InfraNet

The Network of Public Infrastructure Professionals

“Twin Tracks: Strategic Alignment of the National Planning Framework and National Development Plan – Challenges and Solutions”

Event Précis

WebEx, Thursday, November 26th @ 15.00 pm
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Introduction
This report summarises the InfraNet – a seminar for infrastructure professionals convened by the National Investment Office within the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and held via Webex on Thursday, 26th November, 2020.

InfraNet Background and Rationale
Following on from the successful international conference ‘Infrastructure in an Era of Uncertainty’, and the Government’s commitment to continued investment under Project Ireland 2040, the InfraNet was brought together to:

- Provide a forum for experts to critically examine public investment governance, reforms and innovations.
- Engage with experts in public sector and delivery bodies to share best practice, issues and solutions.

Participation
The November 2020 InfraNet was attended by over 150 participants from 67 organisations.

Outcomes and Results
The ultimate objectives of InfraNet are to share experiences, build networks and take action on improving project delivery. The event is a platform for sharing experiences at different levels, from central government and line departments to local delivery agencies. Along with the holding of an annual conference focused on the most relevant sectoral issues, the InfraNet is to be reconvened at intervals throughout the year.

Context
On Thursday 26th November 2020, the National Investment Office (NIO) in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) welcomed colleagues to a strategic information webinar of the public sector infrastructure network called InfraNet.

The theme of the webinar was ‘Twin Tracks: Strategic Alignment of the National Planning Framework and National Development Plan – Challenges and Solutions’. The session was a fruitful exchange between policy-makers and experts, and will inform the review of the National Development Plan which is currently underway.

After a welcome and scene setting from Secretary General Watt of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Michael McGrath TD gave the opening address at the webinar. He outlined the importance afforded to infrastructure by the Government, particularly as part of the economic response to Covid-19. The Minister also echoed the words of the Secretary General and the theme of the webinar in emphasising the importance of ensuring that spatial planning and investment are explicitly linked and that the two planks of Project Ireland 2040, the National Development Plan and National Planning Framework are aligned effectively.

Panel Discussion
The panel discussed in further detail the relationship between planning and investment. Chaired by Professor Martina Kirchberger of Trinity College Dublin, the panel included Graham Doyle, Secretary General of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Anne Marie O’Connor,
Deputy Regulator at the Office of the Planning Regulator, and Dr Frank Crowley of the School of Economics, University College Cork.

Graham Doyle, Secretary General, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage
Secretary General Doyle discussed the role of the National Planning Framework and some of the policy challenges faced by his department particularly in a post-Covid environment.

Anne Marie O’Connor, Deputy Regulator, Office of the Planning Regulator
Ms O’Connor discussed the role and functions of the relatively recently established Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR). Ms O’Connor also outlined the fact that they will evaluate close to 200 draft plans from around the country over the next six years. This evaluation will assess how well those plans align with existing planning policy and regulatory requirements, as well as the National Planning Framework’s objectives of regional development and compact growth.

Dr Frank Crowley, School of Economics, University College Cork
Dr Crowley discussed some of the policy challenges and solutions in aligning the National Development Plan and National Planning Framework. Dr Crowley stated that the growth rate for the regional cities is particularly ambitious. He also outlined some of the impacts of Covid remote working and social distancing, as well as Brexit, and detailed the challenges of convergence in balanced regional development.

Questions and Answers
A number of questions were put to the speakers which are set out below:

Q. Is balanced regional development achievable?
   A. Dr Frank Crowley – Balanced regional development doesn’t happen as a rule and the case for greater balance is strong. It makes sense to have more development in regional centres. We need to consider balanced regional development and the idea of geography of discontent. There is inequality and we need to be careful in creating more balance. We need to realise that given the size of Dublin, it will act as a magnet. Less imbalance can be achieved by focusing on regional inequality.

   Anne Marie O’Connor – We have Dublin and four other regional metropolitan development plans. We need to prioritise and consider counterbalance to Dublin by focusing on the four regional cities and their role.

   Graham Doyle – Achieving actual balance takes a long time. It’s got to be about having strong urban centres. We have to get away from the narrative of winners or losers. Regional balance is important, as is making planning guidelines clear.

Q. Does the NDP review create opportunities to refocus on urban regeneration, particularly in towns and villages? Do we need to accelerate targeted capital projects to facilitate this?
   A. Graham Doyle - We need to have key projects that can start quickly. Focusing on urban development is enormously important.

   Anne Marie O’Connor – In terms of getting compact growth and getting rural towns and villages up and running, there is a lot of debate about housing in the open countryside - we need to shift our thinking. There is a focus on urban regeneration, although the importance of the rural element is also acknowledged.
Dr Frank Crowley – Clearly the incentives are wrong and we need to consider how we are pricing projects. We have huge externalities – we haven’t put a price on the cost of sprawl and clearly development costs are too low.

Q. Does the absence of clear rural housing guidelines inhibit development of rural towns and villages? How can we ensure joined up thinking between County Councils and national/Government policy - in particular in the area of housing? In particular, how do we avoid a scenario where proposals are worked on for many years for much needed mixed housing developments and yet can be overturned very late in the day?

A. Dr Frank Crowley – There is very little autonomy and we need to have joined up thinking.

Anne Marie O'Connor – It’s frustrating that policy decision needs to be made at the end of the pipeline which is a sign that the system is not working. We need to embed the decision in Local and City Development Plans. We have massive amounts of zoning which is informed by mobility and sustainable transport patterns. In terms of greenways and sustainable transport patterns, key to mobility is ensuring we have cycle ways and walking routes that are aligned so that we can move within settlements.

Graham Doyle – The work done on the National Planning Framework and National Development Plan gives a real statement of where we are. We have to keep driving it and relentlessly pursue what we have, what we are adding and what needs to dilute that sprawl. It has to be top down as well as bottom up and has to be a two way dialogue that comes from an overarching strategy. There has to be an element of leadership – leadership involves dialogue.

Q. Anne Marie, Can you elaborate on your statement “focusing on mobility not just greenways”?

A. We need to look at Local Area Plans in the round and focus on sustainable mobility.

Q. How can we provide multinational companies with greater certainty on the timelines for delivery of their major capital investments, and the key public infrastructure projects that underpin them, in the context of the risk associated with prolonged planning or judicial processes?

A. Graham Doyle – We need to set out a long term vision of how we see development happening. The tracker is useful and gives people a sense of where we are going. We continue to hear frustrations from investors out there around things like judicial review. That uncertainty and risk is brought to delivery of key pieces of infrastructure is damaging the system. We need greater dialogue across Government and consider ways to address and still protect people’s views. This is becoming a bigger and bigger problem.

Anne Marie O'Connor – Activating of brownfield sites for development is key.

Dr Frank Crowley – We need to look at effective balance of roads and other transport, National Broadband plan etc. if we are serious about the targets in the National Planning Framework.

Q. Will the National Broadband Plan change future technological resilience if rural areas have access to 500mb+ of broadband? Do the panel see an expansion or major improvement in
the rail network as any form of solution, considering all of climate change, commute times and reducing pressure on Dublin housing market?

A. Graham Doyle – Broadband is an enabler for economic activity and a key facilitator around issues of key regional balance. In terms of rail, we have to do it in the right place, get the densities correct and consider brownfield sites to ensure that we have transport links that work. Rail is fantastic when you can support significant population. We got rail investment wrong over many years so we need to focus investment in rail that can really work and the right rail.

Anne Marie O’Connor – We have seen great initiatives in broadband in Clonakility and towns like that with development hubs. It’s not just a matter of bringing the highest speed, we need to ensure the alignment of the right kind of rail with the right kind of development - opportunity to put investment into electrification and brownfield sites.

Dr Frank Crowley – In terms of broadband, the model we should be thinking of is what we have seen in Skibbereen which has revitalised the area. In terms of rail, we need to consider sustainability including cycle lanes. Outside of Dublin, it’s all rail and we need to change that.

Reflections and Conference Close
The conference was closed by Ronnie Downes, Assistant Secretary of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, who thanked the panel for their contributions, thanked the audience for their attendance and attention and advised that further sessions of the InfraNet would be delivered along with a virtual spring conference next year.
Appendix 1: Clár | Agenda

15.00  Welcome and Scene Setting
       Robert Watt, Secretary General, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform

15.10  Opening Address
       Michael McGrath TD, Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform

       Questions and Answers

15.30  Panel Discussion chaired by Professor Martina Kirchberger, Trinity College Dublin
       Graham Doyle, Secretary General, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage
       Anne Marie O’Connor, Deputy Regulator, Office of the Planning Regulator
       Dr Frank Crowley, Lecturer, School of Economics, UCC

16.20  Reflection and close
       Ronnie Downes, Assistant Secretary, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
Appendix 2: Slides
Slides are included as a separate document.
Appendix 3: Cainteoirí | Speakers

Robert Watt

Secretary General, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform

Robert is Secretary General at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER). Robert is an economist and has experience in both the public and private sectors. He has worked in a range of roles within the Department of Finance, as well as previously working as an Economic consultant. He is a member of the board of the NTMA and was a member of the Economic Management Council.

Michael McGrath, TD

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform

Michael is currently a TD for Cork South Central and is the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. As Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Michael is responsible for delivering well-managed and well-targeted public spending, through modernised, effective and accountable public services. The department oversees the implementation of the National Development Plan, drives the programme of public service reform, and has a key role in decisions made across government.

Dr Martina Kirchberger

Assistant Professor at Trinity College Dublin

Kirchberger is an Assistant Professor at Trinity College Dublin. She is a development economist with a particular interest in urbanization, infrastructure, the construction sector, labour markets, and spatial mobility. Previously, she was an Earth Institute Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at Columbia University. She received her DPhil in Economics from the University of Oxford in 2014. Some of her ongoing research examines the labour market effects of COVID-19 on low-skilled urban workers.
Graham Doyle

**Secretary, General Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage**

Graham Doyle is Secretary General of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage since July this year. Previously he was Secretary General of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport from late 2015. Graham joined the Civil Service as an external recruit seven years ago and was initially responsible for the Public Transport and Climate Change portfolio. His background is in aviation management and business consulting with experience in insolvency, corporate finance and business strategy.

Anne Marie O’Connor

**Deputy Regulator, Office of the Planning Regulator**

Anne Marie is the Deputy Planning Regulator and Director of Evaluations of Local Authority Plans. She is responsible for the assessment of all local authority development plans, local area plans, and variations to these, and any future reviews or amendments of regional spatial and economic strategies. The purpose of these assessments is to ensure that the plans are consistent with regional and national policies and objectives, and to provide for proper planning and sustainable development.

Dr Frank Crowley

**Lecturer, School of Economics, UCC**

Dr Frank Crowley is a lecturer in the School of Economics, UCC since 2007. He has published research articles on the topics of innovation, firm performance, urban development, regional development, spatial economics, government policy intervention, management practices, consumer behaviour and public choice in International and National peer reviewed journals. Frank’s primary research interests are in the area of economic geography. Currently, his research work includes examining the role of the creative sector and the creative economy in Ireland; the role of industrial structures and spatial economic resilience in Ireland and, the links between talent, tolerance, diversity, well-being and entrepreneurship in European Countries.
Ronnie Downes

Assistant Secretary, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform

Ronnie is Assistant Secretary at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) in charge of overall Expenditure Policy. Ronnie’s responsibilities include managing the annual Estimates, overseeing national infrastructure investment strategy, promoting budgetary reforms (including budget transparency and gender-responsive budgeting) as well as public financial reporting and accounting. Ronnie was previously Deputy Head of the Budgeting and Public Expenditures Division at the OECD, where he led country-specific reviews and developed global standards in the area of public financial management and investment. He holds an M.Sc. (Economics) from Trinity College Dublin, as well as graduate diplomas in law, accounting and corporate governance.

Áine Griffin

Head of Communications, Project Ireland 2040

Áine is responsible for developing and implementing the Government’s Communications Strategy for Project Ireland 2040. This involves leading colleagues and peers from departments and delivery agencies in a coordinated, cross-Governmental approach. A career public servant, after a decade of policy development in a variety of Government departments and offices, Áine served as Press Officer in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform following its establishment, Head of Communications in the Data Protection Commission and returned to the Department following two years as the first Outreach and Engagement Manager at the Central Bank of Ireland.