

The Sunday Business Post

Time to learn from poor decisions of the past



Carole Pollard

One of the most tangible benefits of Ireland's EU membership is our modern physical infrastructure.

Everyone who drives on a motorway, takes a train or visits a museum will be familiar with blue plaques stating that the construction was funded by the European Union through a National Development Plan.

Contrary to popular opinion, Brussels did not simply throw money at Ireland to build roads.

In order to obtain funding, the Irish government needed to convince the EU that the infrastructure was necessary and that the money, once received, would be invested properly.

As the economy and budget position improve, expect to see departments and individual politicians lobbying the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform for funding for their own local projects.

The new National Planning Framework will soon be published to replace the largely discredited National Spatial Strategy. This is an opportune moment to publish a parallel 30-year National Infrastructure Strategy for Ireland and set up a central infrastructure agency to procure, design and deliver civil engineering and public building works on be-

half of the whole government.

Proper budgeting and wise investment in our physical infrastructure is vital if we want to improve our quality of life and protect economic competitiveness. Now is the time to plan how to ensure that taxpayers' money is invested where it can do the greatest public good.

Each year, the Department of Education produces projections of full-time enrolment in primary and secondary schools and third-level education based on birth statistics and other household formation data from the CSO, ESRI and other agencies.

We can estimate from this data how many children will be in school in 2033, so we can prepare to build the classrooms for them now. Every government department should also be looking to this time horizon and planning accordingly.

During our period as a recipient of EU funds, Ireland developed National Development Plans to coordinate capital investment. By gathering timely data on population trends, migration and economic activity, schools and hospitals were designed and built in areas where the population was increasing, and roads were built where traffic gridlocks were predicted.

Transparency about long-term funding helps government departments plan for the long term and eliminates the temptation to spend recklessly towards the end of the year to maximise next year's allocation or to hoard money unnecessarily. It also minimises the opportunity for politicians to prioritise constituency projects when the evidence for these does not stack up.

Unfortunately, as the recession bit, the existing NDP was quietly shelved, replaced

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by smaller capital investment programmes subject to review every Budget Day. In doing so,

government has scaled back five-year funding envelopes and instead effectively moved to year-to-year capital allocations.

Building projects need to be designed long before they can be built, and construction should be sequenced properly to minimise duplicating roles. A central infrastructure agency staffed by experts in public procurement should be put in overall control of the tendering, design and rollout of Ireland's new National Infrastructure Strategy instead of each department working in its own silo.

During the recession, Ireland lost many of our young architects and other construction professionals; piecing together design teams for new public building works will take time. So it is more important than ever that the government signals its commitment to the long-term future of the public built environment by investing in the

design and construction of a new era of public buildings now.

Even though the funding might not exist to construct them right now, we should still be designing the next generation of hospitals, schools and public buildings now so they are ready to go when the funding allows.

When the scale of demographic changes on the horizon are so obvious for all to see, such as a near 200 per cent increase in the population of over-65s within the next 30 years, it should serve as a stark reminder that unless we plan now for the needs of Ireland's changing population we will merely replicate ill-informed and poor decisions of the past.

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