

## **Westmeath Examiner**

Tim Ryan, Oireachtas Correspondent

### **Government not allowing Midland towns to grow**

The Government will not enable smaller towns such as Kilbeggan, Moate, Ballymahon, Granard and Edgeworthstown grow in any real or substantial way because of the arbitrary targets to be imposed upon them by the new National Planning Framework, Fianna Fáil Deputy Robert Troy told the Dáil.

“If the Government is not going to let towns grow but is going to impose more restrictions on people seeking to obtain one-off rural houses, how will rural Ireland be supported?” he asked. “How will shops and post offices be supported? How will we ensure there are adequate staff for schools? It will not be supported. Although I acknowledge much work went into the National Planning Framework and officials met those who made submissions, given the severity, importance and longevity of the report, it should be pushed out for several weeks. It should be debated in the House in conjunction with the Capital Plan because the Capital Plan and infrastructural investment over the coming decade will be so important for sustainable growth.”

Deputy Troy said the draft plan reaffirms the imbalance in favour of the east coast and a bias in favour of Dublin and the four other main growth centres, namely, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford. “There are gaping omissions in provision for the Midlands and the North-West,” he said. “There is no ambition to help those areas grow and develop. A comprehensive plan was submitted in regard to Athlone. The CEO of Athlone Chamber of Commerce told me his organisation realises Athlone needs to grow as a region. The Midlands region generally, including Longford, Westmeath and Tullamore, can grow and develop and help counter-balance the emphasis that has been put on the eastern seaboard. There is nothing in that regard in the Framework.”

Deputy Troy said he was greatly concerned by the discriminatory policy against one-off housing in the countryside contained in the provision, which requires that a housing need demand assessment be included in all future development plans. “The Minister of State, Deputy English, represents a rural constituency and knows how difficult it is for those born and bred in a particular area to obtain planning permission,” he said. “If the housing need demand assessment is enforced, it is my view and that of senior planners that it will be next to impossible to obtain.”

### **Troy seeks clarity on wind farm guidelines**

For seven years, the Government and its predecessor have shirked their responsibility to bring forward proposals for updating the wind energy guidelines of 2006, Fianna Fáil Deputy Robert Troy told the Dáil. Many local communities are living in fear of pending planning applications, he said.

“They are concerned about the lack of public consultation and engagement with communities and the fact that the guidelines have not been put on a statutory footing. We know that the two Labour Party Ministers in the previous Government could not agree on what needed to be done. Can the two Ministers in the current Government agree on what needs to be done? When will legislation be in place governing planning applications for wind farms?”

In response, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar said he would ask the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Eoghan Murphy and the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Denis Naughten, to reply to the Deputy.

### **Davitt seeks improved conditions for local councillors**

The issue of local councillor’s pay and conditions was raised in the Seanad by Fianna Fáil Senator Aidan Davitt. He said Minister of State John Paul Phelan gave an undertaking before the mid-term recess that the ongoing neglect of councillors’ pay and conditions would be addressed. “There have been a few false dawns,” he said.

In reply, the Leader of the House, Senator Jerry Buttimer said there is a need for the role of the councillor to be recognised, the hard work they carry out on behalf of the people who elect them and on behalf of their communities where they serve on a variety of boards and strategic policy committees, SPCs, and are involved in amending development plans which require them to be very competent and capable.

“We are lucky with the quality of people we have in local government,” he said. “I am confident that the Minister of State, Deputy Phelan, together with the Minister with responsibility for local government, Deputy Murphy, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and the Minister for Finance will address this issue in the coming weeks. It is important that councillors’ remuneration is kept up to a level, not least because they deserve it, but that the rate of pay will ensure we have quality people staying on in their roles and continuing to work in local government.”