



Galway: still eschewing sustainable development

Planning is improving but car-dependent sprawl remains the norm and it retains in practice its loathing for any transport but roads

By Michael Smith

HISTORY

The first mention of Galway (from Gaillimh meaning ‘stony’) was in 1124 when a fort was built there. However, the town was founded in 1232 when baron Richard de Burgh created a town. After 1270 walls were built around Galway, remnants of which can be seen to this day.

Galway received a municipal charter from the crown in December 1484. This ensured the town’s independence from the Clanrickard Burkes.

TRIBES AND TRADE

During the Middle Ages, Galway was ruled by an oligarchy of fourteen merchant families (12 of Anglo-Norman origin and 2 of Irish origin), the fabled Tribes of Galway. The city thrived on international trade. In the Middle Ages, it was the principal Irish port for trade with Spain and France. It was beyond the pale, not paying taxes to the English Crown, a bastion of independence, trading liberally and monitored.

A reminder of those days is the Spanish Arch (1584). The population of medieval Galway is thought to have been about 3,000. By 1505 some of the streets of Galway were paved and

In 1579 it was noted that: “The town is well built and walled with an excellent good harbour and is replenished with many wealthy merchants”. Galway prospered in the seventeenth and eighteenth century reaching a population of 5000 and incorporating suburbs.

CATASTROPHE OF THE GREAT FAMINE

The 23rd clause of the 1695 Penal Laws provided that “no Papist, except under particular conditions, shall dwell in Limerick or Galway”.

Galway’s economy recovered somewhat from the late eighteenth century as the Penal Laws were relaxed. However, the city’s rural hinterland suffered terribly in the Great Famine of the 1840s. Unlike other urban centres in nineteenth century Ireland, which experienced an explosion in their populations, Galway’s population actually declined.

RAILWAY AND UNIVERSITY

The second half of the century saw some improvement in Galway’s position as the railway lines reached the city in 1850. Galway Courthouse was built in 1812 and Salmon Weir Bridge was built in 1818. Another important development was the creation of a university in Galway in 1845, then, named “Queen’s University of Ireland” - NUIG of today.

In 1812, there were 468 cabins or houses, all thatched, in the fabled Claddagh area of Galway. By the late 1920s, many of the houses were in poor condition and the city medical officer prescribed demolition. Thatched houses were replaced by rows of neat two-storey houses with gardens. Mrs Sarah Curran’s house, the last of the old ones still standing, was demolished in 1938.

A statue of Padraic O’Conaire was erected in 1934, the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Galway designed by John J Robinson was completed in 1965, Galway City Museum opened in 1977 and The Quincentennial Fountain

dates from 1984. Eyre Square Shopping Centre opened in 1991. The new Palás/Palace arthouse cinema, a twisted concrete box designed by architect Tom de Paor that ended up costing €9.5 million, opened in 2018.

THE LAST 40 YEARS: GROWING AND SPRAWLING FAST

Galway was known as the fastest-growing city in Europe in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s but most of it was sprawl all the way out as far as Clifden. Much of the fabric of the city itself was lost and replaced with faux mediaeval fripperies including around Spanish Arch and Shop St linked by crass and decaying concrete paving installed with pedestrianisation in 1998.



Claddagh around 1900

POPULATION

Census 2022 shows that the population growth in Galway was smaller than the national average (7.1%). Galway city had 83,456 inhabitants on Census night in early April and Galway county's population grew to just shy of 193,000. The City's population could rise by between 50% and 55% by 2040. When combined with the city's recognised status as the fastest growing city in Europe around the millennium, it retains a claim to being the biggest growth centre on the continent over fifty years.

THE PRESENT

DEVELOPMENT RATES IN GALWAY

House completion rates increased to approximately 300 in 2019 from a low of 32 houses in 2012. This is in contrast to economically buoyant years where a historical peak of 2,305 house completions was achieved in 2003.

The city has sufficient land capacity to meet both the built-up demand and the projected demand to fulfil the targets set out in the MASP to 2026. At present there are approximately 155 hectares of residential zoned land available within the city. It is also noted that there are currently planning permissions for 2,001 residential units (November 2020).

74% of the population in Galway City lives in a House/Bungalow compared to 86% nationally. 24% of households live in a flat/apartment compared to 11.8% nationally.

47% of households in Galway City live in owner-occupied housing. This is in comparison to 66% of households nationally. 35.5% of households in Galway City live in private rented accommodation, this compares to 18.2% of households nationally.

QUALITY OF LIFE

The city has long had a favourable demographic and is famously friendly. 'Lonely Planet' readers voted it the most friendly city in the world in 2020. It has always had a vibrant student-driven night-life famous for parties, pubs, festivals and its comfort with the Irish language. More recently it has developed a new reputation for culinary excellence. It was European City of Culture in 2020, though it was over-centralised and over-budget and was not a clear success.

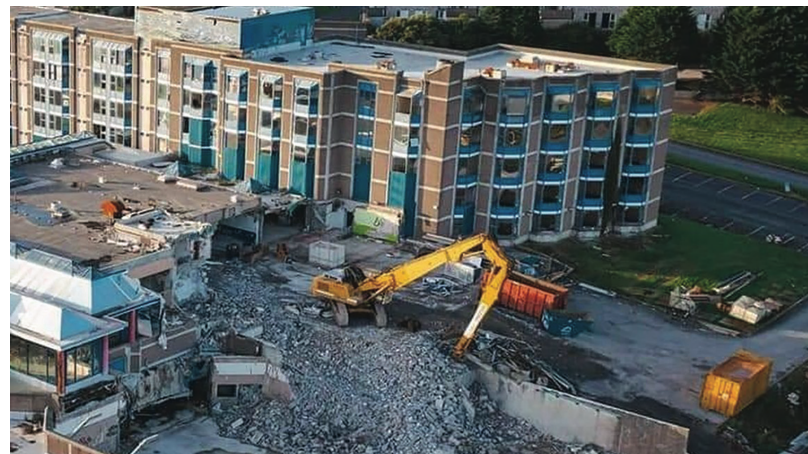
The city ranked among Europe's top ten cities for raising children in 2022. Galway's high score is largely down to its 'Leisure & Lifestyle' prospects and the city also ranks as Europe's 7th best for air quality.

DERELICTION

Galway suffers from vacancy and dereliction like so many towns and cities across Ireland. The number of vacant and derelict properties across the city and county stands at almost 7,500, many allegedly held speculatively – at a time when demand for houses is at an all-time high.

In the City in the last few years Orders under the Derelict Sites 1990 were served on the owners of the former Connacht Laundry site, and former Oasis venue in Salthill. 9-11 Dominick St have been on the register since 2009 and have been referred for legal proceedings.

The most egregious derelict site, the former Corrib Great Southern has been derelict for 15 years but has now been demolished. The billionaire Comer Brothers, who own the site, have said that they intend to use it for apartments and student accommodation. Many have said the site should be acquired via CPO for publicly owned student accommodation for the nearby Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology. In the county there are many derelict houses in the larger towns – Tuam (150), Portumna (124), Loughrea (115), Ballinasloe (103) and Gort (79). A meeting of the County Council in March was told that a Vacant House Officer and a Town Centre Officer have been appointed.



Corrib Great Southern finally being demolished, though with no clear plan

INVESTMENT

Galway is home to four of the top five International Communications and Technology companies – IBM, SAP, Oracle and Cisco.

As one of the chief growth centres under the National Development Plan there will be a lot of investment in Galway over the coming decades.

Healthcare services across Galway are set to be transformed with confirmation in the NDP of the new emergency department and a cancer-care network at University Hospital Galway, but the promise of a new acute hospital at Merlin Park that may offer tertiary and secondary care services to the West and North West region is as far off as ever. The recently opened replacement orthopaedic theatres there (the original theatres had been closed since 2017 because of leaky roofs), seem to have problems with lack of staff, as reported in the June City Tribune.

Galway Courthouse will undergo refurbishment under the capital spending plan; the city's wastewater network and treatment plant will also get an upgrade; and the new learning commons at NUI Galway have been confirmed, along with a library regeneration project at the university, and the provision of new student accommodation.

Urban regeneration projects supported under the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) include the development of a new civic space, and housing in Woodquay without the benefit of the long promised Local Area Plans and consultation; enhancement works at the Spanish Arch and the creation of a new waterfront space at Cathedral Plaza.

DEVELOPMENTS

THE HARBOUR

In 1830 the Galway Docks and Canal Bill was passed to establish and maintain a navigable canal between Lough Corrib and the sea and to improve and develop Galway Harbour to “facilitate and augment the Trade of the Town and Neighbourhood”. The dock was not completed until 1843.

Now, 200 years on, attempts are being made to build a deepwater extension to the 1843 docks. Only this time it is not about extending transatlantic trade to America, but more about land-based property development around the existing old port once it is freed up. This will drastically change Galway’s Ceannt Station and Harbour landscapes.



A new commercial harbour

HARBOUR DEVELOPMENT

The 180-year-old dreams of a Transatlantic Port for Galway have not gone away. In order to service the increasingly lucrative ocean liner tourism a plan has been put in place by the Harbour Board and now all efforts are being made to get national and European funding to get the project started. Interestingly as it has been for nearly 700 years this aspiration has pitted mercantile Limerick against Galway, with Limerick vying – more successfully -for the same funds to develop an ocean liner port at Foynes on the Shannon estuary. It is highly likely that bulk trade will move away south from Galway.

Galway’s historic ‘gated port’ is too small. So a major expansion plan was lodged in 2014, with an oral hearing following in 2015 for a 27-hectare, €52m extension of the harbour, which will include the creation of commercial quays, a deep-water docking facility and the reclamation of lands from the sea.

The State-owned G Company wants a new commercial harbour to accommodate ships up to 40,000 tonnes for Topaz Oil, the local quarry and scrap trade and to indulge the current, or at least pre-Covid, precarious fetish for humungous cruise ships; with a 24-hectare infill jetty sticking out into the European Habitats and Birds Directive protected bay. A decision is expected soon, after discussions with the National Parks and Wildlife Service on whether planning consent can be given for “Imperative Reasons of Overriding Public Interest”.

According to An Taisce the prime reasons for refusing permission include the following:

- The 2013 National Ports Policy, which outlined a plan-led strategy, defined a 3-three-tier rating system for ports. The Galway Harbour Extension proposal for a Tier 3 Regional port, without direct connection to the national road network, contravenes this national strategy
- The plan is based on a flawed socio-economic model of continued fossil-fuel, resource-ravaging and biodiversity-diminishing short term

economic development. The Plan facilitate the unsustainable increase in imported fossil fuel and petroleum products and had no integration with the required transition to a low carbon future.

- The plan would worsen HGV and oil-tanker traffic through the urban area of Galway, from Lough Atalia Road to the Claddagh.
- In an era of sea-level rises the scheme is at risk of flooding.
- In all events funding will have to be local as no EU or government finance is available due to Galway Port’s lowly Tier 3 state, which disallows government support.

ADJACENT PORT LANDS

Assuming it nevertheless proceeds, lands around the old port would then become available for large-scale developments.

The graphic visualisations included here tell you a lot about the scale of developments planned, none of which have been part of any City Plan, but are being entirely led by developers’ own plans,

Nobody is against change, but there is no serious City Council Plan. And there are concerns that new developments, being entirely developer-led and profit-driven will be entirely unaffordable for anyone in Galway.

CITY CENTRE DEVELOPMENT:

By around 2006 Galway Council was understandably anxious to have the run-down station/port area designated an SDZ by the DoE. Dublin’s Docklands, though over-priced and divided into single-use blocks, were seen as the template.

Dave Walsh, now chairman of beleaguered An Bord Pleanála, was then an official working in the Department of the Environment ‘Spatial Planning Unit’. His advice to city management, was to refuse this but to suggest that a Local Area Plan would be the best way to go, with consideration for SDZ status to be “reviewed” later. The city executive planners say, that, scandalously, they don’t have the resources to draw up LAPs.

So the City Council facilitated developer-led plans by Galway developer Gerry Barrett and his partner CIE to develop Ceannt Station lands. They fell foul of the crash but have been resurrected in the last year. Named “Augustine Hill” a mixed-use development is proposed for a 3.3ha former coalyard by ClíÉ, which owns the land, Edward Capital, run by Barrett, and Summix Capital. ClíÉ held a competition in 2017 to find a developer for the site. Green Party Councillor Martina O’Connor complained: “The masterplan has been created to maximise profits for the developer and is not considerate of the needs of the people of Galway”

The City Council told the developer to scale down its original proposal because of the threat it posed to “the unique character of the city”. The original plan had 11 towers, the tallest of which is 21 storeys, making it the highest residential building in Ireland. It is being retained, but the number of other towers is being reduced from 10 to nine. The nine tower blocks have been reduced by either one or two storeys

If this development goes ahead it will consist of 11 new streets and four new public spaces in an area within five minutes’ walk of Eyre Square.



The proposed Augustine Hill development in Galway: Plans for the €320 million redevelopment of an eight-acre site beside Ceannt Station in the city have been put on hold. Image: Edward Group

Meanwhile the City Development Plan 2023-29 aims, at least notionally, to transform the city to become “more concentrated, compact and co-ordinated” and so suggests the ever-hackneyed “landmark buildings” beloved of planners which include high rise around Ceannt Station and the Inner Harbour:

“A focus on regeneration of brownfield and underutilised sites that are well served by existing and planned public transport, amenity, social and community infrastructure is required. The resulting regeneration will have the potential to be transformative for the city, creating new urban districts, vibrant and attractive places, sustainable city living and a reduced carbon footprint”, states the draft which aims at a change in direction “due to changing retail trends” so planning in future must reflect “the need for diversity of uses” and “move towards a broader day and night-time economy”.

It is also proposed that more needs to be done to encourage the use of vacant upper floors in the city centre for housing as part of an overall ‘living city’ policy.



Crown Square

COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT EAST OF THE CENTRE

By the 1970s Galway had developed an enviable reputation as a hub for Foreign Direct Investment in the computer sector. However Digital Equipment Corporation, which had been the single largest employer in Galway since 1971, closed its operations in 1993 with the loss of 750 jobs.

In 1997 a Galway Technology Centre was set up by a Government task force. It has captured some of the world-class entrepreneurial talent that was in Digital, and established start-up companies.

As a result over the past 20 years there has been a huge population working in the industrial and business parks now expanding to the east of the city centre.

Latterly some effort has been made to provide residential accommodation in this area.

Construction is nearing completion, for example, at Crown Square, on the eastern outskirts of the city in Mervue, a €200m mixed-use development in Galway. Crown Square will feature 5.2 hectares (13 acres) of office, a hotel, and a 345-unit housing scheme, ranging from five to nine storeys of modest architectural ambition, without major public-transport links and marketed as “only seven minutes from the motorway”.

Many more have had to look outside the city to find housing which is affordable, while failure to develop better public transport options, notably a proposed LRT, has led to a worsening of city traffic congestion. The city is entirely dependent on car use!



The Comer Group's 'vision' for the eastern side of Eyre Square

Eyre Square East is slated for regeneration, from Richardson’s Pub down as far as Forster Street – where 30 properties are in the ownership of the Comer and McHale Groups.

A master plan is also to be created for this area, suggesting the planning of the area will not be developer-led.

Its core strategy sets out a co-ordinated settlement strategy for the city which is to develop existing undeveloped residential zoned lands mainly located in Knocknacarra, Rahoon and Castlegar; to develop the east side of the city on zoned lands in the Ardaun LAP area which is a nationally designated Major Urban Housing Delivery Site, a new town, five kilometres east of the city centre. Unfortunately the City and County authorities are at odds on whether to permit development of 600 houses at Briar Hill which risk pre-empting the City Council’s strategy for Ardaun.

The core strategy focuses on the growth of designated regeneration areas – Ceannt Station, Inner Harbour and the Headford Road area. These designated regeneration sites have scope for a significant quantum of residential development that can in particular, meet the needs for evolving smaller household sizes.

Additional regeneration sites are likely to include lands at Sandy Road (including city council owned lands) and along the Dyke Road (city council car park). Both of these sites have potential to accommodate significant residential led mixed use schemes. The potential development of these sites is being progressed by the Galway City Council in collaboration with the Land Development Agency.

ROADS



Typical of Galway’s approach to transportation is the celebrated Headford Road which runs from Ballinfoyle, north of the city centre, into the heart of the city at Woodquay. It features an anti-urban fetish for the box-in-a surface-car-park allowing dedicated motorists to stop off at shops, hairdressers and other service-providers without ever dirtying their shoes anywhere

untarmacked that is not a car interior. It is a paradise for those who like unsustainable, sprawling, US-style charmlessness.

The Headford road boasts an icon of contemporary Galway, the Four-Star Maldron Hotel which manages to integrate both a Spar and a filling station.



Hotel with shit attached

A new N6 Bypass, first proposed in 1999, and estimated to cost €1bn was approved by An Bord Pleanála in December 2021. The 18-km route would run from the existing M6 motorway east of Galway city to Barna in the west, replacing plans for the Galway outer bypass, which was approved by the board in 2008 but was effectively struck down by the European Court of Justice five years later. It's been estimated that only 3% of the traffic using it would actually bypass the city and go to Connemara. The remaining 97% would only use bits of it for access to the city. It is feared that all this will do is achieve greater urban sprawl! It would tend to undermine the 2:1 balance in favour of public transport agreed in the Programme for Government but risks being forced through by the bigger parties in government, though the Greens are nominally against it. The Green Party chair was reported as contemplating a judicial review of the scheme on grounds it had failed to take into account Government travel and climate policies, particularly on assessment criteria for road building and the emissions created by such large roads. Meanwhile Tánaiste Leo Varadkar who's much more powerful tweeted: "Fully support this project. Will take the traffic out of Galway City and make it more liveable for residents and visitors and safer for cyclists and pedestrians". Former Lord Mayor Councillor Noel Larkin (Ind) had his finger on the unreconstructed local pulse when he said that "the vast majority of cars will be electric or hydrogen-powered within a decade, so mass transport such as light rail is not only unnecessary but totally unfeasible. The city's transport future should be the construction of an 'outer bypass'". In the end it fell to Friends of the Irish Environment along with Galway Racecourse and some residents to seek a judicial review.

OTHER TRANSPORTATION



Proposed Salmon Weir Pedestrian Bridge

The most significant works under the NDP in Galway will be improvements to Ceannt Station and "placing it at the heart of sustainable transport-led development" in Galway; significant track and station works for the Oranmore to Athenry route; and additional rail connectivity and expansion of existing rail services.

The NDP also envisages the delivery of the BusConnects programme 2030, the National Transport Authority's programme to improve bus services and address climate change through changing to a zero emissions fleet.

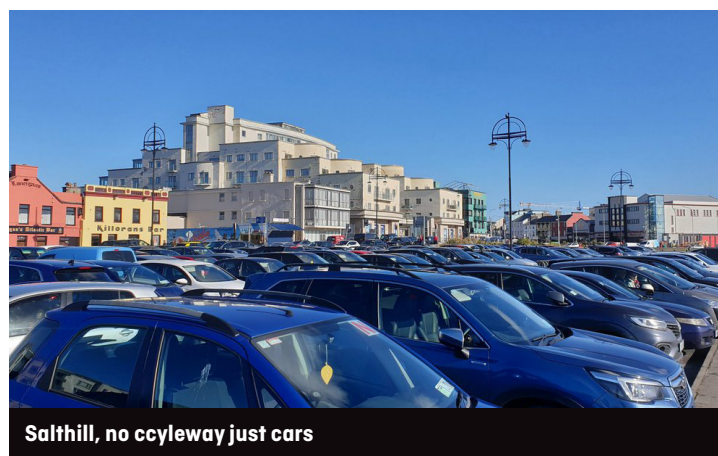
Under the plan, Galway should also be in line for new local cycling infrastructure.

The (dubious) feasibility of light rail in the city will be considered, based on reports from the University of Warwick, as part of the review of the Galway Transport Strategy, due to start this year.

The Galway to Dublin Greenway has long been delayed by recalcitrant agricultural landowners.

A new pedestrian bridge as part of the Clifden Railway Cycle will be supported under the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund.

A proposed temporary two-way segregated cycle track in Galway from Kingston Road, along the coastal side of the Salthill Promenade – a strangely much-loved and much-touristed part of the city – and onto Grattan Road has been tellingly terminated after endless debate leaving Salthill an essay in deference to cars.



Salthill, no cycleway just cars

Projects allegedly under consideration include Ballyloughane to City Centre Greenway, Salmonweir Pedestrian and Cycle Bridge leading to the Cathedral, Silverstrand to City Centre Walking/Cycleway, Eglington Canal Cycle Scheme, Wolfstone Pedestrian Bridge, Parkmore - Pedestrian and Cycle Links, City Centre Parklets and the Clifden Pedestrian and Cycle Bridge on the old railway line over the Corrib. The Clifden end has started but the city end is moving more slowly. In general Galway needs to pay more attention to urban and commuter, than to tourist, cycleways.

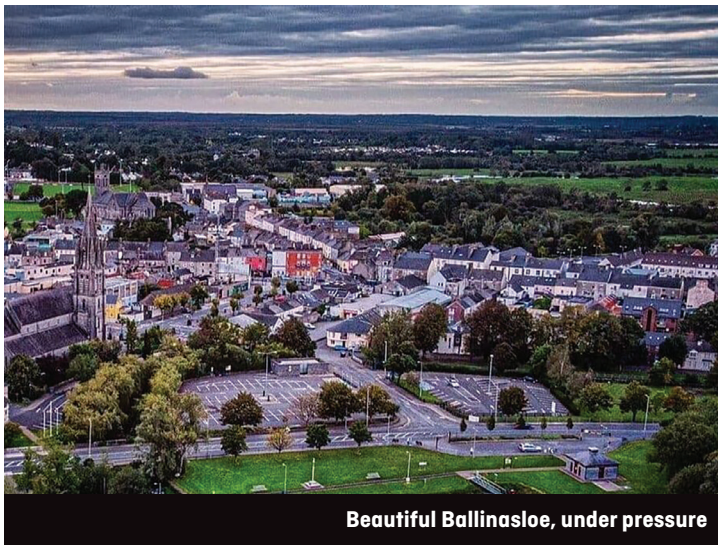
RURAL GALWAY

Plans are afoot to unite Galway City and County Councils. It is not clear if this is a good idea. Certainly sprawl from the City needs to be addressed in an integrated way.

20 years ago 60-70% of housing in rural Galway was built one-off in the countryside. A Housing Demand Assessment in the draft County Council plan states that the percentage of one-off housing units relative to the overall number of housing units permitted for the period 2015-2019 was 40%.

The secret to planning in Galway is that there is no appetite to change this, even in the Green Party. The HNDA extrapolates that if that trend continues for the life of the forthcoming plan that would equate to almost 4,400 single one-off houses in the open countryside. Applying an average household size of 2.5, this would equate to 11,000 out of the stated 18,655 population growth envisaged by the plan. That needed to be curtailed.

The draft Galway County development plan 2022-2028 seeks to sup-



Beautiful Ballinasloe, under pressure

port rural villages as a sustainable approach to maintaining the rural economy and population and as a viable alternative to one-off housing in the open countryside. However, the Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR) has expressed concern that a blanket approach to the inclusion of rural villages of significantly different size, scale and function may undermine or dilute the overarching policy intention to support rural villages.

The Office considers that further consideration should be given to identify larger rural villages with capacity to absorb development, and to support rural regeneration within these areas.

In December 2021 the OPR, though overall pleased with the town's proposed local area plan, expressed concern that Ballinasloe was over ambitious in its population targets for the near term. Presumably it would be better if that development actually took place in Galway City. The OPR considered the town's plan was not providing for enough development in the actual town. Accordingly, it recommended including "an objective to deliver a minimum of 30% of residential units within the existing built up footprint and provide for the monitoring of same".

THE FUTURE

GALWAY CITY DEVELOPMENT PLAN

A new draft City Development Plan is being prepared at a crucial time following the preparation of the National Planning Framework (NPF) and Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES), which seek to promote the rebalancing of regional development in a sustainable manner. The NPF recognises Galway as one of four cities (with Limerick, Cork and Waterford) that can grow significantly and that together, these cities and their regions have potential to be viable alternatives to Dublin.

The Galway Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) is a new 12-year strategic planning framework for the city and its environs. The MASP area includes Galway City and its environs and the county settlements of Bearna, Oranmore and Baile Chláir. The requirement to have a MASP recognises the interrelationship between the city and the surrounding area and the need to co-ordinate the different plans and projects which straddle both administrative boundaries.

The MASP identifies key infrastructure, services and facilities that will be required to support sustainable city growth and regeneration. It sets out how the NPF population targets can be met in accordance with the principles of sustainable development with the aim to deliver compact growth. The population targets set out in the MASP are for the Galway MASP area to grow by 27,500 before 2026 and by a further 14,500 before 2031.

A key sustainability element of the RSES and MASP is to deliver growth in a compact form with an objective to locate at least half of all new homes that are targeted, within the city footprint of the MASP. The MASP

“ 55% by 2040 is an unsustainable growth rate for anywhere, though probably still not inappropriate for a country with Ireland's demographics and projected immigration

supports the redevelopment of key regeneration/brownfield sites in the city and that these sites would support 40% of those homes within the city development envelope.

POPULATION TARGET

The NPF targets the population of the city to grow by between 40,000 and 45,000 people by 2040 which is an increase of almost 55%. That is worth dwelling on because it is almost in itself an unsustainable growth rate for anywhere, though probably still not inappropriate for a country with Ireland's demographics and projected immigration. The NPF also targets half of the homes to accommodate this population increase to be located within the existing built footprint, though that is under-ambitious.

URBAN-LED ASPIRATIONS

The plan-led approach to the key development areas within Galway metropolitan area appears to demonstrate the City Council's commitment to an urban-design-led approach to provide vision for new growth areas. If enforced this will provide solid foundations for the development of the City, county and region.

Regrettably, if history is repeated, development plans of all sorts will be ignored. An Taisce's Ian Lumley says "the balance between rhetoric and real commitment remains the worst of any city in the country, particularly on transport and sprawl."

LESSONS: THE EUROPEAN MODEL

The conundrum in Galway is typical of the challenges facing towns and cities around Ireland. A spiral of decline has led to families living further out of town and commuting in by car. Much of the town centre is left to a transitory population of students and temporary workers who have not the clout or commitment to improve the area that they live in. More parking is then required which consumes the space that could be given to other uses such as parks, playgrounds or markets. One way of breaking this vicious circle is for Councils and citizens to come up with a vision for what improvements it might be possible to achieve in the short to medium term. For example the people of Wood Quay have yet to agree on the common vision for the future of their area, but the work with the Council, the area's residents and the students from the University of Limerick appears promising.

Overall the best view is that of Roddy Mannion in his book 'Galway: a sense of Place'. He argues that in the challenging years ahead Galway needs to rediscover its European roots and allow its cultural creativity and celebratory urban life to extend and envelop the entire living city, and not just the perceived city at its historic heart.

Equally Galway needs to shift its mentality from suburban and car-borne to urban and sustainable.

Galway City and Galway County were within living memory among the most beautiful and charming places on earth. Galway needs to marshal some of the energy and skill that nearly won it 2022 All-Ireland final and channel it into imaginative and world-class planning and development.

Galway should preserve what's left of its countryside, densify its city centre for affordable housing in first-rate mixed-use developments served by light rail and rapid buses, cycleways and pedestrian routes.

For a proud, creative and dynamic European city it needs to re-establish a European and sustainable heart. **L**