

The road ahead for Ireland

The government has infrastructure plans in the pipeline, but it will need to make good on its promises, writes **Arlene Harris**

There was a time when Ireland was renowned for its lack of quality infrastructure – visitors may have been charmed by a network of picturesque winding roads, but they did little to enhance efficiency or even safety. Natives were growing increasingly impatient with insufficient motorway coverage, lengthy journeys on poor roads and the lack of connection between our urban centres and the rest of the country.

Thankfully, times have changed, and Ireland has caught up with its global counterparts in terms of infrastructure, development and connectivity.

But there is still a long way to go, and if the new National Planning Framework (NPF) – Project Ireland 2040 – is to be believed, we will have reached a whole new level of development by the middle of the century, leaving the stereo-

typical image of grass-centred highways and byways well in the past.

In the period between January and December 2017, there were 144 fatal collisions resulting in 159 fatalities on Irish roads. Every case was tragic, of course, but this represents 17 per cent fewer collisions and 15 per cent fewer deaths than the previous year. And with a new vision for better roads across the country included in the NPF, the RSA believes motorists and pedestrians can look forward to a safer future on the road.

“The RSA is delighted to see the prioritisation of upgrades to roads and public transport in Project Ireland 2040,” a spokesperson said. “We have no doubt that these changes will make travel easier and safer for road users.”

Minister for Transport Shane Ross is also enthusiastic. “Since becoming a minister, one of my top priorities has been to get people and goods

from A to B quickly, simply and cost-effectively – with emphasis on quality, accessibility and the protection of our environment,” he said.

“I am very happy that in this plan, my department is putting its money where its mouth is. For instance, in the next few weeks, we will begin preparatory work on the new Metro Link, which will ultimately connect Swords to Sandyford, bringing rail access to the airport and beyond, and complementing transport choices for the greater Dublin area as well as the country as a whole.

“Major public transport items will ease congestion, lower carbon output, and add greatly to the quality and standard of our transport system. Greenways and accessible sustainable transport is at the centre of our plans to enhance our travel network, support our valuable tourism industry and benefit every facet of Irish life.”



Ross said that, as an island nation facing into the uncertainties of Brexit, it is vitally important that our infrastructure is second to none. Because of this, the government will be investing heavily in ensuring our roads and transport links across the country are in line with our European counterparts.

“It is important that we join all the dots; that all our transport sectors feed into and complement each other,” Ross said. “There can be no projects developed in isolation – connectivity is the key.”

The ambitious plan has ten strategic outcomes, and covers many other aspects aside from transport, including regional growth, enhanced regional accessibility, strengthened ru-

ral economies and communities, sustainable mobility, high quality international connectivity, enhanced amenity and heritage, transition to a low carbon and climate resilient society, sustainable management of water and better access to quality childcare, education and health services.

Speaking about the initiative, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar said: “Project Ireland 2040 is a plan for our social, economic and cultural development – a ten-year plan to invest in our infrastructure as a country, a plan to make Ireland a country that reflects the best of who we are and what we aspire to.”

But with an additional one million people living in the country by 2040, there will undoubtedly be more people

on the roads, and also a greater need for housing, health and education facilities, amenities and communication networks.

Not only will this proposed development enhance the lives of the Irish population, but it will also bring about a great deal of employment opportunities. Tony Horan, president of the Association of Consulting Engineers of Ireland (ACEI) believes the project will be beneficial to the engineers of the nation who will be called on to ensure that the ambitious plans are brought to fruition.

“ACEI hopes that the framework’s vision and what it plans to achieve, will mean that engineers can get back to doing what they are good at

– solving real world problems for the benefit of society,” he says. “And that recent change in fortunes in Ireland can be maintained, enabling consulting engineers to continue working on behalf of local communities and society in general.”

Jim Gannon, chief executive of Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI), said every member of the community would be involved, while the National Development Plan (NDP) will help to make Ireland a better place for the future.

“While the NFP rightly focuses on larger infrastructure, land use and society, it’s important to note that many major changes in the coming years will be at the consumer

level, in the home and in our businesses,” Gannon said. “So it’s vital that social and business opportunities around energy efficiency and sustainable energy at local and domestic level remain in clear focus, as we harness Ireland’s wealth of renewable energy resources in a balanced way.”

“The NDP which underpins the framework represents a significant change in Ireland’s response to our climate and energy challenges. The government has made an ambitious statement of intent, and it’s up to agencies such as SEAI to make good on these ambitions, and to enable Irish citizens and business to benefit from the scale of investment in climate action that is proposed.”

ACEI ready to meet population surge with vision

By 2040, it is estimated that the Irish population will have increased by at least a million. This will result in the need for extensive developments in new housing, infrastructure, schools and hospitals. While Project Ireland 2040 – the National Planning Framework (NPF) – has outlined its means of dealing with the expected population surge, catering for its future requirements is a very real issue.

The Association of Con-

sulting Engineers of Ireland (ACEI) is a voluntary body which represents the business and professional interests of companies and individuals practicing as consulting engineers. ACEI member firms will undoubtedly be on hand to put the extensive 2040 vision into practice.

Tony Horan, ACEI president, says that although it will take time to fully assimilate the proposals, the future looks bright.

“The report appears to provide for an holistic approach

to planning and, crucially, it matches the state’s infrastructure investment to the overall spatial plan,” he said. “This has the potential to create a virtuous circle of planning and development which, to date, has been lacking in the Irish context. It also appears to address the parallel concepts of compact growth and balanced regional development with the opportunity to focus growth in our cities, while avoiding a complete over-reliance and focus on Dublin.

“For ACEI members, based all over the state, this is a crucial aspect of the framework. In this context, the association, along with others, continues the call for the establishment of an independent National Infrastructure Commission to provide an independent and co-ordinated approach to the framework’s objectives.”

Horan added that the ACEI hopes the framework’s vision, and what it plans to achieve, will mean that engineers can get back to doing what they are good at – solving real-world problems for the

benefit of society. “The recent precipitous drop-off in global capital investment programmes, allied to the wider reduction in capital expenditure in the private sector, contributed to a global recession,” he said.

“During this recession, societal infrastructural deficiencies persisted, societal problems remained, and most of the required societal needs remained unfulfilled or, in many cases, were neglected. “However, very little capital was made available to the one profession which could design and construct the much-needed solutions: professional engineers. The association hopes that recent change in fortunes in Ireland can be maintained, enabling consulting engineers to continue working on behalf of local communities and society in general.”

Dr Sarah Ingle, ACEI secretary general, says that as well as providing project pipelines for existing engineers and firms, the strategic plans laid out in the NPF would benefit anyone thinking of training in the profession.

“Undertaking an Irish engineering degree provides a global passport,” she said. “Engineering in the built environment, including civil, structural, mechanical and electrical, remains one of the most creative and fulfilling professional careers that men and women can enter.

“The outstanding exposure to challenging planning, design and construction issues in collaborative, multidisciplinary team environments is something that few work environments can offer, and the opportunities to work with cutting edge Computer Aided Design (CAD) and Building Information Modelling (BIM) software to solve problems for society are unrivalled.

“Ireland is now back on a more stable footing and ready to learn from lessons of the past. The NPF is a definite confidence boost to the economy and will enable rewarding careers for engineers in short-, medium- and long-term perspectives, including major contributions to cultural, social, transport and other infrastructure in the next few decades.”

With any project of this magnitude, there are bound to be hurdles to overcome, but Horan says with the right



Tony Horan, President, the Association of Consulting Engineers of Ireland (ACEI)



Dr Sarah Ingle, Secretary General, the Association of Consulting Engineers of Ireland (ACEI)

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“There will also be capacity challenges as the industry gears up to a more sustainable level of construction and de-

Ireland is now back on a more stable footing and ready to learn from lessons of the past

sign development, following previous years of under-investment. These fallow years resulted in capacity losses in a number of areas including labour, trade and professional ranks, which will take some time to fill.

“Overall, Project Ireland 2040 – the National Planning Framework (NPF) is a most welcome development. It will be important, however, to underpin the plan by investing in education and training as well as incentives aimed at attracting skilled and qualified people, at home and abroad, back to work in the engineering and built environment sector.

“These and related initiatives will increase the potential of the NPF, resulting in the delivery of a better Ireland for current and future generations.”