

1. County Sligo today: the planning issues

Since the last development plan for Sligo was prepared in 2005, new policy developments and population, economic and other trends point to issues that the Plan must address. These issues include:

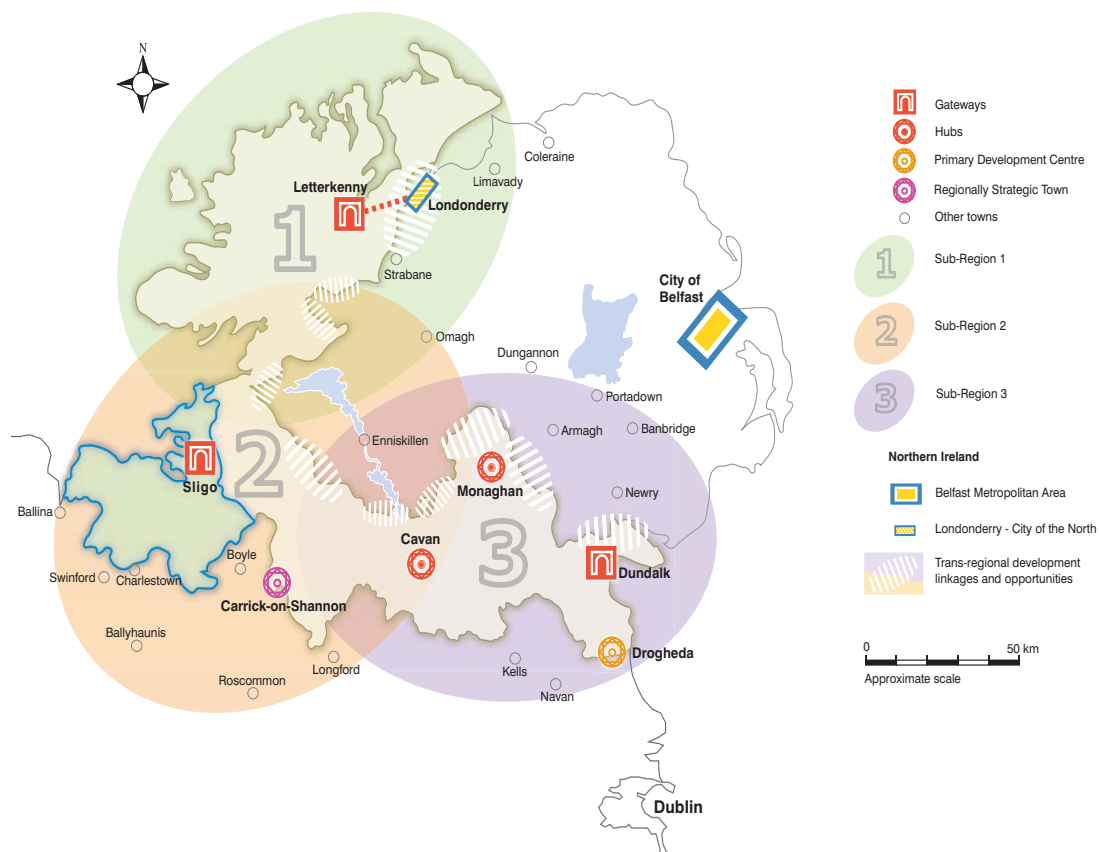
- national, regional and local policy developments;
- headline trends in relation to population, economic context, infrastructural development and environmental conditions.

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 and its development plan include:

- at national level: the National Development Plan 2007-2013 (NDP), National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020 (NSS), National Climate Change Strategy 2007-2012 and various Planning Guidelines;
- at regional level: the Border Regional Planning Guidelines 2010 (RPGs), Connacht Waste Management Plan 2006-2011, River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs) 2009-2015 for the Western River Basin District (RBD), Shannon International RBD and the North-western International RBD.
- at local level: Sligo and Environs Development Plan 2010-2016 and Sligo County Development Board's Integrated Economic, Social and Cultural Strategy 2002-2012 and Action Plan 2009-2012.

Fig. 1.B Border Region: sub-regions as outlined in the Regional Planning Guidelines 2004

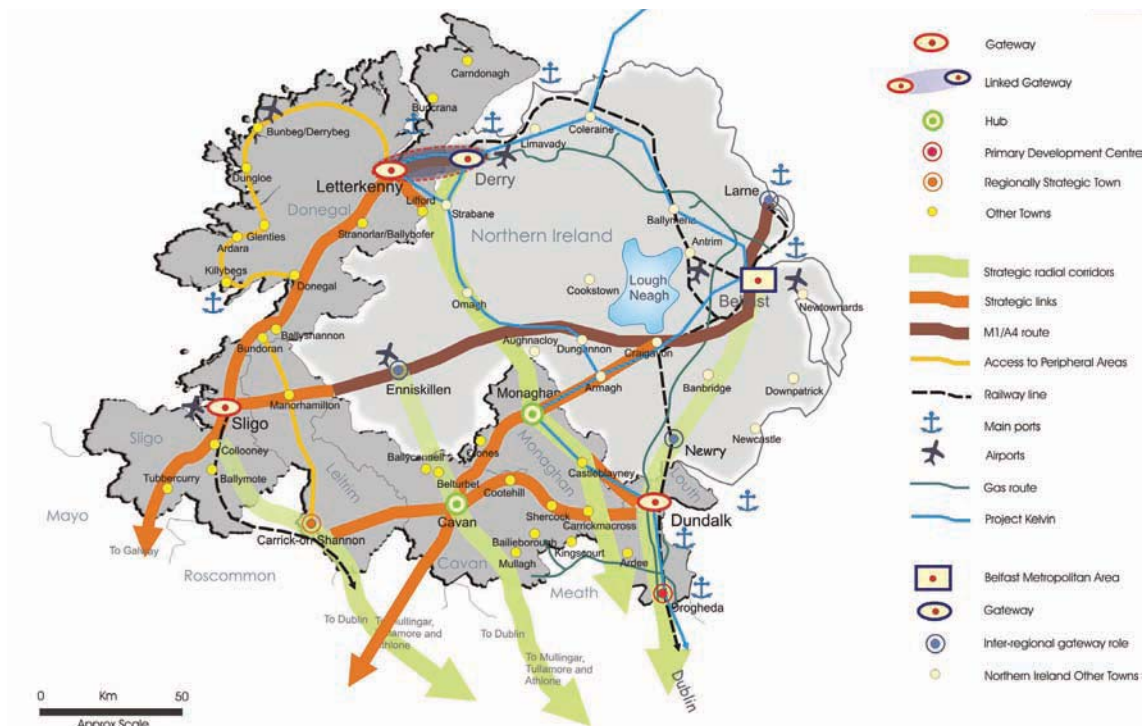


Key messages from these and other relevant policy documents, to which this Plan responds, are as follows:

At national level:

1. The NDP aims to deliver a programme of prioritised and structured investment in Ireland’s physical, economic and social infrastructure, in order to strengthen Ireland’s competitiveness, sustain 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. 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 Infrastructure strategy as outlined in the Draft Regional Planning Guidelines 2010



At regional level:

3. The Draft Border RPGs 2010 aim to support the development of the gateways identified in the NSS within a more detailed framework that includes Hubs and other key towns outside the Gateways. The Guidelines establish a broad framework for county development plans to ensure that the development of the Gateways under the NSS moves forward in tandem with a process of strengthening other urban areas and supporting a dynamic rural community. The RPGS also set minimum population targets and related housing land requirements for counties and major urban centres in the Border Region.
4. The River Basin Management Plans identify the specific environmental objectives to be achieved by the end of 2015 and corresponding programmes of measures (i.e. actions that will be taken to achieve the objectives). Sligo County Council is responsible for the implementation of the RBMPs. Development plan policy must have due regard for the programme of measures detailed in the Management Plans. The RBMPs were published in 2010.

At local level:

5. The Sligo and Environs Development Plan 2010-2016 sets out a detailed development framework to transform Sligo into a Gateway City, as outlined in the NSS.
6. 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.

1.2 Sligo – key development factors

County Sligo, located in the province of Connacht, in the north-west of Ireland, encompasses a total land surface of approximately 1,837.11 km², bordered by Counties Leitrim, Roscommon and Mayo, and flanked to the west by almost 200 km of Atlantic coastline.

Landscape setting

The County has a varied natural landscape with spectacular limestone mountains, such as Benbulbin and Benwiskin, other interesting upland terrain (e.g. the Ox and Bricklieve Mountains), numerous picturesque lakes (Loughs Gill, Arrow, Glencar, Easkey, Gara 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.

In recent years, County Sligo has benefitted from the development of a range of cultural facilities such as the Coleman Music Centre, The Folk Museum, The James Morrison Teach Ceoil and Teach Laighne, Tobercurry Community Library.

The character of the County has been enhanced through public art commissions, which have been integrated with village renewal schemes (e.g. commissioned seating for Coolaney's riverside walk by Alex Pentek, a landmark lighting feature in Ballysadare created by Tony Stallard, and in Grange, a sculptural work created by Elizabeth Caffery for the village park).

Economic trends

The Gateway City of Sligo has developed as an important industrial, commercial and residential centre supporting a regional airport, a railway terminus, a port, two third-level colleges and a general hospital. 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.

In 2009 there were 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. Tobercurry and Grange are the other industrial employment centres in the County.

Outside the City, agriculture continues to be an important part of the local economy, although its share of economic output and employment has declined in proportional terms, while forestry, tourism and other emergent, rural-based economic activities continue to support the smaller towns and villages of the County.

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 a 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.

The public sector remains the most important employer in the County. 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 (*Work in the West: The Western Region's Employment and Unemployment Challenge*, December 2009), 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.

In the context of this employment profile, the Western Development Commission has identified three key employment challenges facing the Western Region:

- adjusting to the decline in construction employment;
- return of the "brain drain";
- delivery of education and training in the region.

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. In terms of job creation, this would translate in:

- identifying and focusing training and investments in priority growth sectors;
- retraining construction workers for the "green economy" and investment in the development of renewable energy resources;
- training and investment in the area of elder care, given the older age profile of the population in the West;
- supporting locally-trading micro-enterprises in rural areas;
- support for process (non-technological) innovation as well as product innovation.

1.3 Population change

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.

Sligo Borough and nearby electoral divisions

The Borough lost 581 (2.91%) of its residents between 2002 and 2006, having grown by 3.6% between 1996 and 2002.

The town's overspill development between 1996 and 2006 was reflected in significant growth within some electoral divisions (EDs) adjacent to, or within commuting distance of Sligo Borough.

The best examples are Knockaree ED, which includes the satellite village of Strandhill and Sligo's expansion along the Strandhill Road, and Collooney ED. The population of Knockaree ED grew by 1,175 (57.5%), while Collooney ED grew by 627 people (58.5%) between 1996 and 2006.

Total population living in Sligo City and within 10 miles of it

In 2002, there were 38,870 people living in the Borough and the 29 EDs within 10 miles of Sligo city centre. By 2006, the population of the same area had grown to 40,011, which represents 65.73% of the total County population.

The number of people living in the Borough and within 10 miles of it has risen, slowly but constantly, by 3,543 (9.7%) between 1996 and 2006.

The County area outside the Borough 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).

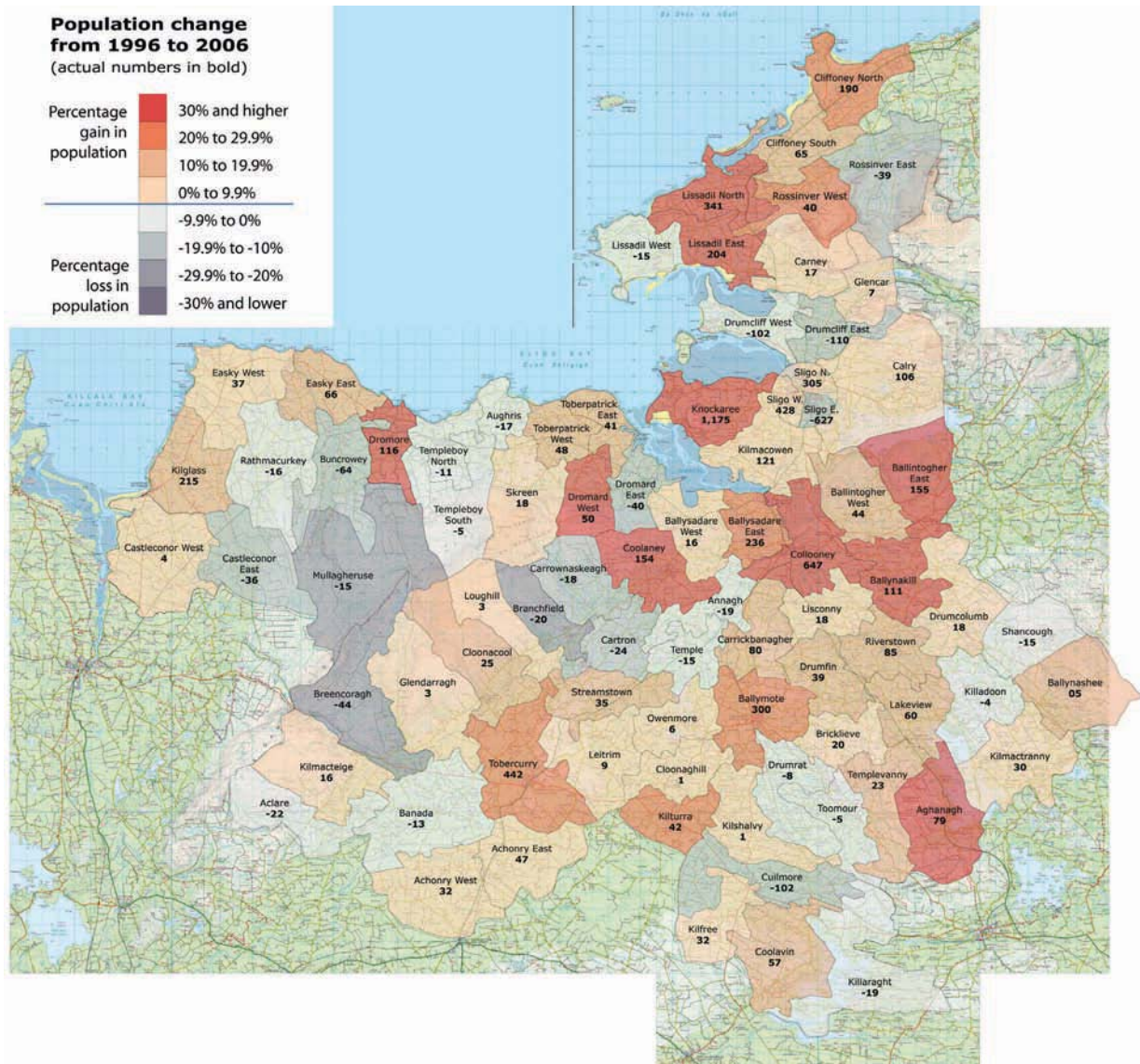
During the twelve years from 1991 to 2002, the population of rural areas in the central and northern parts of the County rose consistently, while more western and southern parts lost population. Population growth over 10% was recorded in 21 out of 79 EDs, six of them experiencing growth of over 15%.

Depopulation has gradually slowed down: 40 rural EDs lost population between 1991 and 1996, but only 34 EDs underwent this process between 1996 and 2002 and just 24 did the same between 2002 and 2006. Most of the EDs that have continued to experience population decline cover extensive uplands and remote rural areas of marginal agricultural value.

The key trends that emerge from a review of Census information are as follows:

- the population of Sligo Borough is stagnant, while that of the Gateway's immediate commuter belt is rising slowly but constantly;
- the County has outpaced the Borough in terms of population growth;
- the process of population decline has been reversed in most parts of the County, with substantial rates of increase being recorded in areas containing satellite villages of Sligo City;
- western parts of County Sligo exhibit more persistent patterns of population stability or decline, generally in the mountainous and remote areas.

Fig. 1.D Population change in County Sligo's Electoral Divisions between 1996 and 2006



1.4 Recent trends and implications for the County Development Plan

Taking account of recent policy developments, economic and demographic trends, the major implications for the formulation of a renewed 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 are essential in retaining and growing the County's population.
- 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 a compact, accessible, physically attractive, public transport-based and business-friendly city with cohesive communities and a strong cultural identity.

- 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, Enniscrone and Tobercurry;
 - the Gateway satellites;
 - the smaller villages.
- Rural areas in Sligo have experienced significant economic, demographic and physical changes:
 - some areas have grown rapidly in population, pointing to the need to carefully manage overspill development associated with Sligo reaching outwards;
 - extensive areas of upland and marginal agricultural land present new opportunities for diversifying the rural economy;
 - the County’s coastline, uplands, rivers, together with its cultural heritage, give it a recognisable national and international identity and are a resource to be wisely managed in sustaining the development of the County into the future.
- 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 to help develop the Gateway and consolidate the towns in the County as local economic engines.
- As we move forward, 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 intends to protect and develop Sligo’s character and culture for the future wellbeing of the County.