

Metropolitanisation as pathway to more effective urban and regional development in Ireland: Policy lessons and reflections

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Introduction

This paper explores the evolving policy context and lessons learned in Ireland's 'metropolitanisation' plans, through an examination of metropolitan governance, city regionalism, national, regional and local planning, resourcing, buy-in, and alignment of new approaches to urban and regional development. This research employs data and insight from an Irish Research Council funded project, [Ireland in the Metropolitan Century](#), and assesses progress towards recognising metropolitanisation processes and implementing Metropolitan Area Strategic Planning (MASP)¹ as a core tenet of the new planning architecture in Ireland.

Internationally, the economic performance of cities – and particularly large cities – is considered crucial to national prosperity, giving rise to what has been termed a ‘metrophilia’ among public policymakers (Waite and Morgan, 2019). The economic influence of metropolitan agglomerations and importance of institutions at the metropolitan scale for organising the effective provision of urban infrastructure is growing. This has raised questions about the appropriate approaches to and structures of city-regional governance to support more effective regional development. In Ireland, this debate gained impetus with the publication of the National Planning Framework (NPF) in February 2018 as part of Project Ireland 2040 ([National Planning Framework and National Development Plan](#)), an approach characterised by extensive cross-party discussion, statutory foundations and a round of detailed public consultations. The launch of Project Ireland 2040 marked a number of key milestones:

- A policy recognition that Ireland’s development trajectory is increasingly unsustainable and that ‘business as usual’ was no longer an option;
- The alignment for the first time of spatial planning with capital investment planning;
- A strong policy and planning emphasis that the five city-regions are key to delivering national strategic outcomes through an innovative and controversial metropolitan-based planning approach.

City-regionalism and metropolitanisation: What does the international experience tell us?

For the purposes of this paper, the term ‘metropolitan’ is used to define the city and its contiguous urban area comprising economic, infrastructure and other networks and

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relationships. This is a commonly recognized scale through which attempts at land use coordination, the promotion of more compact development, strategic rethinking of brownfield lands and adoption of enhanced quality of life measures are seen to have significant effect.

In dynamic economies, expansive growth means that planning, infrastructure development and governance structures struggle to keep up as cities grow, leading to negative agglomeration effects that can potentially deter private investment, reduce urban productivity, constrain further growth and sharpen social and spatial inequalities (Dijkstra et al., 2013; Ahrend et al., 2014; UN-HABITAT, 2016). Thus, the search for governance fixes becomes more pressing. Krawchenko and Schumann (2017, p. 15) suggest that “the introduction of metropolitan bodies responsible for strategic planning” is one mechanism that national governments can use to enhance coordination and effectiveness. The OECD (2015), European Commission (2016) and others argue that governments should improve urban governance and efficiency by redistributing power to this level through a place-based approach.

This search for new governance and institutional arrangements typically occurs in the context of multiple and disparate local governments, each responsible for distinct functions, often with competing priorities, and each having to respond to local political demands (LeGales, 2016). Internationally, two key elements underpin the push for new forms of metropolitan governance. First is the need to better organize economic activities and the workings of labour markets, transport and other infrastructures. Decision-making and policy formulation need to operate at the spatial level at which the economy works and people live their lives. Second, how effectively policymaking, spatial planning and land management operates is shaped by the relationships between constituent governance units within the cities and regions involved. Such relations can involve co-operation and collaboration (as well as competition and rivalry), the pooling and sharing of powers and resources, and territorial politics centred on questions of collective provision (Jonas et al., 2014). Much of the reviewed international literature (see Moore-Cherry et al., 2022) advocates for an institutionally-based approach. But where there is limited political culture, the absence of strong sub-national institutions, or fear of disruption to the political status quo, new institutions become a least preferred option and resistance to meaningful governance reform can result (Moore-Cherry and Tomaney, 2019).

Until relatively recently, in Ireland there has been no identifiable urban, let alone metropolitan, agenda or policy. Despite long-standing concerns with regional development in Ireland, and intermittent attempts by central government policy to strengthen the regional cities as a counterbalance to the Eastern seaboard, the challenges prevail. Historically there has been limited appetite to develop new or reform existing institutions that would devolve power and resources from the centre. Project Ireland 2040 has to a great extent continued this political tradition but has adopted an innovative plan-based approach that is comparatively unique in its structure and delivery.

Data collection

This research draws on an Irish Research Council funded project, *Ireland in the Metropolitan Century* (COALESCE 2019/25). The research design included analysis of the key documents associated with Project Ireland 2040 at the national, regional and local level, including public submissions. Interviews were undertaken with key stakeholders from central government, regional assemblies (executive and nominated members), local authorities (executives and elected officials) and key infrastructure providers. This was complemented by an online survey

sent to all 949 elected county councillors across the country to assess their knowledge, experience, and perceptions of metropolitanisation and the new planning and development approach in Ireland.

The changing policy context of metropolitanisation and metropolitan governance in Ireland

Amongst OECD countries, Ireland represents perhaps the most centralised government system with local authorities having extremely limited power (Breathnach, O'Mahony and van Egeraat 2021; Ladner et al. 2019). The first attempts at decentralisation and devolution of planning power and authority date back to the 1968 Buchanan report, which proposed nine growth centres for targeted inward investment. However, by 1972 central government had dismissed the plan. Later, the National Development Plan (2000) and the National Spatial Strategy (2002) both aspired to balanced regional development through the promotion of gateway towns for strategic investment and growth. For a variety of reasons, documented excellently elsewhere (Breathnach, 2014; Meredith and van Egeraat, 2013), the spatial ambitions of the National Spatial Strategy were not realised and the policy was formally abandoned in 2013. Nonetheless, the spatial and economic imbalances that the NSS sought to address were exacerbated during the boom, bust and austerity periods between 2002 and 2013. The 8 regional authorities originally established in 1994 were disbanded the following year but replaced in 2015 by three new regional assemblies.

After significant consultation and discussion, in 2018, the National Planning Framework (NPF) was launched together with the National Development Plan (capital investment) under the umbrella *Project Ireland 2040*. The core goal was to enable strategic future planning and optimise investment through concentration in a smaller number of growth centres, achieving compact growth within urban centres, and aligning spatial planning with capital investment and infrastructure delivery. One major conceptual shift away from previous approaches was the new emphasis on *balanced growth* rather than *balanced regional development*. The 'core' strategy of the NPF targets 50% of growth in the Eastern and Midland region (EMRA), with the remaining 50% to be achieved in the other two regions (Southern region - SRA, Northern and Western region - NWRA) combined. Significantly, and a major departure given the strong rural traditions in politics and public policy in Ireland, the role of the five cities in delivering these wider policy goals was strongly emphasised (see Table 1).

Table 1: Targeted pattern of population growth in Ireland's cities

City	Population 2016	Population Growth to 2040 ²⁷		Minimum Target Population 2040
		% Range	People	
Dublin - City and Suburbs	1,173,000	20-25%	235,000 - 293,000	1,408,000
Cork - City and Suburbs	209,000	50-60%	105,000 - 125,000	314,000
Limerick - City and Suburbs	94,000	50-60%	47,000 - 56,000	141,000
Galway - City and Suburbs	80,000	50-60%	40,000 - 48,000	120,000
Waterford - City and Suburbs	54,000	50-60%	27,000 - 32,000	81,000

Source: National Planning Framework 2018

The NPF was given a statutory foundation through the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2018, to break the links with electoral cycles but also to allow for the deferral, temporary suspension or review of all city and county development plans so that they could be aligned with new Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES). The regional assemblies now have enhanced responsibilities – but arguably limited authority - as the mediators between high-level national policy principles and local implementation. They are also challenged by their limited resourcing and a mandate that has increased in scale and scope but has not been commensurately funded.

For the five major cities – Dublin (EMRA); Cork, Waterford and Limerick (SRA); and Galway (NWRA) – the assemblies were required to develop 12-year Metropolitan Area Strategic Plans (2019-2031). The new MASP have statutory underpinning and their core purpose is to:

- identify key change parameters and recognise the reality of city-regionalism in Ireland;
- prioritise infrastructure delivery and co-ordination; and
- prioritise compact regeneration and growth through more intensive land use.

The development of the RSESs and MASPs was not without controversy. In some cases, obtaining consensus at regional assembly level was difficult. In particular, given the strong urban focus of the NPF and the MASP process, significant urban/rural cleavages – stronger than party political divides – have emerged, and their management is challenging in a nominee-based regional system, where members lack a direct electoral mandate or incentive to think at the metropolitan or regional scale.

Implementation progress

Four years on from publication, and amidst new challenges related to post-pandemic recovery, cost of living, and the climate and biodiversity crises, to what extent are the aspirations of this plan-based approach to more sustainable and effective regional development being realised?

Reconfiguring national, regional and local planning

The NPF is the second attempt at national spatial planning in Ireland, but marks a step-change in its ambition and performance focus, challenging regional and local government, the spatial planning system, and sectoral planning and policy-makers. The Project Ireland 2040 Delivery Board first met in May 2018 to agree on a set of initial priorities, and a detailed implementation roadmap was circulated by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government to key stakeholders in July 2018. All county development plans were reviewed to align with the regional level, creating a temporal alignment at all levels of the system that has been heretofore absent.

Central government departments and policy also appear to be aligning in a way not seen previously in a public administration that has been traditionally sectorally-focused. However, the institutional relationships between central, regional and local government and broader governance remain unclear. Functional demarcation needs to be more clearly articulated as some functions and boundaries appear fuzzy. One example relates to the co-ordination of development in towns that may cross administrative county boundaries. The NPF states (p.136) that in such circumstances '[central] government will work with the relevant local authorities in developing preparation of joint urban/local area plans, utilising current Local Area Plan (LAP) legislation'. In a functioning multi-level governance system, why would the responsibility for coordinating not fall on the regional assemblies? Giving the decision back to central government undermines the role of the regional assemblies. How new central government institutions such as the Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR) are positioned in the mix is also deserving of scrutiny. The OPR appears to have taken a strongly interventionist role scrutinising local authority draft development plans, a role that conceivably should be within the jurisdiction of the regional level as the next level in a multi-level governance hierarchy. Adjudication functions in the case of dispute between the local and regional could potentially reside with the OPR as an appellate body rather than as a first port of call for coordination.

Resourcing and aligning the new approach

Theoretically, the alignment of the NDP with the NPF should ensure that future capital investment will be more strategically deployed by central government, creating greater incentives for not just cross-sectoral but also vertical co-operation in the governance system. A combination of the strong RSES aligned with county development plans, backed by new funding and oversight arrangements, to steer local authorities, state agencies and private sector investment in the medium term should theoretically ensure that future development is plan-led, in contrast to past experiences (Kitchin et al., 2012).

The new €2 billion Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) - one of 4 funds under the new approach - supports key urban development objectives in the five cities and regional driver towns. Call 1 was launched in summer 2018 with 88 projects awarded funding (totalling almost €312 million). Call 2 was announced in January 2020 with 45 projects awarded a total of €1.3bn funding in March 2021. The scheme operates on a competitive, bid-based Exchequer grant basis with the majority of funding to date awarded to integrated urban development (IUD) and public realm regeneration projects. Some urban centres have been successful under both rounds demonstrating a targeting of resources to achieve meaningful impact.

As well as access to new and existing funding streams, one of the critical elements to shift settlement and development patterns, and achieve national strategic outcomes, is active land management and the unlocking of problematic development sites. A new institution, the Land Development Agency (LDA), has been provided by government with equity funding of €1.25 billion, and is charged initially with managing state land and regenerating under-utilised sites. The creation of a [State Lands database](#) is a first step towards realising the potential of state assets to contribute to broader societal goals, such as stabilising the housing market. Although it remains early days, the LDA appear to be bringing a complementary approach, and the requisite financial and other technical skills, to support complex land assembly and development deals, such as for example in Waterford's north docks (Moore-Cherry et al., 2023 forthcoming). They are also playing a key role in activating state owned lands and driving the compact growth agenda, amidst some resistance. The majority of the LDA's current site portfolio is located in one of the 5 metropolitan areas with Naas and Mullingar (key regional urban centres) the only exceptions, demonstrating their potential centrality to delivering on the ambition of the MASP's.

Generating 'buy-in'

There has been significant technical activity associated with the NPF over the last five years, including the production of three impressive and detailed RSEs, the establishment of the LDA and OPR and the disbursement of funding. However the 'soft' or behavioural changes required to build momentum on national strategic objectives are less visible. At the local level, beyond those directly involved in regional discussions and plan-making, there is limited awareness and knowledge of the fundamental transformations that are occurring. The following comments are indicative of the responses to the survey of local elected officials across the country (n=949, response rate 11%) that we conducted in January 2021:

"I tried to answer as best I could, but I think a lot of the questions presume a fairly decent level of knowledge of these policies and processes and how they're formed."

"An interesting question left out of your survey - have you read the NPF, RSEs, MASPs - you'll probably find a very low reading rate".

"I do not know what the MASP is nor do I suspect do most councillors".

Regional assemblies in Ireland are made up of nominees from the constituent local authorities. Although 71% of our respondents had not been a member of a regional authority/assembly in the past ten years, it might be expected that there would be at least some contextual knowledge and understanding of their role as elected representatives within broader governance structures. This knowledge gap reflects a hyper-localism that is a core feature of Irish politics but, pragmatically, it is also a potential brake on transformational change given that local councillors are formally charged with 'making' the local development plans that must align with – and ultimately deliver on – these broader goals.

What policy lessons and reflections might we take from the first 5 years of experience?

- **Nature of Irish state:** Despite a realignment of the planning system at national, regional and local level, the power of centralised institutions both old and new (OPR, LDA) remains persistent. Defining the appropriate institutional and governance

structures to deliver effectively on metropolitanisation and address the potential and challenges of city-regionalism in Ireland remains a knotty problem.

- **Implementation capacity:** The regions have demonstrated significant activity and produced impressive plans, including new Metropolitan Area Transport Strategies (MATS) aligned to the MASP's but implementation capacity has been limited. Central government has indicated an intention to create City Delivery Boards but there is no progress evident to date. Implementation should be vested in a 'metropolitan' rather than 'city' group and driven by groups convened at the regional tier rather than groups defined by central government. This research demonstrates the existence of sufficient capacity in the form of resources, champions and expertise to develop the metropolitan plans but not the autonomy to implement them. Structures around MASP implementation are currently very weak and, in most cases, non-existent.
- **Metropolitan leadership:** Unlike other international contexts, there is no clear leadership at the metropolitan scale in Ireland, nor a clear path to consistent metropolitan governance. While Limerick voted in a plebiscite in 2019 for a directly elected Mayor, central government has still not passed the legislation to enable the governance reform and election. Cork and Waterford rejected a plebiscite on the same matter. More recently, a Citizens Assembly for Dublin reported to government in January 2023 on their recommendation to hold a plebiscite on the establishment of a directly elected mayor for Dublin with significant power across 15 domains and the ability to raise revenue. The timing of any plebiscite on the matter is not yet clear but it would make sense, if passed, to hold Mayoral elections in alignment with the local authority elections due in May 2024. It is reasonable to assume that a city-regional Mayor would play a key role in driving and monitoring implementation of the MASPs in collaboration with the regional assemblies.
- **Power of the regional scale:** There is clear evidence that the local authorities value the role of the regional in convening central bodies such as the Industrial Development Authority (IDA) and Irish Water around metropolitan scale issues, providing significant support to individual local authorities who often struggle to 'get them to the table'. Rather than lose this momentum, now is the time to better empower the regional authorities to build on this recognition and convening capacity to support the regional scale of governance more forcefully in an Irish context.
- **A new and more autonomous funding approach:** A significant issue constraining the development of a metropolitan sensibility and capacity is the resourcing structure of the regional assemblies. The lack of devolution of power by central government combined with a system whereby local authorities are effectively the regional pay masters squeezes their ability to act and creates a situation where it becomes really 'difficult to know who owns us'. In an effective multi-level governance system, the regional level should be financially independent from other tiers of government and provided with a stable multi-annual budget. There is also significant scope to consider how funds could be better ringfenced for cities who have a weaker history of securing them (e.g. Waterford), but have significant need, avoiding the necessity to continually bid in different funding rounds.
- **Fostering support among the elected members** As part of the current NPF review, it is critical to consider the broader cultural shifts required and education/awareness building needed to achieve more sustainable, balanced and equitable regional development. There is significant evidence of a lack of awareness and buy-in to the metropolitan as a scale of planning that protects both urban and more rural areas, but

that can also successfully drive regional redistribution. The persistence of competitive urban/rural imaginaries are impeding the full potential of the MASP's being realised.

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¹ This is the official terminology for the five city-regions used in the NPF.