

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM FHORBAIRT TUAITHE AGUS POBAIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Dé Céadaoin, 13 Nollaig 2017

Wednesday, 13 December 2017

The Joint Committee met at 11 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Peter Burke,	Senator Maura Hopkins,
Deputy Seán Canney,	Senator Grace O'Sullivan.
Deputy Michael Collins,	
Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice,	
Deputy Carol Nolan,	
Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív,	
Deputy Willie Penrose,	
Deputy Niamh Smyth,	

In attendance: Deputy Tony McLoughlin and Senator Michelle Mulherin.

DEPUTY JOE CAREY IN THE CHAIR.

National Planning Framework: Discussion

Chairman: I remind members and witnesses to turn off their mobile phones. Mobile phones interfere with the sound system and make it difficult for parliamentary reporters to report the meetings. Television and radio coverage and web streaming of the meeting also will be adversely affected. It is proposed that the meeting follows the following order: the committee will consider the national planning framework with the Minister of State with responsibility for housing and urban development, Deputy English. The session will be followed by a two-minute sos and will resume in private session. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Witnesses are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Any submissions made to the committee will be published on the committee website after the meeting.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

Chairman: I welcome the Minister of State and members to the second meeting of the joint committee. The national planning framework, NPF, is a cross-departmental initiative that is vital for effective rural and regional development. The Department of Rural and Community Development has a role as a key contributor to the framework. As the Minister, Deputy Michael Ring, said: “Ireland 2040 underpins... the Action Plan for Rural Development, which seeks to create vibrant, sustainable and self-determining communities across Ireland.” He also said: “Ireland 2040 will provide a framework to support rural and community development policy for years to come.” The joint committee considers Ireland 2040: the National Planning Framework to be of the highest importance in supporting rural and community development. The committee decided to invite the Minister to today’s meeting to discuss Ireland 2040: the National Planning Framework, together with the Action Plan for Rural Development which we discussed at our first meeting. I welcome the Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, with special responsibility for housing and urban development, Deputy Damien English. I also welcome his officials. The Minister might introduced them.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): They are very shy. Mr. Niall Cussen and Mr. Paul Hogan are the main authors of the report. Some members might have had a chance to engage with them at other meetings. They are very happy to engage and to take questions as they are the two individuals who put a lot of work into co-ordinating the main messages and they also took all the feedback from stakeholders in the public sessions.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State. His opening statement has been circulated to the committee and will be published on the committee’s website after the meeting. I now call on him to make his opening statement.

Deputy Damien English: I thank the committee for its invitation. As Minister of State with responsibility for housing and planning, and on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, I am delighted to be here with Mr. Niall Cussen and Mr. Paul Hogan. I welcome this opportunity to listen to members and discuss the committee's views on the national planning framework, NPF. It is important that the committee has a role and will also feed into the process. I am pleased the committee is up and running in time to do that. We made a presentation to the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government and we had a good discussion there. That committee is co-ordinating the message and feedback from both Houses of the Oireachtas. We also had a good debate on the issue in both Seanad Éireann and Dáil Éireann.

Today, I will put forward the Government's views on what Ireland 2040 is aimed at delivering for rural Ireland and for communities in Ireland, both urban and rural. Ireland 2040, which is the draft national planning framework, draws on input and advice from expert economic and analysis from the ESRI and on environmental assessments from RPS consultants. Most importantly, it draws on the views and inputs of a broad range of people and stakeholders across the spectrum at national, regional and local level.

The development of the national planning framework has taken place over a three-year period. It included approximately 40 stakeholder events right around the country. On top of the hundreds of submissions received in the build-up to the publication of the draft NPF, we have received more than 1,000 submissions which we are determined should influence the final plan. The NPF is primarily about planning properly for what will be one of the fastest growing economies in Europe in the coming decades. The plan will ensure the potential of all regions, and all parts of the regions, is fully realised, whether that potential is in an urban or rural context. The framework is about regions working more effectively and both urban and rural development policies working in partnership for the ultimate benefit of the communities we serve. The framework sets a long-term strategic planning and investment context for Ireland over the next 20 years. It includes broad principles to better manage future population and economic growth than was the case in the past. We see it as the business case for investment and it is important to look at that as well as the regional strategies that will feed out of this over 2018. We must bear in mind that we need to plan for a population increase of 1 million extra people, an extra 660,000 people at work and the provision of at least 500,000 extra homes. However, this is not a top-down plan. To work, the national planning framework needs to be truly our plan. The national planning framework will also be further expanded and developed at regional and local levels by the regional spatial and economic strategies, RSEs, and ultimately, in local authority statutory plans. The work on the regional strategies will happen mainly in 2018 and the follow-on will be in the county development plans from 2019 onwards.

Approximately 1,050 submissions were received in the final public consultation. We are looking carefully at the submissions in shaping the final document. Mr. Paul Hogan brings them home with him most nights and he is going through them bit by bit and getting through them. It is important that we hear everyone's views and that is why I again emphasise the benefit of the chance to engage with committee members today to hear their views and make sure we feed them into the final version of the publication. Moreover, looking to the themes raised by the submissions, emerging areas for further drafting include regions, more detail on regional development, and, critically, rural drivers outside the five main cities. When we engaged with the regional authorities, the issue came up quite a lot. They wanted to beef up the content in the plan on the regions and for that to be clearly outlined. I imagine that will probably form part of the discussion here today also.

Another theme is moving from business as usual to compact development and building in more scope to gradually phase in a transition from our current quite expansive or business as usual development model to a more compact development model as set out in the national planning framework. The key is to develop brownfield sites. We want to see that in urban settings, especially in cities where an extra 40% of the increase in population could happen within the city boundaries and we utilise the land in a much more compact way. A further theme is changing work patterns. There is a stronger recognition of the impacts of changing work patterns, technology and connectivity and the scope for people to work from home in that context.

Under the theme of housing and rural development the intention is to reflect the fact that wider social as well as economic considerations can be reasonable justifications for provision of housing in rural areas. That is something we can touch on later also.

In terms of more specifics on investment, with further details emerging through the draft capital investment plan from Departments and sectors, there is more scope to co-ordinate and cross-reference those in ensuring a joined up approach between the NPF and the capital plan. We are very clear on that aspect. The Minister, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, will bring forward his ten-year capital investment plan, which potentially involves €100 billion of taxpayers' money, and we want to make sure they are aligned and that one leads on to the other. The failing of some plans in the past is that they did not have the backing of capital investment and infrastructure behind them. It is important that we get that right and co-ordinate it as well.

There is much in Ireland 2040 for rural areas, the most important being that the framework is about having an overall plan for the country's strategic development, urban and rural working together for the overall benefit of our communities and our future. Throughout the plan there are many references to partnership. One will not have rural development without partnership with urban settings in strong local villages and towns of all sizes as well as cities. The best rural areas will develop in partnership with towns and cities. A link is required between the two in order to develop. In areas of decline, there is a clear absence of a link with a large town or city that can have an influence on their development.

The national planning framework will strengthen rural Ireland, not weaken it. There have been suggestions that the national planning framework will weaken rural Ireland. Those suggestions are somewhat mischievous and quite misleading. We hear that quite a lot. We wish to be very clear; that is not the intention of the plan. The opportunity to have a discussion in that regard today is worthwhile. Carefully reading the draft national planning framework, one will see that it contains many different kinds of practical planning, development and investment policies, which will benefit rural Ireland by driving plan-led and community-led regeneration initiatives, aimed at repurposing rural economies to benefit from new technology-driven economic activities and new living possibilities and growing the regions outside Dublin and the east by more than would occur under a business as usual scenario. It is clear that if we do not implement a new national planning framework and put in place a plan like this in the years' ahead, there will be further rural decline because the development will continue to focus on the east. We are trying to push out development and get the balance right. The concept behind this plan is to balance development through the various regions. We also wish to improve connectivity to weaker areas such as to the northern and western parts of the country.

One of the main challenges in rural development in Ireland today is the necessity to create new opportunities for the renewal and sustainability of rural economies. People often talk about the decline of rural economies in the past seven or eight years, but that is not the reality. There have probably been 30 or 40 years of decline in some rural areas that we are trying to

rejuvenate. That is the reality because we have not planned to bring life back into those rural areas. It is often assumed the decline has happened in the past decade but that is not the case and the statistics will bear that out. If one goes to many smaller towns and villages across rural Ireland, one will see the empty buildings, the shops that are closed and schools that are under threat. If those places are to have any future, we must get people to live again in those empty streets and empty buildings, plan and co-ordinate the future and set out the economic purpose of each town and village in relation to the cities and regions. The national planning framework takes up this challenge, proposing smart growth initiatives to attract people and jobs into small towns and villages, harnessing their attractions in quality of life terms and connecting them to the digital, connected and shared economy of the future.

In addition, chapter 4 of the draft framework sets out 14 specific national planning and development objectives for rural Ireland. Those support and build upon the Action Plan for Rural Development for the longer term and address key areas such as housing, economic development and infrastructure. We must match the emptiness and dereliction of many of the smaller towns with the desires of many people seeking the opportunity to build their own homes. People find it difficult to do so because no one will sell them a site or, if they did, it would cost a fortune because there are no services. In order to assist them, the national planning framework proposes that local authorities will be supported in undertaking the necessary land acquisition, site preparation and local infrastructure provision to deliver self-build development options in smaller towns and villages. That is how we will breathe new life into rural communities. Like many members, I come from a rural background. While many people want to live in a rural area, that does not always mean that they want to live in a one-off house. Deputy Eamon Ó Cuív is panicking, but he should not worry because one-off housing is provided for in the framework. Some people want to live in or on the edge of a village, but that option was never available because it was too expensive and services were not available. A balance needs to be struck in order that they can live on their own land, given the economic and social need to do so, while having the option to be part of a local village community which has been declining for a number of years and which could be serviced much better.

We have a sense that there may be a misconception that in its focus on building up rural communities and particularly smaller towns and villages that the NPF will discourage rural communities in being able to meet housing needs in rural areas. That is not the case because the facts show that Ireland meets a large part of its housing need in rural areas and, more specifically, the countryside. Last year 50% of housing was built in rural areas and in some of the more rural counties the figure was closer to 80%. In our discussions at county and regional level the feedback is that people assume fewer houses are being built in rural areas, but that is not the case. The statistics for the past four or five years show that almost always one-off houses comprise 50% of housing. That might not suit people's views, but they are the facts and we do not make them up. As a Minister of State who comes from a rural area, I want to see vibrant rural communities and rural economies. I realise however, as does the Government, that alongside a lived-in rural landscape, we must not neglect the renewal of existing built-up areas and the communities that live in them. That is true, be it in inner city areas, market town centres or the myriad smaller towns and villages across the country. For many years sections of many communities have been allowed to decline. The plan tries to focus on areas of decline in large towns and small villages and how to address them in the longer term. The decline will not be addressed in six months or a year or two. However, in a planned way we can breathe life back into these communities.

In July the Government made a decision to co-ordinate the NPF with the ten-year capital

investment plan, thus ensuring alignment between strategic planning and investment. That is key because there was not always that alignment in the past. There was the intention and hope, but it did not happen. We need to track the plan to ensure it will happen this time. We are working closely with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform to ensure an effective alignment between the NPF and the mid-term review of the capital plan and longer term infrastructural planning. In ensuring close alignment of the capital plan with the NPF we will avoid the mistakes of the past, when investment under the National Development Plan 2000-2006 came before the 2002 national spatial strategy which was too diversely focused. Through this alignment we are essentially putting our money where our mouth is. Capital investment will underpin the planning framework in order that these plans will be real, their progress can be tracked and we can all buy into them.

Enactment of the Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2016 which we hope to get back into the Houses before Christmas but which will probably not happen until early January will place the NPF on a statutory footing. I Through the new office of the planning regulator, it will put in place a regular process which will include Oireachtas involvement of monitoring, review and updating of the framework, which is key. We want Oireachtas Members to be involved in tracking the framework and making sure the Government will stick to it and what we buy into it and want to invest in will happen. The final framework document will then be brought to the Government for approval to publish. It will be followed by a strategic environmental assessment and the finalising of translation, design and printing. It is envisaged that the final NPF will be published in full in the first quarter of 2018.

I am certain that members will agree with the sentiment that the actions to revitalise towns, villages and communities outlined in the draft framework are good for regions, communities and all parts of our dynamic and proud country. It is important that we get on with our work to put the plans in place. We are here to get the committee's feedback and make changes to the framework. There were 1,000 submissions received which we are teasing through to make sure we will reflect all of them as best we can in order that we can achieve a balance. We need to support the Ireland 2040 process in order that Europe's fastest growing economy for the next decade or so will have a real chance to make lasting change preparing us for a better planned and better future for the people and communities, both urban and rural. It is about our future and that of our children and it is important that we get it right.

I thank members for their time and look forward to further engagement with them.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: I welcome the Minister of State and thank him and his officials for their presentation. I come from a constituency in the north west. I am concerned about the line between Galway and Dublin because the Minister of State mentioned five growth areas, none of which is north of that line. That is vitally important because there is a huge need in that part of the country. The Minister of State mentioned the involvement of communities, local authorities and others to gain support for the framework, but it is important that Sligo be included as a sixth growth area. Many colleagues from the west and the north west will agree with me. The Minister of State is correct to refer to towns and villages. There are streets in Sligo town on which nobody lives. I agree with him that we need to get people back into these communities and rural communities.

I also referred in my submission to the regional imbalance, as well as the need for investment. People need to see that we have an infrastructure that can be worked on and that that issue will be addressed. It is fine to say the five areas highlighted will be looked after, but given the level of population growth in them, we are losing people in other areas. Sligo Institute of

Technology has been granted university status and we have a university hospital; therefore, we have the infrastructure needed. People from counties Donegal, Mayo, Roscommon, Leitrim and Cavan are buying into Sligo. We have one opportunity to get right the framework which will run until 2040.

Chairman: There is a big turnout. I will call three members before allowing the Minister of State to respond.

Deputy Seán Canney: I welcome the Minister of State. The concept of creating a counterbalance through the Atlantic economic corridor to the overdevelopment on the east coast is not targeted properly in the NPF. That needs to be the big ticket item for us in the western half of the country from Cork through Limerick, Galway, Sligo and Donegal to Derry. The technological university status granted to the colleges in Galway, Letterkenny and Sligo is part of that concept. The Minister for Rural and Community Development has appointed a task force to develop the Atlantic economic corridor. The concept is supported by all of the chambers of commerce in the region, but the task force's recommendations need to be stitched into the NPF, as otherwise they will become a separate arrangement. The Atlantic economic corridor is the bee's knees in the programme for Government and exactly what we need.

According to the Western Development Commission, in excess of 16,000 people living the county travel into Galway city every day to work. We must examine how they get in and out of the city. They do so with great difficulty. In some cases, they have to stay in a car park for an hour before they can travel home from work. We are creating a plan for the next 20 years. I see this from the IDA's perspective. It says it will create a park, but there is never joined-up thinking on how people are going to get in and out of it. For instance, in Galway, the success of Parkmore Industrial Estate is that there are 6,000 people are working there, but there is a single road going into and out of it. It is absolutely incredible that there has not been proper forward planning. We cannot blame the local authorities. The IDA, the local authorities and Departments must work together to make sure that when we are drawing up a master plan, the roads are planned alongside the IDA parks, so that when they are fully operational they actually work properly, rather than the situation we have at the moment.

We have spoken about improving towns and villages. I do not see enough meat on the bones. I would like to know how we are going to improve towns like Dunmore, Milltown in my area, or Headford, where there was a large number of shops which are now closed. There is nothing in them. People have moved out of the centre of the towns. There is nothing tangible to incentivise people to come back to live and work in these towns, and to support local retail. If we do not get the population back into the heart of the towns, they will die.

I am very much against positioning supermarkets and big shops on the edge of towns. That creates a doughnut effect. That must be nipped in the bud. We have had enough of it as it really is destroying the centres of towns. It has had this effect in England. We must have no more of it, and we must make sure we are actually creating shopping areas within the towns, not on their outskirts.

One other issue I have a concern about is that we really heavily on the local authorities to deliver all these plans. I can say here and now that the local authorities are not being funded sufficiently to do that. They do not have the resources. They have been stripped of a huge amount of their expertise over the last ten years due to staff retiring and people not coming into the service. There has been a huge loss of expertise. With all due respect to the Minister of State, I would say that one of the biggest problems in our housing situation is our reliance on

local authorities which do not have in-house expertise in planning, environmental assessment, procurement, delivering projects or managing budgets. We have to examine this. We must resource local authorities properly if we are going to rely on them. The national planning framework states that local authorities are going to do this, that and the other. We are loading them with a lot of responsibilities. Galway County Council is at breaking point financially, and it is not being supported. Even though there are wage increases, funds are not being paid out by the central Government. That is absolutely wrong. If we are going to rely on the local authorities, we must put them in a position where they can deliver.

I return the issue of the Atlantic economic corridor. In the west or north-west of Ireland, of which Deputy McLoughlin has spoken, or down in the south, the biggest problem is the lack of proper broadband. There are not the sufficient water and waste water services to take additional capacity. In many cases, there are not proper roads. We must also examine the rail network, which we are not using. I refer particularly to the connection between Claremorris and Athenry, which could be opened up to freight services and commuter services. I always say that the biggest and cleanest artery to get people in and out of Eyre Square in Galway city is rail. We are not using it to connect with north County Galway or the east. With 16,000 people coming into the city everyday to work, we need to look at this in a more serious way.

When we talk about enterprise and how it should work, the IDA has a big role to play. I refer to Athenry, which has been in the news lately, and towns like Loughrea, Gort and Tuam, which are situated along the new roadway that has been built in Galway. There is more potential along the west coast to Ennis. The IDA parks are already there. In Tuam, planning permissions have run out, and there is a 40-acre site there with nothing in it. Any industry in Tuam has been there for years and proven that it is sustainable. We have fine industry there, but we could have a lot more of it. Rather than trying to squeeze it all into Galway city, we should be looking at the towns.

We have to look at how we carry out the business of planning. I have had discussions on this with Mr. Niall Cussen and Mr. Paul Hogan, who are present. Many of the frailties in our planning have been highlighted by the events surrounding Apple's application to build a data centre in Athenry. We must not carry out a quick fix, but whatever we do, we must change the way we do planning business. I do not necessarily mean creating shortcuts but we must provide definitive timelines, so that anyone coming to this country and looking for planning permission will know that there is a definitive timeline by which their project will or will not be given the green light rather a process that drags on for years. We are paying the cost of that at the moment, because we got very bad publicity from the Apple affair. I look forward to working with the Minister of State and all the other Government Departments to bring forward legislation to ensure we can tell potential investors that their projects have a fair chance of being approved and the time it will take to decide on it. That is very important.

Senator Michelle Mulherin: I support what Deputy Canney had to say and, for the most part, what Deputy McLoughlin had to say. It is great that there is a fine turnout at this meeting. In considering the national planning framework, we have to take stock of where we are, and of what sort of planning and development has taken place to date. Balanced regional development never happened. Deputy McLoughlin spoke about a line running from the north of Galway across to Dublin or Louth. Consider that whole area, as we talk about rural development. Apart from the Tuam bypass, which I very much welcome, there is no major inter-urban route. There are no high-speed trains. There is no deep water port. There is a port in Killybegs, but it is quite limited in what it can do. There is a vast region of the country, the west and north west, that is

without critical infrastructure. That contrasts with the south. If one is going to the ploughing championships, one is tripping over roads. I am talking about the roads to Dublin city. There are excellent national primary and national secondary roads, and even regional roads.

I support the call for more meat on the bones, for more specifics. We do not want a situation where rural Ireland is supported in tourism but not much else. I very much welcome the town and village renewal schemes, which have given hope to towns and villages. They are really about enhancing them but we need economic drivers in these rural areas. Not all rural areas are the same. A rural area that is not so far from a big town or city may be different from a place like Mayo. That county has a population of about 135,000. It has three reasonably-sized towns, but the remaining population is dispersed in rural areas. I would say the same applies to Roscommon, which is represented here. Everyone will speak about their own area. If we do not develop the concept for the region, which I acknowledge is being proposed, my concern is that Mayo will be a commuter belt of Galway or Sligo. At the moment, we have a framework providing for economic growth and development. We need more support. We need connectivity between the three main towns. I agree with the Minister of State that the decline in rural Ireland has not been confined to the last few years since the recession. The decline has been going on for scores of years, which is in keeping with the situation throughout Europe. There is a big pull to the big urban centres. We did not get investment in roads, which I described earlier, even during the Celtic tiger era, so we need policies that are weighted towards the west and north west. Policies should be weighted and not equal. It has to be done to counterbalance the congestion in cities and the big urban centres where there is a lack of housing and school places. We have all of that in abundance in the west and north west, yet the west and north west, including Donegal and Mayo, recorded a decline in population in the 2016 census. We have an ageing population in Mayo. I see that going down the streets. It is our young people who are gone. They cannot live on fresh air. They need jobs so there has to be more investment. We can scratch our heads over the magic formula. We should not continue to pursue demand-driven economic policies, which means we only invest where there is critical mass, that is, in cities and towns. I am not saying they should not be invested in but we really need to do a lot more to put rural Ireland on a sustainable footing. If we continue as we are, we will become - I will not say a game reserve, because we are not game - merely a nice place for people to-----

Deputy Michael Collins: Jurassic Park.

Senator Michelle Mulherin: -----commute to at weekends. We live in a lovely spot but I have a bigger ambition. Everyone here has a bigger ambition for rural Ireland than the way it is at present. I welcomed the town and village enhancement scheme. We need a particular stimulus to identify our town cores in rural towns and villages. They are market towns. How do we bring people to live in them and how do we look after independent traders in those towns and villages to give them life? We should build, project and plan for some population growth in the future. We see it happening in the cities. We do not need to do a thing for it to happen in the cities because that is the natural order of things. Cities will keep growing. They will be congested and we will miss out on opportunities because they are too congested. Galway has been described like that. The key point I am making on the west is that we have to come up with a plan that has sufficient detail in order that it does not make a county such as Mayo a place where people just commute out of because there is a road going to Galway or Sligo. It is not just Mayo. It is the same story in east Galway and Ballinasloe which are right beside Galway, but there is no trickle-down effect or benefit to the rural areas from these big cities. That is the reality.

The Minister of State said he will tease out the issue of how we will develop the regions. If we do not tease it out in this committee with everybody here, we can forget it. If we do not tease it out here, we will have a capital investment plan that will throw money at the big urban centres again. Public transport is an issue. Every time we see a report coming out from the National Transport Authority, it says it is going to shut down the railway lines into the west except for Limerick. It is incredible. We need to accelerate what we are doing and not just look around the country and say we are doing a little bit here and there. We need a massive injection into a massive area of the country that has an awful lot to offer in addressing the problems facing the country. If we do not consider what we need to do to get these areas going, including the Atlantic economic corridor where there are jobs and where young people can live and have families, then we are wasting our time.

Deputy Damien English: I will touch on some of the issues. I will not be able to answer every question in detail because the idea is that I listen to members' contributions. There has been a lot of detail and the idea is we take it on board and try to reflect it in what we do in the weeks and months ahead in bringing this plan forward.

I will address the issue raised by Deputy McLoughlin. We have agreed as a result of feedback from the committee that there is a need to strengthen the wording to reflect the concerns that have been raised. The issue of what is happening north of the Dublin-Galway corridor has been raised a lot so we will strengthen our wording.

We have been trying to avoid a scattergun approach in which we name every village because that will not achieve what we are trying to achieve. It has to be regional. We are asking people to think regionally in order that everyone benefits from it. We need to strengthen the wording and we will work on doing that. We also need cities to be developed in order that they have an international footing and can compete at that level. There should be a trickle-down effect if it is planned in the right way. That is what we are trying to do.

It is not to limit the growth of other large towns or villages but to recognise we need to grow cities in a proper, desirable and sustainable way in order that they are more attractive places for investment and we avoid the congestion Senator Mulherin referred to. It is a reality that thousands of people go to work in Galway and they will continue to do that. In addition to providing jobs outside of Galway, there will be more jobs in Galway because Galway is a major player. We recognise that in the strategy. We want to invest more in Galway to serve the region and to help it grow. That is not to say we do not have similar growth in other towns and villages as well.

We also have to make sure our cities are managed in a sustainable way. The Senator mentioned what is happening at the moment. They are not being planned and managed in a sustainable way because we have not invested in the infrastructure needed to make them the world-class cities we want them to be. That is part of the strategy. We see Sligo, Athlone and the larger towns as large growth centres and we have to agree the wording and how we will focus on it.

Deputy McLoughlin touched on the issue of university status and Deputy Canney mentioned it too. The technical university and the link with Letterkenny, Galway, Mayo and Sligo was mentioned. We have agreed at previous meetings that to strengthen the conversation around the educational stakeholders and their significance in the strategy in the region. We will strengthen our wording.

The Atlantic corridor was mentioned. Mr. Paul Hogan and Mr. Niall Cussen are both involved in that task force. Deputy Canney is not here but he can fill them in afterwards. They are involved in that task force and they can sit in on those meetings. It is reflected in the document. We can strengthen our wording because it is something we want to build on. There are a lot of issues in Galway which we are working on. It is part of the Atlantic corridor.

The smarter growth initiative is about looking at these areas in larger towns in counties such as Mayo, Sligo, Galway or other counties such as Cavan and Monaghan. How do we drive growth in these areas? It will not happen unless we plan it. That is the conversation we are trying to have. We cannot set out the plan for every individual village and town in the national planning framework. This sets out the overall national planning framework and then we have the regional strategies and county development plans. They have to focus in and make choices and pick the areas. The idea is the resources will be put in to make it happen and not just to talk about it. It is a decision for a regional level as well as a county level. It would not be right for us to list all the towns and villages. We want a bottom-up approach as well. We will set out the overall ambition for the region and then try to focus the development as best we possibly can.

Everybody talked about the different Departments. Unlike in the past, our Department is leading this and putting it together. The various Departments and agencies have been around the table and have been part of the strategy. They are buying into it and have fed into it. They will have responsibilities to make sure it happens, whether it is the IDA, Enterprise Ireland, the HSE or the education players around the table. They are all part of this. They were not part of it in the past. They did not necessarily buy into it or follow through with the plans. The Senator was right. If we are going to target jobs growth in certain parts of Sligo or Mayo and the IDA, Enterprise Ireland and the Department are not with us, it will not happen. It goes back to what Deputy Canney said about planning in certain places. It is about having a balance and planning it out.

Meat on the bone was mentioned by everybody. It is not for the national planning framework to put all the meat on all the bone. Its purpose is to allow for it, put it in a national context and make sure it happens at a regional and county level and for the committee to be part of that conversation.

With regard to the issue of staff in local authorities, the Department recognises there is a great difficulty with local authorities which are rebuilding their capacity to deal with housing, planning and all the other services they provide. Local authorities are central to all walks of life in their communities. We are strengthening their teams. More than 600 additional staff have been sanctioned already in the planning and housing sections. We will build up those teams even more. We are also looking at the resources for each county. The whole idea of having the national planning framework is to try to plan out the future for each local authority and what they will have in terms of being able to raise money. If there is proper growth in their area from proper job creation, they will get rates and so on. That is what this is about. We recognise they need to strengthen their teams of people. Where there are shortages of certain skills in local authorities, whether in architecture or planning, that affect bringing forward housing and development plans, we will strengthen those teams and work with them on that. They are being asked to let us know when they need additional resources. They should let us know not only that they want more staff but what they want the staff for, what they want to do and where they are short of various skills.

I engaged with a local authority recently which informed me that it had received sanction for extra staff and that it was seeking further funding for training. I asked whether it would not hire

people with the necessary skills. We ask that if an authority needs architects, it should employ them and not people who must be trained. We are providing the resources and ask that local authorities strengthen their teams in the various areas in order to bring the plans to fruition.

There was a reference to connectivity. That is the idea here, whereby connectivity is planned for and then the infrastructure to facilitate it - whether in the context of broadband, increased road infrastructure or high-speed rail - is put in place. Decisions must be made regarding where it is required and then provision must be supported by means of the capital investment plan. That is what we are trying to do.

Senator Michelle Mulherin: The Minister of State described various regional plans and we are looking at the national planning framework. There are 131,000 people living in Mayo. There are three towns with populations of 10,000 and the remainder of the county consists of rural areas and small towns. The county has a population of 131,000 and a functioning economy. I understand that the Minister of State has to look at large cities. I do not mean any disrespect in the context of what Deputy McLoughlin is suggesting, but the Minister of State should go into some detail in respect of counties such as Mayo and Roscommon. There are 131,000 people living in county Mayo compared with 61,000 in the whole of County Sligo, including the city. Why would the Minister of State suggest that we in Mayo should have to commute to Sligo or Galway? Why will he not provide some detail on Mayo? Take linked hubs, for example. We had a spacial strategy previously, but the problem was that it was not implemented. The strategy identified hub towns. I do not think it is acceptable for the Minister of State to make that statement.

Deputy Damien English: To be clear, we are not saying that Mayo will lose out. That is not what we are saying at all. We are talking about taking a regional approach first. In that context, there are regional spacial and economic strategies which will be used to decide where the growth centres are; they will be in Mayo, Sligo and other counties because each county has major growth centres and we specify that there will be approximately 137 villages of less than 1,500 people which will also have a role. Individual plans must be worked out for each of those villages and towns and then there will be a need to start making choices. These are choices that must be made at regional level. The Government cannot dictate to every county which towns are prioritised.

Senator Michelle Mulherin: But the Minister of State has said that the cities are a priority. He has said that urban centres are a priority.

Deputy Damien English: That is a reality; it reflects what is there. There are five cities that are already cities which have a major influence in the area. For example, Galway is a medtech centre in the context of Europe and is a major player in an international context. One cannot just forget about it, one has to plan to enhance its position and provide the infrastructure. There are traffic plans for Galway that require an investment of nearly €1 billion to relieve the pressure in the city. That needs to be planned and made happen and investment is required. This does not mean that there will be no investment in Mayo but the Senator has to realise that Galway is the leading city in the region and that such cities need to be used.

We are not saying that Mayo will suffer to Sligo's benefit or *vice versa*. We are just setting out the regional context in terms of what needs to be done. The Senator makes a good point about how there needs to be extra weighting in order for real change to happen. We are trying to strengthen the wording in respect of the north and the north west. We can examine the weighting. The population percentages are 50% in cities and 50% in rural areas. However, the

general feedback is that a people want to see strengthened wording regarding the future of the north and the north west. We will do this in coming months.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State. The next group of questions will be from Deputy Ó Cuív, Senator Hopkins and Deputy Penrose. Contributors have five minutes each and the Minister of State will respond after 15 minutes.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: That is agreed so long as we may keep coming back until everyone has gone home and only one or two of us are left. Five minutes is not enough time to express my concerns about the thrust of where we are going.

I will briefly mention an urban problem. The plan is to grow our cities dramatically and quickly. Let us look at our cities. The areas in this State with the highest levels of deprivation and drug abuse - this is not the fault of the people living there because they are highly segregated - are all located in our cities and were all rapidly built. We have no housing in our cities. The plan is to put 45,000 more people into Galway, for example, when there is no housing there. It would be necessary to build 20,000 houses merely to catch up. If they were to be implemented today, all the transport proposals in this plan would only deal with the current situation. However, the Minister of State wants to add a further 45,000 people to the city. There are huge swathes of our country which could be developed and in which we would not face these problems but the new religion of urbanisation, which is a 20th century concept, seems to have taken over and is driving everything. There is an idea that the only successful places are cities. That is fine. Take Ballsbridge, which is in my neck of the woods. One could say that it is a relatively successful place but I cannot think of many people in Corr na Móna who would want to live in some of the less well off parts of Limerick, Galway or Dublin. We need to look at this holistically and challenge the premise behind much of what is being said here.

I have read this plan. It is very clever. It says this and that and has a little bit in it for everybody but, ultimately, the Minister of State has clearly spelled out the position here today, for which I thank him. He said, "We are working closely with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform to ensure an effective alignment between the NPF and the mid-term review of the capital plan". The plan states that the money is to be focused on the cities. The Minister of State says that the way in which money was spent previously was too dispersed. Very cleverly, the Department is now setting up this independent planning regulator which will pick this report up and say that it was told to invest the money in the cities, despite all the fine words. It can be seen all throughout the document - it is all cities and towns and the rest of us do not count. I was really impressed by Senator Mulherin's contribution.

The time for this round is short, so I will focus on rural areas. Chapter 4.5 of the plan refers to open countryside, which is where the vast majority of rural people live. They do so by choice because they have a fantastic quality of life. I am told that I am meant to live in the village. When I asked someone why I should live in the village, I was told that I would be near the local post office. I put my hand in my pocket and said, "Here is my bank, my travel agent and anything else I want, without leaving my sitting room." For most people, the day of having to walk to the post office is gone. Recently, I visited an industrial concern located two miles from my house. I asked the owners if they had the new broadband and they told me they have a Gbit, but the problem is that their customers in England do not have anything equivalent. We have broadband now and the idea that we all need to be in cities is out of date.

Deputy Damien English: I am conscious that the Deputy missed the beginning of the meeting but I said very clearly that this is not just about cities.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I have read the plan.

Deputy Damien English: The Deputy must not have read it because he is going on a rant that does not reflect what is in the plan. With respect-----

Chairman: Hold on a second-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Is the Minister of State going to call my contribution a rant?

Deputy Damien English: It is unfair of the Deputy to come in late and keeps throwing this-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I read the Minister of State's document last night after it was emailed to us.

Deputy Damien English: The Deputy can put on a showpiece but it will not help in the context of what we are trying to do.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: If that is the Minister of State's attitude towards what I am saying and towards Fianna Fáil, that is fine.

Deputy Damien English: That is not our attitude at all but the Deputy is constantly misrepresenting what is in the plan.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I will get over it.

Deputy Damien English: That is grand.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: When I was a Minister, I always respected the Opposition.

Deputy Damien English: The Deputy did so and I would have to compliment him on that. I was one of the Opposition spokespersons at the time and he was very good to me.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Is the Minister of State going to respect me?

Deputy Damien English: I will respect the Deputy. I did not-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It is a fact-----

Chairman: The Deputy should finish his contribution and then the Minister of State-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I am not going to have someone say that this is a rant. I have read the plan.

Deputy Damien English: I am sorry that I used the word "rant". The Deputy was not here for the start of the meeting when I made it very clear that the plan is very much focused on rural Ireland. We recognise-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Sorry-----

Deputy Damien English: Sorry, Chairman-----

Chairman: Can the Minister of State finish his point now?

Deputy Damien English: I cannot sit here and be told again and again that this is not for rural Ireland. I made it clear at the start of the meeting that this is why we are here to engage

with the committee. We see this plan playing a major part in saving rural Ireland. As I stated earlier, the statistics indicate that over 50% of house building over the past number years was in rural areas. That is a fact. We want to allow for this and to enable the rebuilding of villages. As I stressed earlier, not everyone wants to live in a one-off house. Some people want to live in a rural village but that choice was not available to them in the past. We want to ensure people have that choice and at the same time allow thousands of people to live in one-off houses. As I said, 50% of developments are outside cities. I ask the Deputy not to misrepresent the plan.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: From my reading of the plan, everything is focused on the cities, followed by big towns, small towns and rural Ireland. As provided for in this plan, and in light of the Flemish decree, severe restrictions are to come into effect in relation to one-off housing. The thrust of policy is to try to control one-off housing. Nobody wants to stop people who want to live in towns and villages from doing so. There are no housing need forms to be completed by people who want to live in a town or village. When Minister, I introduced housing need because I did not want to see unrestricted housing development but this plan, in terms of the obtuse language used therein, introduces many further restrictions on rural living, including in parishes like St. Thomas's in south Galway that have produced fantastic hurling teams, and the many other areas that are totally dispersed. There is nothing wrong with these areas. They have huge capacity for growth because the schools can take more pupils and people provide their own infrastructure and as such they do not need huge State investment.

The plan repeatedly references focusing the investment in the major cities. When it comes to roads, the focus is on major inter-urban routes. The vast majority of people using the Galway-Dublin motorway do not come from Galway city. Many of them join it at different locations along the route. The focus in the plan is on major inter-urban routes rather than major inter-regional routes. There are people who travel from Mayo to Galway to take the Galway-Dublin route. The focus in this plan is on urban infrastructure. One needs to read this plan carefully. I have not only taken the time to read it carefully, but I have made a detailed submission on it. It is cleverly written. In terms of infrastructure proposals, the largest pieces of infrastructure to be provided in rural Ireland are greenways and blueways, for which I thank the Minister of State, but we need roads and railways as well as greenways and blueways. This proposal is more leprechaun policy in regard to rural Ireland. Of course we need greenways and blueways and nice urban coastal walks from Balbriggan to Bray, but we also need the basic infrastructure that people require to enable them to do their daily business.

Senator Maura Hopkins: I thank the Minister of State for being here. In regard to the national planning framework and rural Ireland, one of the biggest challenges in terms of maintaining rural communities is access to employment. If we want people and families to remain in and return to rural Ireland, we need to ensure there are jobs in rural areas. Deputy Canney gave the example of Parkmore in Galway city. I will give another example. There is an IDA Ireland business park in Ballinasloe. Similar to the example outlined by Deputy Canney in relation to Tuam, it is under-utilised. We need to ensure there is positive discrimination towards towns like Ballinasloe that has very good infrastructure and can be accessed via two exits off the M6. It also has relatively good broadband and very good community and educational facilities, but there are insufficient jobs to sustain people to live and work there. There are far too many people getting up very early in the morning to travel to work when they could be working in their own local area. What we need is balance in terms of infrastructure development in relation to cities, particularly Galway city which in terms of traffic is absolutely chaotic. As I said earlier, there is excellent infrastructure in Ballinasloe but businesses are not being incentivised to locate there. Last week, I had a meeting with representatives of the IDA Ireland business park and a

local community group at which I raised the issue of Ballinasloe not receiving its fair share in terms of regional development despite its excellent infrastructure and so on.

I have read the national planning framework. I have also read the Western Development Commission submission. Following on from the Minister of State's second contribution, I am satisfied that growth in the west and north west will be a focus of the national planning framework rather than a regional spatial and economic strategy. We want our fair share in terms of development and we will contribute to that, but we need to be supported. I welcome that growth in these areas is a focus of the national planning framework. As stated by the Minister of State, the framework and the capital plan are linked. I am concerned that there are specific actions and recommendations set out in the plan in regard to the five cities but there are not detailed or specific actions in regard to rural Ireland, in particular actions around reversal of rural decline. I am not sure how it is planned to achieve it. I am practical person and I like to see practical actions to support villages, towns and cities across the country, but there are no such actions in this draft plan.

I have made a detailed submission on the draft plan. All participants today have expressed real concerns that need to be taken into account in the final document. We live in rural areas and we connect with people in rural areas on a daily basis. We have good knowledge of the issues in rural Ireland. We want greater focus on the development of rural villages and towns and better support for the west and north west in the context of the national planning framework.

Deputy Willie Penrose: I have been an unashamed advocate for rural Ireland for the past 25 years or so as I live in a very rural area. For any plan to be successful, the principal actors and stakeholders must first escape capture by the heavy hand of the supervisory Departments. Nothing will be achieved if one is constrained by a top-down Department view. However, I do not see an escape here because the plan strikes me as representing a piece for everybody in the audience without a prime objective or desire. It does not show the necessary bias to remedy infrastructure defects across rural hinterlands and landscapes. That will not be achieved. There is no sign of positive discrimination in favour of rural Ireland.

Cities by their nature are vibrant and active. That is why they will survive. One need only look at something that keeps the local authority going, the rates base. A single big industry in a city can be equivalent to the entire rates base across a rural county. That means development can take place, which is fair play. Many people are gravitating from our areas, and must travel long journeys, to get to work in the cities. They are contributing to development in the cities. That is fair enough. However, the Minister must trust local authorities to achieve some of the plans. Every action and initiative of the local authorities is circumscribed by what I consider to be vice-like departmental control. There is no real devolution of powers or responsibility to local authorities from the mother Department. That is a failing in the plan. Nothing will be achieved until that is released. I have always held that view. We must let the local authorities loose and vest them with the authority to be real local development innovators and agencies, without having to refer back to the Department.

We see that with the housing situation. It is a case of going up and down repeatedly and taking three years to build a house that could be built in six months. I encounter great frustration in Westmeath and Longford with this. One does not have any answers, so one becomes neutralised oneself as well. It is also reflected in the broadband situation. There are great broadband initiatives taking place but, as I said at the last meeting, Eir identifies particular areas. My area of Ballynacargy, nearby Ballymore, Colehill in Longford and Legan are blackspots but the first thing Eir did was to stop coming to those areas even though they were identified by the Govern-

ment and everybody else as blackspots. It is bad enough that rural people are relegated to being third-class citizens but, to add insult to injury, consider the situation in Mullingar on the N52. Bloomfield House Hotel in Mullingar is one of the finest hotels in the country and Mullingar Golf Club is one of the finest golf clubs in the country. In Belvedere, for example, the madness is that Eir delivers broadband to a person in one place, for example, where the Minister is sitting, but the person's sister next door, who has a business, cannot get it. The woman is in business and comes from an innovative family of entrepreneurs, one of the finest in the country. She is at her wits' end and cannot believe it. How can the Minister talk about grandiose plans when he cannot even deliver that simple thing? With broadband connectivity there can be cottage or remote control-type industries. That is how to give rural people a chance.

I recall speaking at an event in Kiltimagh in 1998 or 1999. It was the finest example I have seen of a little local area plan that people devised for themselves, long before anybody was given a tosser. Consider what the Ludgate Hub is doing for Skibbereen and Clonakilty in west Cork. There are plenty of people showing us how it is done. We do not need experts. I believe the game is over the minute we bring in consultants. The Minister should dump the consultants and show them the door. I have never had time for them. We achieved more in the Dáil on the carers issue by writing our own report - simple men handwriting it. We brought forward 15 recommendations and eight of them were implemented by the late Minister, Seamus Brennan, and his successors. The consultants must be cut out. As soon as I see them I know the game is over for rural Ireland. The first thing they do is start talking in haughty language that means nothing but garbage. Let us be clear about that.

With regard to the IDA and so forth, there are 22.5 ha in Mullingar available for development. The N52 road cuts through it. There is also the M6 and M4 nearby. The 22.5 ha have been sitting there for the last eight years. There is planning permission and the land is serviced, yet the IDA could not get a snipe into it. This is a town with 25,000 to 28,000 people and it has the potential to grow. It is an hour from Dublin Port and Dublin Airport, 30 minutes from Maynooth and 30 minutes from Athlone Institute of Technology. It is nonsense. It is all grandiose, gravy train ideas with not an ounce of practicality.

That is what worries me about this plan. We will have smart growth initiatives, competition and plenty of stuff between public and private enterprise, but what will happen to small local councils? Consider the planning issue. I have been a strong advocate of rural planning. I had to be. I would not be living where I am living without getting my house. Under the planning code I can write in an objection to somebody building a house in Galway, Cork or Donegal. The planning should only have an impact where one lives. Westmeath people should object in Westmeath, not chase off to write an objection to somebody living in Meath or Cork. One must be impacted by the planning application. I need a few minutes on this issue, Chairman. Rural planning permissions are very important. A son or daughter building beside his or her elderly parents means the son or daughter is available to the parents to ensure they do not end up in nursing homes or elsewhere. The son or daughter, or their partners, will be able to provide the necessary care. We can gain from that.

The first thing one hears is that there are no services. The funny thing is that rural people did not object to paying their water rates or anything else. They pay for everything. They do not mind. We do not get footpaths or lights but I could not give a sugar as long as I could live beside my late mother and father. That was all that interested me, so I could provide some help to them. That does not come into the planning laws but it is a core issue. Those people are critical to maintaining football, hockey and soccer teams and keeping churches, schools, Garda

stations and anything else in rural Ireland alive.

Gas supply is also important. Places such as Kinnegad, Moate, Kilbeggan, Delvin and Castlepollard, all big towns, cannot get a gas supply from Bord Gáis.

I wish to make a final point. We do not appear to be getting much industry, but thankfully we have a number of manufacturing industries such as the Mergon Group and TEG in Mullingar. We were lucky in that regard. They are wonderful people who have done great work over the years. We are dependent on that but we need more help, more apprenticeships and so forth. We need the balanced growth my colleagues have discussed. I have been involved with the Sparkassen model since its inception. I brought its representatives to meet the credit unions at a big public meeting. The problem is that the dead hand of the Department of Finance and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform will do everything it can to make sure it does not happen, notwithstanding that every Member of the Oireachtas wants it to happen. Bureaucrats will ensure that something that is absolutely critical to revitalising rural Ireland will not happen. There is a place in Mullingar for the midlands one ready to go and there will be seven or eight more of them around the country, but it will not happen unless somebody does something.

I will give a final example. The Royal Canal has been great. The former Minister, Deputy Ó Cuív, and the current President Higgins were involved with it. They were great Ministers who were innovative. I have been involved with the Royal Canal Amenity Group since 1979 as a volunteer. I received an answer to a parliamentary question from the Department a few days ago which illustrates the type of thing that is happening. The Minister of State is aware of this because he was fighting for things for Meath as a Deputy. There is a small spur line to Longford to finish this project from Spencer Dock to Cloondara. It is a wonderful amenity. Half the country walks the Royal Canal. Starting in Dublin, it is possible to walk the length of the canal. My home is on the banks of the canal and I see walkers passing by. That this project is not considered a priority shows the lack of joined-up thinking in Departments. This puts people over the edge. Volunteers in the Royal Canal Amenity Group cannot believe this project is not proceeding.

Chairman: Deputy Penrose has spoken well on this issue. I ask the Minister of State to respond to the three contributions.

Deputy Damien English: While I am unable to answer all the questions members asked, I will try to address their concerns. The idea is to listen to the various contributions and feed them into the overall plan. The reason I am attending today is that I understand concerns have arisen regarding the roll-out of the national planning framework. This is a 20 year plan which sets out a vision for the country. The draft does not include everything and we recognise that changes will need to be made. While I will be pleased to address any concerns raised, I must also point out when people are factually incorrect.

The document makes clear that 50% of growth will not be in the five major cities in the State. It could not be any clearer on this point. Regardless of whether people like it, cities will also experience growth and rightly so. However, if we do not plan them better, they will not thrive although they will survive. We need the five main cities to thrive and to continue to attract investment and employment and be international players. If Galway does not continue to be an international player in the medical technology sector, the whole region will suffer. It is important, therefore, when drawing up a national plan that we provide for continued investment in the cities. They must become more sustainable and better planned to continue to win investment. We must also give people the option to live in our cities.

Deputy Ó Cuív is correct that Galway is experiencing a significant housing problem. Setting out a vision for the city includes trying to address its housing needs for the next 20 to 25 years. I have never said we will fix the housing problem in one year, nor are we planning for a 25% increase in Galway's population in one year. The 25% population increase will take place over 25 years, and without planning, it will probably still take place in an unco-ordinated and unsustainable manner. Planning requires drawing up a business case to win investment for a region, city, town or village. The purpose of the framework is to plan for this in order that business cases can be made for investment, including by the Departments of Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform.

We are trying to strike the right balance. The national planning framework makes clear that we are planning for housing in villages, small towns and rural areas. To take Galway as an example, given that it was referred to by previous speakers, one-off houses have accounted for approximately 75% of new houses in Galway since 2011. While I am fully in favour of one-off houses, what will happen if they account for 100% of new houses? This would not be appropriate. The issue is one of striking the right balance. We have agreed to strengthen the wording on the social reasons for living in rural areas. The plan reflects economic needs and we will provide greater clarity by including social needs because, as Deputy Ó Cuív stated, this is also important.

Not everyone can live in a one-off house and not everybody wants to do so. I do not agree that people have an option of living in a village. An issue arises regarding the cost of a site or a house in a village or town. It has not always been easy to live in a village. I know people who would have liked to have lived in a small village but could not afford to buy a site in it. Others were not sure if they could build a one-off house within the boundary of a town or village. They did not want to live an estate but on a site in the village or town. We want to encourage this option and we are doing so in the national planning framework. Living in rural areas does not only involve living in one-off housing, although the plan allows for one-off housing.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Maybe.

Deputy Damien English: No, it is not a case of "maybe". It is clearly provided for in the planning framework. I ask the Deputy to deal with facts.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: We will go through the document in a moment.

Deputy Damien English: We have made a commitment to strengthen the wording to allay concerns on this issue. I ask members not to misrepresent the contents of the plan. We are here to engage with the facts.

Senator Hopkins referred to Ballinasloe and other towns. In my previous job in the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, as it was then known, we went to great lengths to engage with all the stakeholders in enterprise and try to persuade investors to invest in towns and villages as opposed to Dublin, Cork, Galway and so forth. In the past year, approximately 70% of the jobs created have been outside the Dublin and Cork regions. We want this trend to continue. In some regions, albeit not all of them, towns and villages have enjoyed considerable success in this regard. We must ask why certain locations have not been successful. The Government cannot drag a company to Ballinasloe or force it to invest in the town. However, choices can be made at regional or county level on the towns and growth centres to be made more attractive to business and on identifying what industries and businesses should locate in a town. In general, companies want access to talent, people and skills, which returns us to the

issue of apprenticeships, further education and training and linkages with institutes of technologies and universities. These are all essential requirements that regions must meet if they wish to win jobs. We have agreed to strengthen the wording on this issue in the plans.

People often choose to live in cities. Companies then decide to invest in cities because it is here that the talent is to be found. We want to make towns and villages more attractive places to live because if people choose to live in them, their chances of securing investment will increase. However, these decisions cannot be made by the Government at national level. Regional and local choices must be made and every county has influence on these choices. As such, regional strategies are just as important as the national plan because it at this level that decisions are made on the “wheres” and “whens”.

I do not agree with Deputy Penrose on this issue. The Government deliberately decided not to give something to everyone in the audience because that was the mistake made in previous plans. We are providing that decisions must also be made at regional level, which will mean politicians must make decisions for their regions and counties.

Deputy Ó Cuív asked how will investment be made in towns and villages. The purpose of the smart growth funds is to target villages, towns, cities and key areas of deprivation, as well as the RAPID areas in towns. When the Deputy was a Minister he visited Navan, Ballinacree and Oldcastle which are CLÁR and RAPID areas. There are areas of decline in all towns and villages and we cannot ignore them. We are planning to address and fix them. We are trying to achieve growth. We recognise that cities are meant to benefit the wider region but parts of the regions are not benefiting from growth in the cities. Many people drive into Galway city to work but that does not have to be the case. Many of the companies which have located in Galway will locate additional facilities outside the city, as is currently the case with companies in Dublin which locate secondary phases of development outside the capital. However, one must first attract the investment.

We will work with local authorities which have a central role in deciding in which towns and villages they want to invest. If they make a case to the growth funds, we will target investments. The Deputy is correct to ask where the actions are to make this happen. The strategy sets out the where and how as well as the overall regions. A number of actions will then be needed to back this up and this will be co-ordinated by all Departments. For this reason, the strategy sets out the business case for these actions and investments through various Government agencies and Departments. This has not always been done in a co-ordinated manner. The town and renewal village scheme and other schemes are not always co-ordinated in such a way as to make a significant impact. Decisions with real purpose must be made for a town or village and must include a plan for the next 25 or 30 years. Everybody in a local authority area needs to buy into the plan and investment should be directed into that choice through the various Departments. The town or village will then have been chosen to thrive. A county may choose four or five such locations but they must back up these choices to make this happen, which is what we are trying to do in this strategy. We want long-term thinking because the decline of a town or village cannot be addressed in a couple of years. Long-term investment is required to make it attractive.

Cities present serious challenges which we are trying to address in the strategy. That is not to say all actions will be focused on cities as that is not the case.

I was asked if the Department dictates to local authorities. Approximately 300 local area plans will be submitted to me and my officials for decision in the year ahead. We rarely have

to intervene in these plans. In most cases, local authorities make decisions on local areas plans which we then check, tick a box and say "Away you go". In some cases, we are required to intervene because the plan does not provide for sufficient housing. We try not to do this and we engage with the local authorities. We generally do not dictate to them and the local area plans are generally good. Local authority members make the decisions.

Members argue that villages and towns are being ruined by large shopping centres outside towns. In many cases, local councillors made the decisions which gave rise to these developments. I was a member of the committee with responsibility for enterprise for years and we discussed this matter many times. I recognise that bad decisions were made in this regard but they were made locally, rather than being dictated by national policy. We are trying to focus on breathing life back into the high streets of villages and towns. Let us put to use empty and vacant buildings. Only yesterday, I signed off on draft regulations to make it easier to use a vacant commercial building for housing purposes. In some towns and villages, such properties have been lying empty for 20 or 30 years. Let us focus our minds on trying to save rural areas. I am appearing before the joint committee because I genuinely want to engage with members on this matter.

The concerns of the committee have been expressed very well. While we do not agree with members on every point, we want to address their concerns. I hope we will be able to tweak the wording of the national planning framework to make it clearer.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Minister and his officials for coming here to discuss this hugely important plan. It is to cover the period up to 2040 and that is why it is so important.

Deputy Penrose is right - the Minister said this also - that local authorities are very much at the coalface. To be honest, local authorities throughout the country are concerned about what has been published so far. If I am given the opportunity, I will outline some of my concerns in respect of my constituency of Cavan-Monaghan. There is an onus to discriminate positively in favour of the northern and western regions, particularly in the context of the Border counties. It is a necessary and explicit requirement under the national planning framework to redress the economic and political growth imbalances that exist and ensure that all regions in the State benefit fairly from the economic upturn and increased Government investment. This will ensure that more regionally balanced development is delivered.

I have with me a map to which I always refer. It was presented to us, as local representatives, by Monaghan County Council and has been referred to in so many of the debates in the Dáil. They say that a picture paints a thousand words. The map in question explicitly shows the motorway, to which Deputy McLoughlin referred, from Galway to Dublin and everything south of that. When one looks north, there is little in the way of motorway infrastructure from Galway right up to Belfast. That is where I will begin my presentation to the Minister. I seek greater clarity on the timescale for the delivery of the N2-A5 Dublin to Derry route upgrade. This project is important in the context of connectivity with the north west and for economic growth along the corridor to which the route relates. It is important that we get explicit timescales for its development under the national planning framework. Given its strategic importance and the lack of any direct rail infrastructure serving significant urban areas in the north west along the route, the N2-A5 Dublin to Derry project should be prioritised to full motorway status. Dare I say it, I doubt that there is any further rail development proposed. Therefore, the road infrastructure is hugely important. Monaghan County Council has - continuously and forcefully - always made representations on the importance of that upgrade of the N2, not only due to the significant number of fatalities on the road but also because it is one of the main cor-

ridors through Monaghan and on to Derry. We need explicit timescales for the delivery of that project.

There is an explicit mention, as Deputy Ó Cuív stated, of greenways and blueways in the plan. I welcome the proposed delivery of the Ulster Canal greenway under this plan. However, the mention of the reopening of the Ulster Canal should be included in tandem with the development of the greenway, particularly in light of its tourism and economic potential for the northern and western regions and its potential to act as a catalyst in the regeneration of a number of towns in the central Border area. We depend on that for economic and tourism development. As stated, it is a platform for us to put ourselves forward. We do not have big cities similar to Cork, Limerick and Galway. We depend on the natural heritage and architecture of the area, which is there to be developed and tapped into. I want the reopening of the Ulster Canal along that route to be committed to in tandem with the greenway, which, as I say, is welcome. More important than the greenway is the Ulster Canal. I certainly hope the fact that the greenway has been initiated does not mean that the Ulster Canal project is dead.

The east-west link corridor proposal has been brought to design stage and is sitting on a desk gathering dust. I do not see any mention of that in the national planning framework. That would be a massive mistake. The purpose of the east-west link is to open up the region from Dundalk to Monaghan to Cavan and on over to Sligo. The Border region is totally dependent on that. There has been a great deal of work done and investment made to bring the proposal to design stage. There is more work to be done and there are routes to be decided upon. I want to see it happen, as do both of the local authorities in my constituency. It is crucial and imperative for the development of the Border region that the project be named as part of the Minister's plans for the future.

The upgrade of that Dundalk-Cavan-Sligo east-west strategic route is important for the Border region. It is currently a heavily used poorly aligned route serving significant FDI and indigenous businesses moving goods from Dundalk to ports in Northern Ireland and right over to Sligo. Strategic economic growth in the region is stifled because of not having that upgrade. It is hugely important for the region that the project be named, given a timescale and committed to in the national planning framework.

Cavan town is named as one of the main locations that will deliver in terms of jobs, education and housing. For 25 years, Cavan Institute has provided the highest quality of education for people, both in Cavan and far beyond. As recognised in the draft planning framework, Cavan town is positioned to act as a principal location in terms of housing, jobs and education delivery. To address the low level of third-level qualifications in the sub-region and enhance the talent base, there is a clear opportunity, in the context of the national planning framework, to build on the foundations laid by Cavan Institute by establishing an institute of technology in the town to serve the region. This is something that must be addressed in the plan.

It is important to recognise the growth towns and counties, and also regional spatial and economic strategies, in the national planning framework in order to ensure that growth continues. It is also important to recognise that the previous investment imbalance in the region needs to be corrected under this national planning framework. There is also a need to provide a commitment to upgrade the N3, the N4 and the N2-A5 route and, of course, to proceed with the east-west link corridor. In County Cavan, as the Minister of State, Deputy English, knows better than anybody, the N3 comes to an abrupt stop when one reaches the Meath border. I travel that route every day on my way here. As the Minister of State will be aware, it has made a fantastic difference to County Meath. It has opened the county up. It is as if Cavan people

are the second-class citizens when it comes to the delivery of national primary routes. There is no motorway leading to Cavan town, which brings one right up to the Border hinterland. It is crucially important that we see the upgrade of that route as well. As I stated, if one looks at that map, one can see how the motorway comes to an abrupt stop at the Meath-Cavan border. It would be a missed opportunity. When one considers that this plan is to cover the period up to 2040, that matter must be addressed in the context of this plan.

Finally, I reiterate the point that the third-level facility is of central importance to the Border area. Cavan Institute is strategically placed in the context of establishing an institute of technology in the town. Cavan Institute has grown rapidly in recent years to the point where it is bursting at the seams. It needs the recognition to which I refer in order to be brought that step further. Students have to leave home and we experience a brain drain. We are losing that skilled workforce. We are losing all those students who want to go on to third level and, eventually, complete their masters and PhDs. The Minister and I both know that in today's world one is going nowhere without a degree. The institute needs that recognition. It needs that upgrade.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank the Minister for coming in. I also thank Mr. Cussen and Mr. Hogan for attending.

I was in Sligo when the Minister's predecessor, Deputy Coveney, launched the plan and invited people right across the country to make submissions. I visited seven counties. I went to Donegal, Sligo, Cavan, Mayo, Roscommon, Galway and Leitrim to listen to people outline what they need for the future. There is a fair onus on this plan for the simple reason that it will cover the next 20 years. It is a defining time. The reality is that we either do it right now or certain parts of rural Ireland will be forgotten. This is the responsibility that is on our shoulders.

We are not happy with the framework. What we need to do is make it right. That is the only way one can solve something. We can give out about it and we can jump and down, but all one can do is make it right.

I have this to say about whoever is responsible for writing it. Deputy Penrose talked about consultants earlier. Consultants need to be removed from every room in the country because, first, they are robbing the country and, second, they do not know the nuts and bolts of this. They do not realise what is happening. These people live in a fantasy world compared with some people who live in rural parts of Ireland.

If the Minister of State looks at a copy of the map Deputy Smyth has, he will see there is not one city in the Republic north of a line drawn from Dublin to Galway. Are we going to leave the likes of Sligo and Letterkenny without city status or build that area up? These places are not in my constituency but they are important. The first thing we are doing is putting in a foundation with this plan, but if we do not build houses right and have the foundation right, we will go nowhere. The Minister knows what we need; he was party to the talks on the formation of a government. The whole western arc was taken out of the TEN-T funding in 2011. He remembers that. It was put into the programme for Government, but the Minister, Deputy Ross, is more concerned about drink-driving than ensuring TEN-T funding for that area, which would help it economically.

We need to tie up with Northern Ireland. The A5 from Derry to Aughnacloy will be completed. A spur can be built out of that to the M1 if we lay down our plans for the future. This is being done in bits but it is like draining one field when the whole farm is wet. There is no point to it. It is like hopping. Bits are being built from Mullingar, but a road needs to be brought

down along the west from Mullingar to Westport and from Carrick-on-Shannon to Sligo. The new road that is being opened, the M6 to Tuam, is great. It is opening access to the area. The Minister of State was right in saying earlier that one cannot catch some business person by the neck and tell him or her to go somewhere else. However, someone stuck behind a 35X tractor for an hour driving around Longford will definitely not go there. We also need to build roads strategically in this plan. We are in trouble in Galway, and I do not blame this all on the Departments. Some county councils are asleep and need a wake-up call about what is going on but others need resources. I noticed the Minister of State talked about maintaining regional and local roads and strategic road improvement, but the councils do not get the money. They are about 40% down. We cannot maintain them.

The Minister of State talked about the CAP. The CAP needs to shift the 20% of farmers getting 80% of the money in the next three years. We are seeing land abandonment at present. The Government needs to put the full infrastructure in. I know the Government cannot do this on its own; it will need regional plans afterwards along with local plans for towns.

We all know the problems Dublin has. I question one thing I saw in the plan. We are dreaming this dream, or perhaps it is Transport Infrastructure Ireland, that we will spend €3 billion in ten or 12 years' time on building an underground way out to the airport. I went out that way the other day. I telephoned Iarnród Éireann and was told that for €200 million, we could build a spur from Malahide. Half a loaf is better than no bread, but we are not doing this for Dublin. Galway is losing jobs, according to the statistics that have come out, because of traffic problems. Tree huggers have been blocking developments in this regard for years and years, and we need to do something about them as well. There are people objecting. The Apple data centre in Athenry is being held up, as was the outer ring road in Galway. How many more roads will be held up? Someone who could be from the bottom end of Waterford will object to something being built in Galway. This cannot go on. It is the Minister of State's Department that can change some of the rules in this regard. I know it cannot do everything, and I am not saying that, but we must have a vision for the next 20 years of the kind of country we want. When the plan comes out in spring, do we want a road from Dublin to Mullingar? Do we want a proper road from Mullingar to Westport? Are we going to join up with, and talk to, the Northern officials? Will a road be built out to Aughnacloy? Are we going to lengthen the road in the Minister of State's area heading towards Monaghan? Will a road be built from, say, Donegal to Sligo? Are we going to make a city out of Sligo? Are we going to make a city out of Athlone or are we going to keep tilting everyone back to Dublin? That is the problem at present. We need the Cork-to-Mallow road completed to serve the southern part of the country. We need to know shortly whether something like the Luas will be built in the likes of Galway, Cork or Limerick. We must look 20 years ahead. Will we have a rail corridor in the west of Ireland? If such a rail corridor is not in the plan, we better cut to the chase. There is a debate going on about greenways and rail, but we need to know where we are going for the next 20 years because people will make decisions based on this plan and the Minister of State and his officials have an opportunity to get this strategically right.

This plan is an aspiration for the simple reason that the last one was published in 2002 and I still see many parts of that plan in respect of which nothing was ever delivered on. No one will ever say that everything will be delivered on, but one thing we need to see is whether the Minister of State will include these projects in the plan. If we do not do this, if we do not build the foundation of what is to be put in the plan now, we are as well just to forget about it.

Another problem I have concerns rural housing, and I ask the Minister of State's officials to

look at this. Some of these do-gooders do not understand that if one does not have a son or a daughter building, the local national school will be in trouble down the line because one needs a chain of children to keep a small school open in rural Ireland. The shop in the local area needs to be kept open. We are not looking for anything for nothing. People in rural Ireland are paying for everything but, ultimately, all they are looking for is a little fair play. This is not to have a go at the Minister of State or anything like that. What I am saying to him is that this is an opportunity to lay the foundations now. However, if the plan comes out the same as it was the last time, we need to make concrete decisions to the effect that from now on this is what we will do for the next 20 years. If these projects are not in the plan, we may as well give up talking about rural Ireland.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I thank the Minister of State for his presentation. It was very detailed. It does, however, concern me. I know he made the point that the decimation of rural Ireland has not occurred through the recession, but it has got worse, and I know this as a Teachta Dála and someone who has always lived in a rural community. During the recession of the 1980s we had post offices and banks. We no longer have them, so we seem to be going backwards instead of forward. That is the reality. I am not here to be negative; I am just being constructive and saying it as it is.

The Minister of State mentioned the IDA and that he is quite pleased that it is on board. That worries me because the IDA is completely urban-focused. Deputies in other parties have expressed frustration in this regard, and I totally concur with Deputy Penrose. The IDA is turning its back on communities, and a much tougher approach is needed here. The IDA should be more answerable to Government. A task force needs to be set up in order to manage it and to set targets because its track record is dismal and speaks for itself. Consider the number of visits to Laois-Offaly. It needs to improve. We talk about the rejuvenation of our rural economies. That cannot happen unless there is buy-in and co-operation from all these people. The local authorities are doing their best through the local enterprise offices, and that is certainly working well in supporting new SMEs, but the IDA also has responsibility for foreign direct investment and we cannot be left behind any longer. I just want to make the point strongly that we need a tougher approach.

Regarding businesses, I have met business people in my constituency of Offaly and the zoning of land seems to be problematic. There are people who would be quite happy to go into a small town and set up a business but there are regulations regarding the zoning of land. That needs to be looked into and addressed because these people are expressing interest. We also need to get the planning side of it right.

The plan refers to presenting rural economies with opportunities through economic development. That has to happen but it will not happen unless our services are protected. When the Ulster Bank in Ferbane in west Offaly closed, many businesses were in turmoil worrying about the closure and its detrimental effect on them. We need to protect businesses by ensuring we do not jump the gun. We are not asking for any more than what we are entitled to but we need to have common sense and services have to be protected.

I attended a meeting with Deputy Penrose in Athlone a couple of months ago at which IBEC, which has set up some businesses in the midlands, expressed concern over the lack of road infrastructure connecting the midlands and the North. There are businesspeople who are interested in setting up businesses in the midlands so we need to address the poor state of the road infrastructure in the area. I have met members of Offaly County Council, who are doing their utmost to develop jobs and create opportunities in what is a rural county that has been left

behind. They have asked for the Tullamore-Kilbeggan link road to be prioritised because that will create investment, as it will for the neighbouring county of Westmeath and the midlands as a whole. We need a pragmatic approach but we see report after report and I get nervous when I hear that the urban-focused IDA is getting involved. We need to see fewer reports and plans and more action. The Minister, as a rural Deputy, will know that people are fed up, frustrated and will not take any more. We will not take being second-class citizens any more. I am here as an advocate for my own constituency and for the wider midlands area, which has been left behind. We need action and we need it fast.

Senator Grace O’Sullivan: I have made my own submission to the process but I want to raise a few points. The Minister talked about making the business case for investment. We are talking about societies here, more so than business. I would be nervous if the Minister was only focusing on the business case.

I wonder why we are having this discussion without the capital plan on the table beside us. If I am planning something, I have to know what is in my budget, but we are in the dark in this process without that critical piece of information.

Does the Minister have criteria for determining regional investment? I get the sense from other Deputies and Senators of a lack of parity, and my own region, the south east, feels it is losing out. Waterford, in particular, is an unemployment blackspot and we need support with regard to the technological university, which would develop the skills and talent in the region in order that we can compete. We have not had that support so we need action as soon as possible.

We have talked a lot about roads today but not enough about rail. The construction of a good road from Europort Rosslare to Waterford, Limerick, Galway and the north west and back to Dublin is now almost complete and it needs to be finished as a matter of urgency, but we also need investment in rail because it will create an option for commuters and will alleviate the congestion in Dublin, Galway and Cork.

We have a huge opportunity in respect of renewable energy systems for rural Ireland, the western corridor, the eastern corridor and, for offshore wind, the Irish Sea, and I would like this to be built into the national planning framework. What we do now will lay the foundations, and if we get it right, it will be to the benefit of our society in coming years. If we think of it simply as a business opportunity, we will miss a vital component, namely, the people of our country.

Chairman: I agree with a lot of what has been said. There is an undoubted need for the national planning framework. Previous plans have failed miserably but if this plan is totally successful, we will, unfortunately, have a slightly inflated version of what we have already, in which two thirds of the population live in the greater Dublin area. As a result, the plan is flawed. Regions are not defined properly, although cities are readily identifiable. We need to look at the country as an island and as a whole. We need to look at Belfast and the north west, though there is welcome mention of Derry collaborating with Letterkenny. Sligo and the surrounding counties also need to be included in the region, however, and one could argue there should be a Limerick-Galway region and a Cork-Waterford region as well as a Dublin region. The regions were decided in 2014, when Clare was lumped in with Wexford even though it is right beside Galway and the two counties have an economic reliance on each other, with people travelling from one to the other to work every morning. This needs to change and we need to identify proper functioning regions that can work together.

We also need to define a region. A region is something with an urban core and with trans-

port links such as ports, rail and airports and a critical mass of people within an hour's journey, which will provide a counterbalance to Dublin. Dublin is creaking at the seams. There is congestion and one cannot buy a house here, but this plan wants to push more people into Dublin. We need to take advantage of this opportunity to rebalance the State.

Deputy Canney hit the nail on the head when he said that although the Atlantic corridor task force, which is backed by the State, was put together in March and on which the Minister sits, does invaluable work, that work is not being taken on board. As a country, we need to re-balance what we are doing to seriously address the imbalance between Dublin and the rest of the country. There is a massive gulf. If we are to address the problems of rural Ireland, we need to create a counterbalance to Dublin. We must encourage people to stay in rural Ireland. We must ensure they can attend primary school locally and get a third level education close to home. When they are educated, we must ensure they can find jobs in their immediate area instead of having to travel to Dublin, Berlin, Amsterdam or Australia to find work. We need to have regional areas that can compete with Dublin. Serious work needs to be done on the plan to deliver in that regard.

I agree with Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice that we have an opportunity. We have a vision and an opportunity to get it right. I ask the Minister of State to listen to and take on board what members have said.

Deputy Damien English: I will again try to respond to the points raised. As there is a lot of commonality in the issues raised, I will not go back over absolutely everything.

The Chairman is absolutely right when he says we need to have regions that can compete with Dublin. That is what we are trying to do in striking a balance and enabling the regions to compete. That said, Dublin, Cork, Galway and Limerick have to compete with other places in Europe and the rest of the world. The challenge is to get the balance right. We certainly need to increased competition within Ireland and make sure investment is spread throughout the country. However, we must recognise that we need cities in Ireland to be international players. That is why we must also grow the cities; otherwise they will decline and not thrive and opportunities will be missed. The Chairman is absolutely right, therefore, that it is all about getting the balance right. Reference was made to the fact that development should not be a question of either/or, but members must understand rural Ireland also needs strong cities. There is no doubt that is the case. Ireland as a whole needs them.

Deputy Grace O'Sullivan commented on my use of the phrase "business case". I think the Deputy knows that I am not obsessed with business. I am a community person and the plan is about developing communities, towns and villages and providing various services. Therefore, when I use the term "business case", I am referring to the book of evidence to win investment. A youth centre needs a business case. If one wants to open a new hospital, one must make a case for such investment. That is what I mean when I use the term "business case". I do not mean that it is all about economics and winning jobs. It is not just about that, but one must make a case. When I describe the national planning framework as the business case for investment, what I mean is that it sets out a vision for the country. Decisions will be made on all of the infrastructure that has been mentioned, but one has the evidence. National, regional and local plans are the evidence for investment. Following on from this, there will be investment in energy projects, technology, broadband infrastructure and so forth in order to make the plans happen. No one spends taxpayer's money without making the case for such expenditure. That is what I meant. I want to make it clear that I am not obsessed with economics and business. The aim of the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Mur-

phy, and the Department is to develop communities socially and economically.

The Deputy also referred to energy projects and the opportunities available in rural Ireland. I totally agree with her. Several years ago I visited the small town of Güssing on the Austrian-Hungarian border. It has a population of less than 2,000. It had turned itself around completely from a job creation point of view. It had an unemployment rate of almost 80%. Now it has an employment rate of over 130% as a result of investment in green energy projects. It is producing energy in small rather than huge plants, for which it is often very difficult to gain community acceptance. There are lots of opportunities for rural towns and villages to contribute in many ways. The Deputy is absolutely right in that regard.

It is true that a lot of the projects I mentioned are road projects, but we also envisage further investment in the rail network. Members referred to many rail projects. While we do want to see investment in both light rail and high speed rail services, we must have the critical mass of people to justify it. Reference was made to Galway and Cork, but if 75% of those building houses in Galway are not living in the city, there will never be the critical mass to justify investment in a light rail system in Galway. At the same time, if we do not invest in light rail systems and the provision of bus corridors and roads, as a city Galway will suffer. It needs that balance of investment. That is what this is about. The same applies to Cork and Dublin in the context of metro north and other projects - if we do not have sufficient people, we cannot justify the investment. I know all about this because for most of my life I have been arguing for the provision of a rail connection to Navan. It is about having enough people to justify the investment. One could argue about decisions made by previous Governments, but one must recognise that we need sufficient people to pay for such investment to make it work. That is why we refer to having 50% of growth in cities because we must build them up, but to provide any service, there must be a critical mass of people. It is easier to service villages if there are people living in them. That is what we are trying to do.

Deputy Niamh Smyth listed a range of projects, most of which I would probably support because they affect my own county too. However, I am not here to tick a box for various projects. Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice raised similar issues. The plan is about the why and the where. Why would one want to have a road running through County Monaghan? Why would one upgrade the existing road to motorway standard? What is the reason for it or the rationale behind it?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: The Government mentions specific projects.

Deputy Damien English: Yes, in some case we do, rightly so. However, I cannot detail every project. The idea is that the plan will set out what we want to achieve in the regions and different areas and what we need to do to make it happen. One will then list the various projects. That is where the national investment plan comes in, as well as other strategies, including what the local authorities need to do to make it happen. That is what we are trying to do. I agree with many of the points made by the Deputy.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Most politicians and people believe that if we are to do this now, we need to lay it out in black and white-----

Deputy Damien English: I agree. I have not finished-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The road projects on which we are to embark need to be included in the plan in black and white. The areas that are to be cities need to be included in

black and white. We cannot just have flowery wording while saying nothing.

Deputy Damien English: One needs to have what the Deputy calls the flowery wording, as well as the detail. I am happy to agree with him in that regard. We need to strengthen the wording on the regions, particularly the northern regions, including the north west. We are happy to do so. We are agreed that they include counties Monaghan and Cavan. We will strengthen the wording on the regions generally to reflect the concerns expressed. As politicians, we must also accept that if we do that, we have to make it happen.

Reference was made to Sligo town being designated as a city. If one looks at what has happened in County Sligo, one will see that many of its towns and villages have grown more than Sligo town. My town of Navan is probably bigger than Sligo town now. That has happened on the back of decisions made locally by local councillors. If we want these things to happen, we must make them happen. We must buy into national, regional and local plans.

Deputy Carol Nolan mentioned County Laois. Approximately 10,000 people leave Portlaoise every day of the week. How do we win investment for it? I have seen the plans for it as a town. It is a major growth centre and there are great plans to develop the town which will win investment. The local authority has made the decision to focus on this and put the effort into it. It has put a plan together that will win investment from all Departments that will bring jobs. That is what we are trying to do. We are trying to set out the thought process to determine what we are trying to achieve in the different regions and growth centres and then make decisions that will make it happen.

Deputy Niamh Smyth made reference to green ways and blue ways and various roads, but it is all about connectivity. We must ask to what do we want to connect and what the future is for different towns and villages. There is great potential. The Deputy mentioned counties Cavan and Monaghan and several other places. They are all key growth centres that we want to see developed.

The Deputy also talked about the education system. We agreed earlier that the document probably needs to reflect more on the role of the education system. However, I disagree with the Deputy on one issue. There is an obsession with the need to have a primary or a master's degree. It is an obsession in peoples' heads, but it is not the reality. The career paths available and earning potential through apprenticeships and further education and training are just as important. Sir Alex Ferguson was an apprentice.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I am not disagreeing with the Minister of State in that regard.

Deputy Damien English: I want to make a point because it is very important, particularly in the context of the regions. One could look at Combilift in the Deputy's region. That company's expansion and the associated growth in jobs are down to further education and training. The company has worked with the Department to develop new educational methods locally. There are so many opportunities in the regions to work with the ETBs, institutes of technology and universities. It is important that we strike that balance in education-----

Deputy Niamh Smyth: We will not have highly skilled jobs in the area-----

Deputy Damien English: May I finish my point, please? It is wrong to say one will go nowhere in this country without a degree. That is wrong and not fair. I spent a lot of time working on the skills strategy, focusing on further education and training. Cavan-Monaghan is one of the best areas when it comes to opportunities in that regard. Education is a journey, but

there is so much potential in the regions, particularly the north west. There is so much on offer from the various players in education in counties Galway, Mayo and Sligo, as well as Cavan-Monaghan. That is how we will win investment and jobs. We will reflect that more clearly in the strategy as we go along.

There were a few other issues mentioned. I am not here to comment on each road project the Deputies mentioned but I understand why everyone is raising them. We know there has to be a joined-up approach here and that is what will happen with the investment plan. It is important that they are linked together. I am not going to issue pronouncements on timelines for the various projects. That is not in my gift. The capital plan is being developed and will roll out pretty much in line with this. There will be ongoing reviews to make sure we are making the right decisions on capital investment and that is it aligned with the different parts of the national planning framework. There will mid-term reviews and five-year plans. It is important that the ten-year capital plan reflects the agreed, finalised version of the national planning framework, Ireland 2040 Our Plan. We are here to make sure we strengthen it from a rural point of view. We are agreeing with the Deputy on that and are prepared to do that as well.

Deputy Fitzmaurice touched on some of the same areas and highlighted the importance of actually naming the projects and so on. It is also important that we get the thought process right. What do we want to achieve? What projects will help to achieve it? Where do we have to invest and how do we target investment? People keep mentioning IDA Ireland. Deputy Carol Nolan said she is concerned that it is at the table. I have worked with IDA Ireland and its number one target is to win jobs for the country.

Deputy Carol Nolan: It is not doing it. I have met it twice.

Deputy Damien English: I am only answering the questions I was asked. Its number one priority is to win jobs for Ireland. Governments have intervened and asked it to create a regional balance, with 50% of the jobs created outside the major cities. We do not always achieve that every year but there is some good progress being made. It also has to win jobs for the country as a whole and it is quite successful at that. Many Governments composed of different parties have been involved in that process. IDA Ireland has had some of its best years in the last couple of years. We have to work with it to make sure there is a spread of those jobs. It goes back to the question of why. Deputy Fitzmaurice said it. We cannot take someone by the lug and make them locate a business in a certain area. We have to encourage people and work with the local authorities. I have seen how different local authorities have strengthened their relationships with IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and so on, and have developed economic strategies and won investment as a result. It is important to encourage local authorities, which are now leading economic development in their areas, to work with the agencies and produce plans. I have seen the plan for Portlaoise and have no doubt it will win investment and help IDA Ireland to bring jobs there. Without that plan, we will not get those jobs there. That is why we have the national planning framework.

Chairman: Will the Minister of State take another question from Deputy Nolan?

Deputy Damien English: I will, but I am conscious that everybody wants to come in.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I just want to address the point about IDA Ireland. The fact of the matter is that the local authorities are doing all they can. When I was a councillor, IDA Ireland was called in for a meeting-----

Deputy Damien English: I am not here to defend IDA Ireland.

Deputy Carol Nolan: The Minister of State seems to be doing so, all the same. He is talking about balanced regional development. The fact of the matter is that it is not happening. The Minister of State has a background in jobs and enterprise. Would he agree with the proposal that a task force be set up?

Deputy Damien English: There are umpteen task forces. We have regional action plans with which I was involved. I was involved in the Action Plan for Jobs. It is about having a plan, making decisions and implementing hundreds of actions every year to make it happen. That is why I believe in the national planning framework. We will not get investment and jobs in these different regions if we do not have a plan that is backed up by infrastructure which makes it possible to locate jobs in more areas. Each county, town and village has to decide what it wants. Each town and village has to have some sort of long-term aim, purpose and vision. It needs to feed into something as well. I am not here to defend IDA Ireland. I am just here to point out that it has to win jobs for the country first and then get them dispersed.

Deputy Carol Nolan: It is not balanced.

Deputy Damien English: I know from working with the people in IDA Ireland that they are not necessarily obsessed with which county gets those jobs. Many counties have their own strategies that help secure them. IDA Ireland will bring jobs to different places but it has to get them into the country first. I am critical of IDA Ireland in my own county as well at times. The Deputy should not get me wrong.

Deputy Carol Nolan: The Minister of State should set up a task force.

Chairman: We have given that issue a fair run now. Deputy Smyth has a small point.

Deputy Damien English: I want to make sure I have answered all the existing questions first. I must check my notes. I think I have covered most things. It is all about the local authorities having local area and county development plans. They are essential. People say there is difficulty with zoning of land for enterprises. They are decisions made by local councillors. My Department is very proactive in responding to that. I will cite-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: They are given the parameters of how much they can zone.

Deputy Damien English: I have recently seen a proposal in Arklow for a key bit of land to be set aside to win jobs and investment. That is something that will work, that we encourage and that can happen in many towns and villages in a planned way. We are not going to win IDA Ireland investment in every town and village. We have to make some decisions and choices. We are trying to co-ordinate it through the national plan. I want to stress that the regional plans that come out of this over the next 12 months are the key.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I have one quick question. When this plan comes out in February, are we going to know whether there will be road infrastructure put in at A, B, C, D and E? Will decisions be made about where exactly rail is going to be provided over the next 20 years? Those issues will be decided by national policy, not county councils. Will they be on the plan? If not, we do not know where we are going.

Chairman: I thank Deputy Fitzmaurice. Deputy Smyth wants to come in briefly, then Deputy Ó Cuív. Deputies Michael Collins and Danny Healy-Rae have not made contributions

yet. We are two hours into this.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: We will be another few hours. The Minister of State said he is not going to name projects. Maybe he did not mean that.

Deputy Damien English: I am not here to announce them today. That is not my job.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: Certain projects are mentioned, however, and that is where my concern is. The Ulster Canal greenway is specifically mentioned. Far more important is the Ulster Canal being reopened. That is not just me being parochial. It is about developing the whole economic area.

Deputy Damien English: That is why we are here today; it is to hear that.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: The Minister of State was talking about skill sets, degrees and all the rest. IDA Ireland will not look at towns like Cavan or Monaghan because we do not have a third level college. A skilled workforce must be coming through with primary and master's degrees for IDA Ireland to consider bringing big companies to an area, whether we like it or not. There must be a highly skilled workforce on the ground to take up the jobs. Of course we have apprenticeships and Combilift is a wonderful addition to the area. People going into those apprenticeships are on the minimum wage. Therefore, there are young people from the constituency with degrees from other parts of the country, who will not consider going back to their homeplace because the highly skilled jobs are not there for them.

The east-west link corridor is the most obvious piece of infrastructure that we need to service the whole north-western region. That is not being parochial. It needs to be specifically named. We are highlighting projects that are obviously apt.

Deputy Damien English: I am not saying anyone is being parochial. I am not here to announce projects. I cannot do that as it is not my job. That is all I am saying. I was actually agreeing with Deputy Smyth on some of the projects.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: On this issue of infrastructure, here and there throughout the plan, specific projects are mentioned in a hodgepodge fashion. Specific roads are mentioned, the M20 and so on, and reference is made to general improvements. I would have thought a national approach would take cognisance of the fact that over half of the national primary routes are now either dual carriageway or motorway. It would have been reasonable to include in the plan a statement that the objective between now and 2040 - a period of some 23 years - would be that every national primary route would be dual carriageway or motorway. Westport to Castlebar is proposed as a narrow dual carriageway, not as a motorway. That is satisfactory. However, if we want connectivity across this island for all our people, the first thing we need is a good spinal link. In the last 20 years, we have done about half of them. We had virtually no motorway or dual carriageway 20 years ago. The remaining half is the cheaper half. Having completed that work, we will have connected places like Cavan, Monaghan, Letterkenny, Donegal town, Ballina and all the areas around them. We will have connected Killarney and Tralee to the national road network in a sensible way. It is very achievable. We will then find that there is a certain section of the country that is very far removed from national primary routes, a matter Fianna Fáil had included in Transport 21. It states the Government will focus on upgrading coastal national secondary routes, including Skibbereen, the Ring of Kerry, Dingle, west Clare, west Galway and west Mayo - the N59 - as well as the N56 in County Donegal. When that is done, nowhere in the country will be strategically far from anywhere else.

There is another thing that I do not understand about the plan. It is bitterly written and without a big vision. There are many railway lines throughout the country, some of which are utilised, some of which are half-utilised and some of which are totally unutilised. There does not seem to be a comprehensive plan to look at the existing rail infrastructure, including from Claremorris to Galway, and ask, since the Minister of State is so focused on cities, if there is a need for rapid commuter services into the cities. This is not mentioned anywhere, even though, for example, there are more railway lines around Limerick than any other city. They include the lines to and from Nenagh, the cement company and Foynes. At very little cost, one could put in place a fantastic commuter system that would enable people to live wherever they wanted and get to the centre very quickly, but this is not included in the plan. Such a service is not even mentioned for Cork and certainly not for Galway. This transport plan does not state this is our little island, that we want everywhere to be connected to everywhere else and that we will adopt a strategic approach to do it over 23 years. All of these things are achievable in that timeframe, but the plan is not in place to do so. There is a litany of bits and pieces, but there is no comprehensive plan to connect all of the country.

We often talk about cities. They are interesting places for those who have to live in them. The high-end people being talked about who live in the cities are the ones who visit the wild-est parts of the country at the weekend, including west Clare, Achill and so on, for recreation, including to take part in extreme sports. They do not live in Dublin for the entire week. Many of them want to get out of it, as we saw when we had the-----

Deputy Damien English: And *vice versa*.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: That is not doubted.

On the need for critical mass, if there were another 100,000 people in County Galway, every regional service, including the train and bus services from Galway to Dublin, would have many more passengers. A myth is perpetuated by planners that all of the people who get on intercity buses in Galway live in Galway city. If one were to carry out a survey, one would find that 50% or more do not live there. They mostly live in country areas, including Connemara, north and south Galway or elsewhere. They travel into the city to get on a bus, for example, to Dublin. The idea that the health of the transport system or a shop is dependent on the people living in a town is wrong. If the local towns in the area in which I live were dependent on the people who live in them, they would have no business. Our vision is too short. I cannot believe how limited, hodge-podge and unco-ordinated our vision is for a 23-year national transport strategy. I suggest the Minister of State start again, include "a transport vision for Ireland" and come back to us with a big vision. That does not mean having a bit of road here or there as announced by the Taoiseach.

Deputy Damien English: I said at the start and have said repeatedly that the document sets out what we want to achieve, where we want to achieve it and the ambition behind it. The ten-year capital investment plan and the further capital investment plans that will come after it will dictate the infrastructure that will be funded. We are saying what we think is needed and identifying the areas we want to develop. Decisions will have to be made on how that will happen. I am not here to list a range of proposals. If we were to do so in the draft, every Deputy would his or her own projects. We have set out what we want to achieve in the regions. There will be a natural progression to address what has to happen. We have mentioned some projects to which we are committed. They are examples. I cannot keep repeating that all of the decisions will be made in the ten-year capital investment plan which will be aligned with the document. We would all love to have them listed. I would too because I agree with many of them, but I

cannot do so today. That is not what the plan is about.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: There are five or six major projects on which decisions need to be made.

Deputy Damien English: The plan is to publish them together early in January. There is a book of evidence outlining the reasons many of the infrastructural projects mentioned by the Deputy have to happen. Under different laws there are many step-by-step procedures one has to go through. All of the projects cannot be named because that would not be the right way to do it. They will be linked. I want people to be confident that that will happen, unlike what happened in the past.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: On page 53, the Minister of State-----

Deputy Damien English: I know that there are a few more-----

Chairman: Three members have to come in. Deputies Seán Canney, Michael Collins and Danny Healy-Rae have yet to speak.

Deputy Damien English: That is fine.

Chairman: We will keep it brief. We are over time.

Deputy Damien English: We will consider all of the issues raised and submissions made and come back with a final document. I am not here to have the answer to every question for the committee. I wish I could, but we have not finished the document. This is an opportunity for members to raise issues. I am not here to talk all day and cannot do so.

Deputy Seán Canney: Having listened to those who have spoken, I have two points. Many people have spoken about the railways. That point needs to be stitched in. The other big message to which we need to come back relates to the Atlantic economic corridor.

Deputy Damien English: When he was out of the room, I answered the Deputy's question.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Michael Collins: We are talking about the national planning framework, but we are also addressing the development of communities in rural Ireland. We have been given a brief synopsis of what we should be discussing. If there is to be any hope of turning things around in rural Ireland, the creation of employment is a huge issue. As Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív said, there has been little or no funding for secondary roads. The Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Shane Ross, might say to me that he has provided a sum of €30,000, but I am talking about serious funding. In my constituency very poor funding has been received for the N71 which extends from Shannon to the peninsulas, including Bere Island and Mizen Head. How can we open up west Cork? One must provide broadband - the service is extremely poor, as is mobile phone coverage in many places - and the roads must also be improved. If we could tackle issues throughout the country such as the improvement of the N71, we would start to open up rural communities to employment creation.

We talk about planning in rural areas and the granting of planning permission. That is another issue that needs to be addressed. Planning permission is being refused to many young people who perhaps are working in a city but who want to live or have great ideas to create employment in a local community. If one looks at the guidelines, one will see that they are

too strict. They are against the giving of planning permission to local people, in particular, and even to someone who is willing to set up a business. There are poor planning laws that need to be looked at.

I see rural-proofing as one of the topics to be considered. The process is certainly not working and the Government needs to give it serious consideration. The farcical Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill was not rural-proofed. The Minister said he had met various groups and that he would meet all of them again. All he is doing is saying what he will do. He needs to look for rural transport solutions to enable people to come and go from their communities freely.

There are positives. We do not always need to dwell on the negatives. The Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Denis Naughten, recently started a post office pilot scheme in Mullingar, Ennis and Bantry. Through an online service people will be able to purchase goods locally on a Tuesday evening and receive them in the post the next morning. That is a move in the right direction and we are starting to compete with the online world. I hope the people of Bantry and its surroundings, as well as Ennis and Mullingar, will take it up when it starts in January 2018. Hopefully, businesses will tie in with it and use the opportunities it will present.

Payment of motor tax needs to move to the post office network. There is a big opportunity with this. Motor tax collection is being moved to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. It might provide an opportunity for people to be able to tax their cars at their post office. We want to save our post office network. Community banking using the network could also assist in this regard.

On islands, there are eight islands in my constituency. Peninsulas should be included in this. I live on a peninsula myself and I know how it is difficult as they can be poorly populated with poor employment and difficult transport access. This needs to be studied.

Once, with a twinning project with Goleen Community Council, I travelled to Vihtijärvi in Finland. I noticed the Finns had a very good medical care system. I accept they pay high taxes but they get something for that. In every rural community, the children are collected from the door, taken to school, fed and brought home to the door. Their medical care is also fully covered. That is the road we need to travel. In Ireland taxes are low but families are burned out by all the payments they must make instead. The Finns have a good system, which is well worth examining.

While we talk about developing rural communities, the previous Government destroyed many rural communities and community voluntary organisations. I was a member of the voluntary forum but the previous Government disbanded it, along with town councils. We need to further develop community councils because they are the life and soul of many communities, helping to get community centres up and running and providing services such as Meals on Wheels. We need to look at the Leader programme to undo the mess made of it. Funding has not been given to communities and we are two years short of the programme ending.

I come from a community perspective. I would not have been elected to the Dáil only for the people of the community who are 100% behind me because I speak only for communities. We need to look at the struggles in communities. Some communities feel no one is listening. This week thousands of people came out in the Bantry area, pleading with the Government not to allow the proposal to harvest mechanically hundreds of acres of kelp in Bantry Bay. That is against community spirit and will be an environmental disaster. People say “No” but no one is

listening.

I am fighting with CIÉ on the school transport rule that a child must go to the nearest school to the bus service. That is fine if the bus takes the natural route. However, I have some situations in west Cork where the bus takes a boreen to prove a route is 0.1 km shorter in order to take the child to one school than another. That is a disgrace. The bus should take the natural route.

There is much done against people in communities trying to go about their daily lives. I hope we can work together on this national planning framework to change that.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I object strongly to this being described as the national plan from now to 2040. It is not good enough to cover the next three or four years, not to mind the next 20 years. I am not signing my name to this or approving it as our plan because then Kerry local authority will tell us this is the plan as set out by the Government and these are the Members who backed it. I object to this being called a plan for the next 23 years.

IBEC constantly tells us that, compared with Europe, this country has the least number of infrastructure projects in train or even prepared for the go-ahead. We hear more about rolling out broadband. If it were a carpet they were rolling out, the whole of the island and the British Isles would be covered by now. Why is it not being done in a methodical fashion? Where it is rolled out, there are pockets of bad coverage within. People affected in these pockets are going mad because they think it has passed them by and they will never get broadband. I have raised this issue before with the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Naughten.

We do not have many rural transport services. Deputy Heydon spoke about 38 more rural link services across the country. The 38 services would not cater for Kerry alone. If Deputy Heydon thinks this will camouflage the Minister, Deputy Ross's, drink-driving Bill and offset the anger being meted out to those parties supporting it, it will not.

It is hard enough as it is for people who have ties with a rural area to get planning permission for a single-build house. Now we are hearing that they will have to have a financial link to where they want to build. That is unfair, particularly for people who might have to travel two hours to work from their locality. This is about housing and putting a roof over one's head. The people in question have a site, which is a large part of the cost of a house.

The Government is inclined to blame the local authorities for not zoning enough land. Over the past 12 months, we have asked the Department to allow Kerry County Council to zone extra lands in Killarney but it will not. It is the Department which is setting out the parameters for land zoning. The developer Michael O'Flynn, who knows what he is talking about, said recently that if not enough land is zoned, it will drag up the cost of houses. The Department needs to get into its head that this needs to be done. There is nothing wrong with more land being zoned, as it would create competition. If only one developer has his lands on one side of a town zoned, then he has a monopoly and can charge whatever he likes for houses on it. The Department has to recognise that. Blaming the local authorities is not correct.

Deputy Damien English: I was talking about industrial land and jobs.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: We have been waiting 36 years for the Macroom bypass. Some of it will be built next year but it will not be connected to Ballincollig when many people thought it would be.

While we are glad to have people coming to Killarney and County Kerry, the old Killarney bypass is badly congested. In 2004, we were shown grand plans in the Malton Hotel in Killarney for an improved bypass to be up and running by 2009. We are going into 2018 now and still nothing has happened. There have been fatalities on the old bypass - two people have already been killed this year - due to congestion and bad junctions.

On the review of the local community and development committees, will the Minister of State go back to what we had before? The previous system worked for 25 years. No Leader programme has been in place since 2013. The last one was initiated by the then Minister, Deputy Ó Cuív. We are going into 2018 but there is still is no programme. The previous Government messed it up. The man who went to Europe, Phil Hogan, blew it all asunder.

Chairman: Will the Deputy conclude?

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: It has to be recognised that traffic volumes have increased everywhere. I do not think there is any plan to deal with this. Let us take my village of Kilgarvan, for example. The volume of traffic has increased. The volume going down through that quiet village is extraordinary. There are traffic jams now, something that never happened before in small towns and villages. That has to be recognised.

It is not about blaming the local authority. We did not get a specific improvement plan to take a turn in the road since 2009 for any road in Kerry. I am not talking about national primary or secondary roads. This has been seriously neglected - I was told by my father in 2009 that every penny available for national secondary roads would be delivered up here in Dublin for Luas, DART and every other thing. The Government is trying to get people to Dublin but they cannot come half the time because there are traffic jams. There is no recognition of providing jobs. The Government cannot provide them because we do not have the infrastructure and because the companies will not go there. Let us consider Kerry Group, the jewel in our crown. The roads were not sufficient to get into Kerry. That is where we are. It hurts me every time I pass that massive place where 900 people are employed. It should have been in the great hub in Farranfore but we have no bypass on the road to get there.

I do not accept that this is a plan for the next 23 years. There is no way in the world that it can be. I am asking other Ministers not to do it. It might barely cover two or three years. There is nothing in it that says it is a cast-iron plan for the next 23 years.

Chairman: Minister of State, will you touch on issues that have not been covered already in the two contributions? Before I conclude----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I have two short specific questions. Can I ask them?

Chairman: I will bring you in after I make a quick point.

Deputy Damien English: Chairman, I have other commitments that I have to get to. I am sorry - I have been here since 11 a.m.

Chairman: We will bring the meeting to a conclusion. One of the key economic drivers in the mid-west region is Shannon Airport. Limerick is referred to as one city in the plan, but there is no recognition of the role of Shannon as a driver and employment provider. Some 10,000 people work in Shannon between the industrial zone and the airport. There are large numbers of spin-off jobs. People from Limerick, Clare and across the mid-west region work there. It drives employment. There should be recognition within the plan of that and further supports

for Shannon. National aviation policy should tie into the national planning framework as well.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I wish to ask two specific questions. Page 68 covers open countryside and refers to housing. Without going through the entire text, will the Minister of State explain two things to me? National policy objective 18b refers to rural areas under urban influence and facilitating the provision of single housing in the countryside “based on the core consideration of demonstrable economic need to live in a rural area and relevant siting criteria for rural housing in statutory guidelines and plans”. Will the Minister of State tell me what “demonstrable economic need” is? It looks to be a major shift from what was in place. Up to now, nominally, it was a matter of family attachment.

Deputy Damien English: I will address that. I said I would address that earlier on.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: That brings me to national policy objective 19. This refers to projected need for single housing in the countryside through the local housing need demand assessment tool and county development plan core strategy processes. These phrases sound ominous to me. It seems to me this is simply another way to try to cut down on the rural house. The Minister of State is saying it is not that way. Perhaps he could expand on that remark in the next draft or come back to the committee on the matter.

I am not saying this facetiously, but when I read this page I see references to EU treaties and functional requirements. Areas are defined by commuter catchment of at least 15% of the relevant city area workforce. It is not immediately apparent exactly to where and to whom the Department is referring. It is coded and we need to crack the code. We will crack the code before this process is over – I guarantee the Minister of State that much. It would be helpful if he started cracking the code for us today.

Chairman: Thank you, Deputy. The Minister of State might bring the meeting to a conclusion.

Deputy Damien English: I would be delighted to do so.

Chairman: Thank you very much for your time and engagement.

Deputy Damien English: The reason I am here today is not to have every answer for members but to hear their all their thoughts and to feed these through the strategy. I will touch on some of them and I have dealt with some of them repeatedly. People have been in and out but I accept that people are busy and so on. If a question from a member has not been answered, he or she can check the record to see the answer.

I will address the last two specific questions. At the start of today’s meeting and at regional assembly meetings I emphasised that we are going to change the wording around one-off housing because it affects economic need only. There is a case for putting in the social ties. We will strengthen that wording and Deputy Ó Cuív and members will see new wording to deal with the concerns raised.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: What will it be?

Deputy Damien English: Can I answer the question, Chairman? I am saying the wording will be strengthened. Committee members will see the wording but it will clearly include social ties because of the issue around families and the connection to families and so on. People want to have that included and we have committed to that. I have said that repeatedly today and I

will say it again in case it has not been heard.

The issue around the-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Through the Chair, I did not ask-----

Chairman: The Minister of State has answered the two points already.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I did not ask him about the next iteration. I asked him what is in the present iteration. It is a fair question.

Deputy Damien English: I am trying to explain it to Deputy Ó Cuív. We are changing the wording. It is a draft.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I am not asking about the changes. What does it mean?

Chairman: Will you try to answer that, Minister of State?

Deputy Damien English: Planning was always provided for. We have referred to economic and functional need. Deputy Michael Collins referred to having a business in a rural area. Planning always allows for that. If a business needs to be on the land or has to be there, planning deals with that. There may be an economic and functional need to be in a certain place. One example is farming or using the land - whatever a person is doing. It applies once a person has proved that he is making an income off the land. That was always there because Deputy Ó Cuív put it there.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I beg your pardon, Chairman.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: A person cannot live off the land alone. Many have part-time jobs somewhere else. A person cannot live on the land alone.

Deputy Damien English: I am not finished, Chairman.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: He is coming out with it now.

Deputy Damien English: I am trying to explain.

Chairman: Let us have some order now. The Minister of State is clarifying the position.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: He wants to punish the small farmer. Is that what he wants?

Chairman: We will have one speaker now. Hold on a second, Deputy.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I actually wrote initial restrictive housing guidelines in the Galway plan in 1997. I personally wrote them and we put them in. Subsequently, I was involved in two spatial strategies in government. We wrote guidelines. They did not set out what the Minister of State has said just now. I want the Minister of State to explain to me what “demonstrable economic need” means. What does it mean? I am not asking how the Minister of State is going to change it.

Chairman: We will park the question there and the Minister of State will answer it.

Deputy Damien English: I am saying that what we have committed to doing is to change the wording and I will reflect the social need as well. That will address the concerns of Deputy Healy-Rae and many others. That is what will be in it.

I explained to Deputy Michael Collins the issue relating to people supporting local employment in an area. Planning allows for that. It applies to this plan and other plans. Let us suppose a person is not from an area but wants to build in the area. If he shows that the proposal is related to a need to be on that land for business, then it is allowed. In most cases, that is what happens. As I said at the start - Deputy Healy-Rae was not here at the time – for the past three or four years, and probably for longer, more than 50% of the houses in the country have been one-off rural houses.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: What is wrong with that?

Deputy Damien English: Chairman, can I finish? There is a notion being given here that no one gets a one-off house. I accept that not everyone who wants one gets one. The reality is that we have built 6,000 or 7,000 rural houses every year in recent years. We have not stopped rural one-off houses and we have no intention of doing so.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: It looks like that is what the Government is doing.

Deputy Damien English: That is why I have said to the committee repeatedly that we will strengthen the wording.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The Minister of State should try to carry on giving an answer.

Deputy Damien English: Chairman, there has to be some order because of what I am trying to do here. We have been here all day. I am trying to answer questions fairly and honestly.

Another question was asked in respect of core strategy. We are saying that core strategies have to reflect that there will be one-off housing, as well as housing in towns and villages. We want to have it. We have asked local authorities. No extra forms are required if a person is applying for a house. In terms of the core strategies, we are asking local authorities and councillors to estimate what houses will be built in urban and rural areas of their counties in the years ahead. That is all that is being asked for in this framework. No extra forms will required.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: In the case of a rural demand exceeding the core strategy demand-----

Deputy Damien English: The reason we have this is to help us plan for the services that will be required. If members are going to argue for the provision of increased rural transport services or other services for particular areas, we must have an idea of for whom they will be needed. They will be required for the people in an area and to meet the demand on foot of additional housing that will be required in the future. That constitutes planning for the future and building up the services that will be required.

Deputy Michael Collins and Danny Healy-Rae raised the issue of broadband connectivity and other services in rural areas. The funding for every service throughout this country has suffered cuts during the past seven or eight years. No one has ever denied that. The country did not have the required funding. The spend by Government was cut by more than €20 billion per year, which had a knock-on effect on every service in all our towns and villages. We are now trying to build that back up. This plan looks ahead 20 to 25 years and its focus is on where we need to invest the resources and, when we get increases towards the back end of the years, where such taxpayers' money should be spent. I advise Deputy Michael Collins that this plan will support rural living. I recognise, as he said, that this means post offices and the services that are needed in villages. The Deputy was correct in what he said. The Minister for Commu-

nications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Naughten, announced changes to provide opportunities for people and I hope that those opportunities will be taken up. That is also what this is about. We are putting in place initiatives with respect to both strategies for towns and villages but people have to avail of the opportunities presented. We are trying to plan in a co-ordinated way to achieve this as best as we can.

I believe we all agree on the issue of broadband connectivity. I also represent a rural area that is not served well in terms of broadband connectivity. Access to broadband services is part of people's future in terms of their connectivity, business and security. We all agree that the roll-out of the national broadband plan has been delayed for far too long. When it gets through this final stage in the months ahead and the contract is awarded, I believe it will be rolled out quite quickly. No one can excuse the delays in its being rolled out. I agree with Deputy Danny Healy-Rae on that. With the opportunities it will bring when it is finally implemented, we will be leading the way in this area in Europe, and rightly so. As a small island nation, we need broadband connectivity in order to thrive. We are committed to that and a decision has to be made in the months ahead on who will be awarded the contract, which has been delayed for too long.

The rural proofing of policies is part of this. This plan is about rural and urban Ireland and the balance, partnership and linkages, bearing in mind that one affects the other and that one will not be sustained without the other. It touches on rail services and different projects but I will not list all those projects because it falls within the gift of other Departments to make announcements on them in other plans.

Regarding bus services, including those in rural areas, Deputy Heydon is not a Minister yet but he hopes to be. He will be glad that Deputy Danny Healy-Rae gave him that promotion. Deputy Heydon has put forward suggestions in respect of increasing the number of routes and some of them relate to Deputy Danny Healy Rae's area. He is not saying that is the be all and end all. There are simply suggestions and we all agree on that. There have been some great rural transport services. I see them operating in my own area. I refer to the Flexibus and LocalLink operators which are providing great services. Operators of services in Cork and Kerry are also providing great connections. We need more of that but we must plan for it and work out where there are population groups and whom and what we need to connect to each other. That is what we are trying to do in this plan. There are prime examples of such services operating in Cork. I would point to Clonakilty, a town in the Deputy's constituency, Westport and Trim in my area. People have got together in many towns and made the provision of such services happen in rural areas. It is about making it happen. That is what we are trying to do here. There are some great examples of that in the counties that we all represent but we want more of that and to get in behind those initiatives. That requires everybody to be on the same page, working together in a planned and co-ordinated way and targeting resources to make an impact, not just to suit some people on certain days but to make an impact in a town or village in the long run.

Deputy Michael Collins raised a local issue concerning the harvesting of kelp. It does not relating to the framework but we have a marine strategy and we will be dealing with that. The decision on that issue was made many years ago by a former Green Party Minister who was very concerned about the environment. He made an environmentally aware decision. I had to make an announcement about the conditions attaching to that in the past week to make sure that we had proper monitoring of that development. I am very clear on this. If a project such as this receives planning permission, if such permission was secured many years ago and if the development is not carried out in the proper manner we envisaged with respect to the conditions

attached to the permission, then we deal with that. In the context of the conditions I announced, I have to benchmark those that are in place and try to track and monitor those to protect the marine environment in the area. We are very clear on that. However, this is not the time to deal with that issue because we are discussing another matter.

Deputy Michael Collins: Tens of thousands of people have come out about this issue and Bantry Bay is being treated as something of a guinea pig. An environmental disaster has been set in train.

Chairman: We have had a very good exchange here. We as a committee can certainly discuss that afterwards.

On behalf of the committee, I thank the Minister of State for attending and for his engagement with the members. I propose that the joint committee publish the opening statement and submissions received in regard to this meeting. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: What opening statement is that?

Chairman: The one the Minister of State made.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It will be on the record later

Chairman: We will be publishing those on the website.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: No, I do not agree with that.

Chairman: Why not?

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Why publish that opening statement and not publish everybody's contribution?

Chairman: We will do that. The proceedings of this meeting will be put up on the website.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: That is what I am saying, so we should leave it that way.

Chairman: I propose that we go into private session-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: A major part of the meeting is taking place now.

Chairman: -----for a few minutes.

The joint committee went into private session at 1.55 p.m. and adjourned at 2.05 p.m. until 11 a.m. on Wednesday, 17 January 2018.