

Opening statement for Joint committee on Regional Development, Rural Affairs, Arts and the Gaeltacht

Impact of environmental designations on the development of
vital infrastructure such as roads

Statement From Conamara Municipal District Councillors

- Cllr Noel Thomas (Cathaoirleach)
- Cllr Eileen Mannion
- Cllr Tom Healy
- Cllr Tom Welby

While this statement is based on the general effects that designated areas are having on the development of infrastructure such as roads, we in Conamara have a very good case study at the moment in the N59. The N59 is the main artery connecting Galway city with Clifden. The majority of this road is to a very poor standard at present and is in need of urgent up grading. It is considered to be the economic lifeline for Conamara as regards regional and local development and its upgrading and improvement is a key objective of the County and Regional Development Plans.

The upgrading of this road is presently being held up due to the fact that it is running through designated areas and close by areas with Pearl mussels. Without a proper road infrastructure the towns and villages along this route will slowly die, this is already evident with some small schools being forced to close because there are no families left to support them. Without proper infrastructure in place it will be impossible to sustain economic growth in Conamara, this is causing considerable concern among not only the local community but regional and local development bodies, the local business community, local politicians and councillors etc.

Galway Co Co submitted 8 method statements to the NPWS 18 months ago and to date only two of those have been agreed upon. This is unacceptable that the NPWS can be allowed to have this seemingly unlimited amount of time to decide on these method statements.

A. Basic outline:

- ▶ Two parts – Clifden to Maam Cross (approx. 30km) and Maam Cross to Oughterard (approx.15km).
 - ▶ Planning approved (December 2013) for Maam Cross to Oughterard subject to agreeing “Construction Method Statements” with National Parks and Wildlife.
 - ▶ Planning denied April 2016 for Clifden to Maam Cross section.
 - ▶ Works needed for Oughterard towards Galway to ensure full connection between Connemara and Galway city as regional hub, note that road condition is unsatisfactory.
 - ▶ Quality of Road at Derrylea (where the road was recently upgraded) needs to extend all the way in to Galway city and connect with the new N6 bypass connecting Connemara with the European Motorway network.
 - ▶ Substantially increased traffic on Connemara roads over the last three years since the introduction of the Wild Atlantic way.
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I must highlight that of this 45km road only about 5% of it needs to be realigned and will infringe into SAC, the rest of the upgrade works would occur on the existing road. This is a

national secondary route that is in urgent need of repair and we should not find ourselves in this situation where such a minor section of designated land can hold up such a vital project.

B. Effects on the lives of Locals:

- ▶ The N59 connects us to the M6 which is the start of the European Motorway network, adverse access to this network hinders economic development and equal opportunity for Connemara People.
 - ▶ The road surface and bumpiness increases the likelihood of accidents for visitors and creates discomfort for patients travelling to access medical services in Galway.
 - ▶ Car's and vehicles experience excessive wear meaning locals pay increased car maintenance costs. Gouge marks are common from cars hitting the road surface. Clifden NCT Testing centre has the highest test rate failure in the country.
 - ▶ At a minimum, we should be able to offer young people from the area the ability to live in their home area and commute to Galway for work which may not be available in Connemara – Without this we lose our youth.
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Every last person in Connemara is affected by the adverse road conditions, lives are in danger, services experience higher costs and difficulty operating in Connemara, Opportunity for Connemara people is denied.

C. Relevant Statistics:

Clifden – Maam Cross

- ▶ Safe opportunities for overtaking exist along 2% of this route – whereas a minimum of 15% is required.
- ▶ There are difficulties in passing when large vehicles meet.
- ▶ There is no alternative public transport option on this route to the bus – where time, comfort and safety is hampered by the present condition of the road.
- ▶ The 'Do minimum' option would require a continuous maintenance effort with all the associated costs, whilst not addressing the fundamental deficiencies of the road.

The vertical alignment of the upgraded road is virtually the same as the existing road – with relatively modest changes.

Maam Cross – Oughterard

- ▶ Most of the route (97%) has a paved width of less than 7m which is the minimum required for a Type 3 Single Carriageway.
- ▶ The horizontal and vertical alignments of the existing road provide a stopping and passing sight distance that is inadequate for the permitted maximum speed limits over much of the route.
- ▶ Safe overtaking opportunities along the rural sections is approx. 6%, which is substantially below the 15% requirement of the NRA, that is generally considered necessary in order to provide a reasonable safe standard of Type 3 road.
- ▶ Junctions between the local road network and the N59 are frequently of poor standard and the majority of other access points have inadequate sightlines. It has been demonstrated that the existing pavement is not fit for purpose.

The combination of sub-standard roadway, road width, poor alignment, poor junction standards, inadequate sightlines and poor pavement condition along this stretch of the N59 results in a range of difficulties for existing road users. The deficiencies render it unfit to serve the purpose of a National Secondary Route. Intervention is required as the existing road is in an unsafe condition.

RSA statistics:

For the years 2005 to 2013 (3 years to date missing) from the centre of Moycullen to Aasleagh falls:

- 117 Motor accidents total
- 8 Serious Accidents
- 8 Fatal accidents

D. Rural Decline:

- ▶ Preliminary CSO census data showed Clifden Electoral district had the second highest population decline in the country.
- ▶ School Closures: LeitirMucú has been closed this year with **no** prospect of an increase in numbers in the coming years. Continuing downward trend in the younger population in many parts of West Connemara is highlighted by the fact that no new student came in to Turlach primary school in RosMuc this autumn. Only one pupil began School in CillChiaráin this year and only one started in AirdMhóir. Some classes in CillChiaráin are now without pupils. In Roundstone the intake this year was three. According to local sources this trend is set to continue in the intermediate years ahead unless new families

come in to live in the area or local families return from overseas. –
Connaught Tribune 09-09-2016 (Note Cleggan NS has a similar problem over
the last number of years.)

- ▶ Environmental designations effectively cap economic development in the area....where an economy can't grow it dies. If road traffic can't grow, the local economy can't either. This effectively makes citizens in Connemara second class citizens denying them opportunity that other citizens have equal access to.
- ▶ No new industrial developments in Oughterard and Clifden since the 1980's.

E. Community Need:

- ▶ The scheme will result in improvements in the vertical and horizontal alignment of this road which caters for considerable volumes of traffic in summer months.
- ▶ The scheme will increase the overtaking opportunities on this stretch of road from 1.7% currently to 15.0% – thereby reducing driver frustration.
- ▶ It is calculated that 71% of the existing route does not provide adequate stopping sight distance. Accident clusters have been identified, and the issue of road safety addressed in the design of the new road.
- ▶ Travelling times will be improved by 2.25 minutes per vehicle – a not inconsiderable saving to those travelling this road on a daily basis. (Comment: The road is so poor, we should expect this to be significant and more than the expected 2.25 minutes)
- ▶ There is no alternative rail option along this route.
- ▶ Drivers of buses and HGVs will benefit from road widening – where passing on-coming vehicles is difficult at present. Sight visibility will be improved at a number of junctions, both private and public.
- ▶ The narrow cross section, deficient sightlines, presence of solid roadside boundaries and poor alignment significantly increase the risk that vulnerable road users will not be seen by motorists.
- ▶ The road pavement condition is poor – with 62% failing under at least one pavement condition parameter. Admittedly the pavement condition could be improved without the need for a CPO. However, roadside drainage improvements will ultimately result in any pavement improvements lasting longer, where water would not be ponding on the road.
- ▶ It is estimated that the proposed improvements will reduce the number of collisions by approximately one per year over the 30 years following construction – a saving of €5.798m. – How many lives?

Recommendations

1. There should be a structured system with a very clear time scale put in place, for decisions made on method statements.
2. There should be a thorough investigation carried out on the NPWS to ascertain whether they have the necessary resources and qualifications required to conduct the scientific oversight of this project.
3. There should be a national policy introduced for the oversight of any projects seeking planning in designated areas. (in the interest of fairness and transparency)

Noel Thomas

Seán C Tuohy

Tom Healy

Seamus Walsh M.C.C.

de Welling
Seamus C. Cullen

Niamh Byrne

Eileen Mannion