CHAPTER 31
Transport and land use planning in contemporary Meath

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Introduction

This chapter focuses on the development of Meath's contemporary transport system over the past 20 years. It does so by contextualising transport developments within the broad framework of changes in the national and local planning system over a slightly longer timeframe. It has long been recognised that a significant link exists between the development of land uses and transportation. Indeed, the very function of transport infrastructure is to overcome the physical separation of land uses across space and the provision of access between these uses comprises the transport network. Thus, the ultimate role of transport infrastructure is to overcome the friction of distance associated with physical separation between land uses. When new office or residential developments are constructed they not only influence the volume of commuting trips at a given location, but also impact the choice of travel mode that might be utilised depending on how well it is served by good-quality public transportation. Similarly, new retail developments with abundant free car parking can influence the frequency and volume of non-work trips, encouraging more car-based travel for shopping, entertainment and leisure purposes. In other words, how various land uses (and their intensity) are arranged across physical space is crucial to the demand for travel and the extent to which public transport, walking and cycling (i.e. sustainable modes) are utilised for trip making versus the private car. In the context of Meath, there have been unprecedented land use developments over the course of the Celtic Tiger period, an era of unprecedented economic activity that occurred between the mid-1990s and 2007. In particular, the boom period saw an immense expansion of residential development both in the form of new housing estates as well as one-off housing in the countryside. Such transformations coupled with the movement of a significant part of the Dublin population to Meath to avail of more affordable housing, has had a major impact on the transport patterns in the county.

It is important to note that the aforementioned changes to Meath's built environment have been accompanied by a change in the nature of the transport system through the redevelopment and upgrading of the existing roads infrastructure as well as the development of new national primary routes and motorways. In addition, there have been changes to the public transport system with more public transport routes emerging to service central and suburban Dublin, as well as other parts of the Mid-East region along with a new rail link connecting Dunboyne/Pace to Dublin. Moreover, the public transport fleet has been completely modernised over this period with new buses and rail carriages along the most frequently utilised routes, as well as the introduction of new facilities such as a Wi-Fi-enabled fleet. While these improvements to public transport are welcomed, they have done little to stem the increasing dependency on the private car for trip-making which has become more pronounced over the last two decades.

This chapter aims to provide the reader with an outline of the evolution of the transport and planning environment in county Meath over the Celtic Tiger period. It begins by describing the planning and development context for the county and how this has changed over the recent past. More specifically, it describes how the planning system operates in Meath by looking at the legislative basis for planning in Ireland and the role played by key stakeholders (i.e. councillors, local authority officials and third-parties). It sets out the overall pattern of development in Meath prior to the onset of the Celtic tiger period (i.e. 1970s, 1980s) before examining how this has been transformed under broader shifts in the economic and policy environment. It also points towards some key planning controversies that have helped to shape (mis)development in Meath over the boom period and traces the recent shift towards a more regionalised and coordinated approach aimed at negating the reoccurrence of past mistakes. Within that overall planning and development context, the chapter then outlines the emergence of new commuter towns throughout the county that have a strong functional relationship with the Dublin economy. The dramatic population growth of towns such as Navan, Ashbourne, Ratoath, among others, is analysed and discussed together with the social implications of these developments. The extent to which land use rearrangements have impacted the transport network are then discussed by describing the key transport infrastructure developments that have resulted from additions to the built environment. Here, the broad scope of the impact of these developments on everyday transport patterns is also described. The final section focuses on the development of rural transport initiatives in the county through the various partnership boards which have been influential in the provision of local community services in Meath.

The planning context

The Irish planning system was formally established under the 1963 Local Government (Planning and Development) Act and was closely based on the British Town and Country Planning Act of 1947. From that time onwards, physical planning in Ireland has been a mandatory function of local government. This founding piece of legislation was updated 8 times between 1963 and 1999 to remedy various deficiencies that emerged during its operation. However, in 2000 a major new piece of legislation (the Planning and Development Act 2000) was introduced to amend and consolidate the previous Acts. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this chapter to set out the nature of the amending Act in detail, it was designed to have an ethos of sustainable development, be strategic in approach and deliver a high quality performance.[1] It too has subsequently been updated through a number of amendments (in 2002, 2010, 2011) and new provisions in 2006. Some have argued however, that many of the legislative changes introduced through the Planning and Development Acts 2000-2011 (particularly its efforts to streamline and improve the overall efficiency of the planning process) have reoriented the Irish planning system towards the facilitation of private development interests, rather than safeguarding interests of the common good.[2]

The legislative and administrative framework for planning in Meath is the same as that of all other local authorities in the Republic of Ireland. The main instrument for the regulation and control of development is the development plan and the making of a development plan is the *reserved function* of the local elected members (i.e. councillors) in each local authority. The development management process on the other hand relates to the consent procedure for authorising development and the decision to grant or refuse a planning application is an *executive function* of the county manager (or delegated officials). Whilst planners draft the development plan and provide advice on all planning matters, councillors have ultimate decision making-powers in terms of policy formulation and matters of zoning. Similarly, planners assess and make recommendations as to whether individual applications should be approved or refused, but the manager has the authority to accept or overturn the recommendations provided. In this regard, planners play a largely advisory role in the planning process. Although the executive is the key decision maker with regards specific planning applications, councillors can override the decisions reached by passing a 'section 140' motion.[3] This mechanism has been subjected to criticism as it has been widely abused by councillors to ensure that certain applications are approved.[4]

Unlike most planning systems in Europe, third parties in Ireland may make appeals to An Bord Pleanála[5] (commonly referred to as 'the Board') against a local planning authority's decision to grant or refuse permission. This third-party

right of appeal which was enshrined in the original 1963 Act was largely resented by development interests who complained about the delays, uncertainties, vexatious appeals and financial implication arising from this provision. Although this provision remains largely intact today, many of the aforementioned legislative changes have placed a series of limitations on the rights of third parties. For instance, third parties are now required to have first made a submission or observation in writing to the planning authority at a cost of twenty euro (previously free of charge) before being able to appeal a decision to the Board. Such changes have been criticised for limiting the democratic nature of the Irish planning system.[6]

In terms of the funding of Irish local authorities, limited opportunities exist for authorities to raise income independently of central government. Two of the principal means of raising income within the control of local authorities are commercial rates (payable to the local authority annually) and development contributions (payable to the planning authority as a condition to a grant of permission). This funding structure has come under increased scrutiny for contributing to unsustainable patterns of development as local authorities compete fiercely with one another to attract new development to their respective administrative area.[7]

Development patterns in Meath

Development trends in Meath have undergone significant shifts over the past three decades. During the 1970s, Meath was predominantly an agricultural-based county, though with a strong manufacturing and industrial base. Census figures from 1971 reveal the agricultural sector as the biggest employer amongst Meath residents (21.8%), with industry and manufacturing accounting for 20.4% and 11.3% respectively. Much of the county's economic activity and employment opportunities centred on the county town of Navan, then home to over 30 furniture factories, as well as big employers such as the widely recognised carpet manufacturer Navan Carpets. Tara Mines, an underground lead-zinc mine located on the outskirts of the town also played a critical role in providing employment to Meath residents and the surrounding counties and continues to employ in the region of 700 people today (fig. 31.1).

Throughout the 1970s/80s industrial development activity largely took place on the outskirts of existing urban centres driven largely by the promotion of industrial estate development by the Industrial Development Authority to stimulate industry and employment. During that era, levels of house building activity were relatively low compared to modern day standards. For instance, in 1970 only 424 units were built throughout the county, whilst a yearly average of 2,870 units was delivered over the ten- year period between 2000 and 2010 (fig. 31.2). In terms of residential trends, one-off housing was prominent throughout

the 1970s and 1980s in Meath and indeed elsewhere. However, this was not confined to rural areas as patterns of 'ribbon' development emerged along the primary roads radiating from main urban centres such as Navan, Kells, Trim, Athboy etc. Despite displaying a relatively even balance between employment and residential development activity in the past, the county has undergone significant shifts in more recent times. In line with broader economic trends, Meath has suffered from global economic restructuring as its manufacturing base has become increasingly undermined by international competition. For instance, Navan Carpets closed in 2003 due to overseas competition, despite being one of Ireland's leading carpet manufacturers since its establishment in 1938.

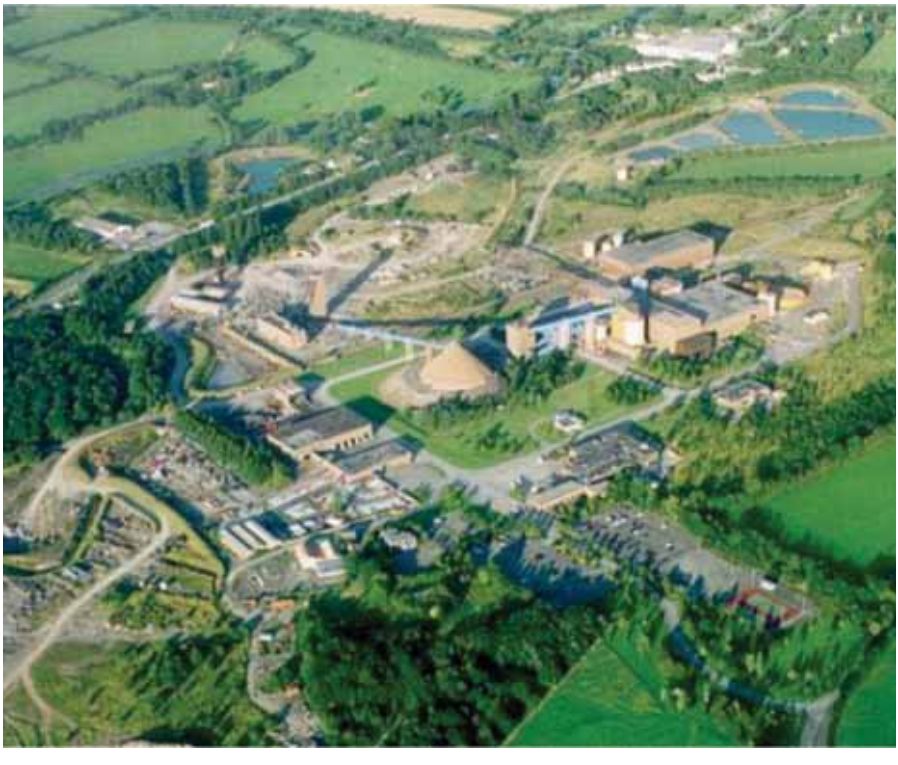

Plate 31.1: Aerial view of Tara Mines which remains a key employer in County Meath (Source: http://www.boliden.com/Global/Press%20photos/Gruvor/Tara/overview_tara.jpg)

Given Meath's close proximity to Dublin, it has struggled to respond to the challenges posed by broader trends which have taken place at the global and national level, namely the shift away from manufacturing towards a more service-based economy. The lack of job opportunities within the county, particularly those within the tertiary sector, has meant that Dublin has come to play an ever increasing role as an employment centre for Meath residents with much of the population commuting daily to avail of jobs outside the county. For instance,

over the past decade Meath's job-to-labour-force ratio has centred on a figure of 0.49, which indicates that there are twice as many workers as there are jobs throughout the county. Indeed, the *Regional planning guidelines for the Greater Dublin Area 2004-2016*[8] suggests that this ratio should not fall below 0.7 if a vibrant and relatively self-sustainable community is to be achieved. Since the late 1990s, such trends have been amplified further as soaring house prices within the Dublin metropolitan region have made Meath a more attractive and affordable location for those wishing to purchase property within commuting distance of the nation's capital. Driven by the availability of relatively cheap land, coupled with the growing demand for housing during the Celtic Tiger years, Meath quickly became one of the prime locations within the Greater Dublin Area (GDA)[9] for residential house building activity from the mid-1990's onwards.

Reflective of the development pressures placed on Meath during this era is the growth in the number of planning decisions made within the county, increasing almost three-fold (283%) between 1993 and 2007[10] (fig. 31.1). Similarly, housing output across the county increased dramatically from a low of 196 units in 1988, to a high of 3,886 in 2005, representing an almost 20-fold increase (fig. 31.1). Such upsurges in the supply of housing saw Meath's population rise by over a fifth between 2002 and 2006 (+28,616), with the electoral district of 'Navan Rural' recording the second highest population increase in the state over the same period.[11] These development trends have been associated with the emergence unsustainable patterns of low density housing development and the loss of

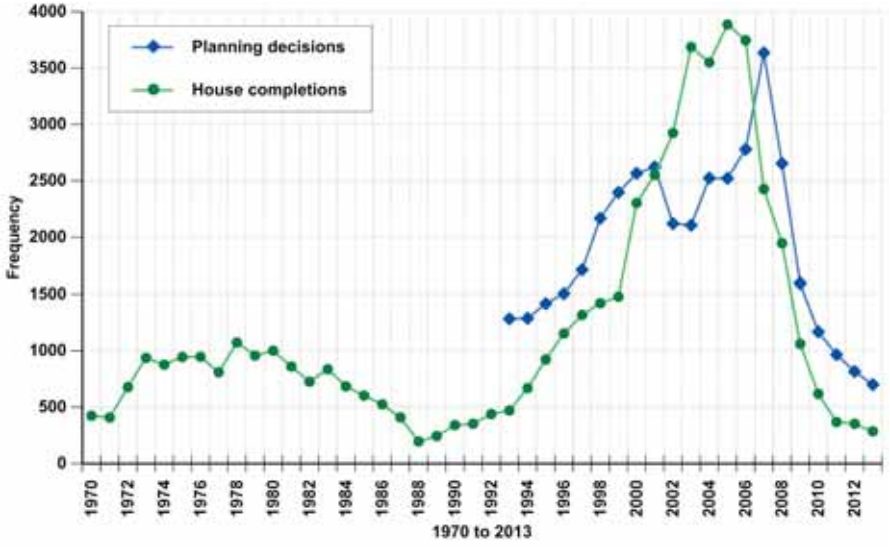

Fig. 31.1: House completions in Meath, 1970-2013, and planning decisions in Meath, 1993-2013 (Figure design: Francis Ludlow).

(Source: Generated from Department of the Environment Heritage and Local Government Planning Statistics).[12]

agricultural land, much of which has taken place on the outskirts of existing urban centres such as Navan. Indeed, many of the county's smaller urban centres and villages, particularly those in the southern fringe, have also been transformed into satellite towns of Dublin which are largely dormitory in nature, namely Ratoath, Dunboyne, Dunshaughlin, Clonee, and Ashbourne.

Planning in Meath, like many other counties, can be further criticised for its failure to curb the unfettered pattern of housing development that played a key role in the overheating of the property market during the boom years. Indeed, Meath's property market has been hit particularly hard since the economic downturn with property prices for new and second-hand homes down from peak levels by 39% and 44%, respectively.[13] Moreover, recent census figures reveal that 10% of the stock of private houses throughout the country lie vacant.[14] Meath is also home to 19 unfinished housing estates,[15] which further reflects the extent to which the property market in Meath became over-inflated as it attempted to capitalise on the overspill generated from within the Dublin metropolitan region. Overall, the foregoing reflects the largely localised and *ad-hoc* approach to planning that prevailed in Meath in recent years and which has played a critical part in preventing more sustainable patterns of development throughout the county.

Guided by policy shifts that have taken place at the national and regional levels, it is increasingly recognised that there is an inherent need to plan more strategically to ensure balanced patterns of development activity are secured in Meath. Indeed, as far back as 1999, it was acknowledged that local authorities throughout the GDA needed to adopt a more strategic, balanced and coordinated approach to planning with the publication of the *Strategic planning guidelines for the Greater Dublin Area*.[16] These guidelines placed particular emphasis on the need to reduce the growing demand for private transport. They sought to concentrate future development into growth centres along key transportation corridors, with Navan constituting Meath's 'Primary Development Centre'. These guidelines soon took on a quasi-statutory footing when the Planning and Development Act 2000 took effect, whereby a hierarchy of land use plans[17] was introduced to ensure better levels of coordination were achieved between adjoining local authorities. However, the new legislation only required planning authorities to 'have regard to' regional planning guidelines when making and adopting their development plans. In 2003, Mr. Tony McEvoy (elected member of Kildare County Council) and Mr. Michael Smith (chairman of An Taisce),[18] mounted a famous legal challenge against the Meath County Development Plan, arguing that it had grossly over-zoned lands for the projected regional population growth appropriate to Meath's designation as a primary urban development centre. Based on the judgement arising from this landmark case, it became clear that the phrase 'have regard to' did not require the planning

authority to rigidly or 'slavishly comply' with the relevant guidelines; rather, they merely had to give them 'reasonable consideration.'[19] This adverse ruling meant that the over-zoning of land in Meath (and indeed nationally) continued unabated, a trend that came to be reflected in many controversial rezoning decisions. Amongst them were plans to develop a City West-style business park in Piercetown, Dunboyne (commonly known as the Royal Gateway Site). The proposed development consisted of a mix of office and light industrial buildings on a 42-acre site with the view to eventually extending it to an area of 120 acres. This was unanimously supported by all 26 members of Meath County Council when a vote was taken to materially contravene the development plan to allow the development to take place (largely justified on the grounds of job creation). Their decision was subsequently overturned when appealed by An Taisce to An Bord Pleanála on the basis that it contravened the provisions of the *Strategic planning guidelines* and constituted inappropriate 'car-based' development. While such decisions on the part of Meath County Councillors were irresponsible from a planning and environmental perspective, in many respects they reflect the drive and inherent need to re-establish Meath as an employment centre in its own right.

In recent years, however, there has been a renewed attempt to secure a more strategic planning approach and restore the intended linkages between national policies, regional planning guidelines, development plans and local area plans. In 2010, new legislation[20] was introduced that now requires County development plans to adopt a core strategy which must contain details of the quantity of land already zoned for residential use, together with similar information on lands proposed to be zoned for residential purposes.[21] Moreover, it specifically provides that planning authorities must ensure, when making a development plan or a local area plan, that it 'is consistent with any regional planning guidelines in force for its area.'[22] In line with these requirements, the recently adopted *Meath County Development Plan 2013-2019* now contains a core strategy and reflects the shift towards a more regionalised and coordinated planning approach. In particular, it sets out the strategic vision and approach of Meath County Council for the plan period, with one of its core principles being to develop Meath's 'critical role as part of the Dublin City National Economic Gateway maximising on its proximity to Dublin Airport.'[23] Moreover, it also seeks to 'consolidate population growth and employment in areas best served by a range of transport modes.'[24] The adoption and implementation of core principles such as these will help reaffirm the county's role as set out in the *National Spatial Strategy*[25] and *Regional Planning Guidelines*[26], thereby reflecting a shift from localised and micro planning approaches, towards a more regionalised and strategic approach that is more consistent with best practice.

Emergence of commuter towns

One of the defining features of the development of Meath over the last twenty years has been the emergence of urban commuter towns. In general, these are located somewhat near to, but are not independent of the larger metropolitan area which they service. They also tend to predate the wider metropolitan expansion of large cities but have significant bedroom communities. As Meath has increasingly become part of, and more integrated into, the GDA, many of Meath's once small rural settlements have been transformed into commuter towns servicing the Dublin economy.

Indeed, prior to the onset of the Celtic Tiger, Meath was a predominantly rural county. However, because of the rapid increase in house prices in the Dublin area during the boom, Meath became a very attractive location for developers looking to build large-scale low density housing within commuting distance of Dublin. It was also attractive because the planning restrictions in Meath were generally much more lax than in Dublin and development could be initiated on greenfield sites which minimised development expense considerably.[27] From a planning perspective, the social, environmental and economic cost associated with Meath's recent development history is certainly a cause for concern. In particular, there has been far too much emphasis placed on housing development with the result being that attempts to deliver more balanced forms of development that promote employment-generating land uses has been negated. This is reflected in the fact that out of the 74,342 workers currently residing in Meath, 32,942 work outside the county.[28] Indeed, the lack of job opportunities locally has exacerbated long-distance commuting patterns in the county. For instance, recent census figures reveal that 40.3% of workers living in Meath face a commute in excess of 30 minutes.[29] These trends not only have negative repercussions in terms of quality of life issues, but have also placed considerable pressures on Meath's existing transport infrastructure. The fact that Navan is the only administrative capital in the mid-east region which currently does not enjoy rail access aggravates the problem. The response to Meath's transportation problems to date has largely been to concentrate on improving the road network, most notably through the delivery of the M3 and M4 motorways. While the provision of a rail link from Dublin to Dunboyne/Pace is a significant addition to Meath's transport network, the second phase of the project which consists of an extension to Navan is currently on hold due to financial capital constraints, as already noted. Modal choice for the majority of Meath's commuters remains predominantly car based as a result.

Table 1 shows the extent to which the populations of selected towns increased between 1996 and 2006, i.e. the Celtic Tiger era. It can be seen that the towns which saw the greatest population increases include Ratoath, Enfield, Navan, and Trim with substantial increases in other towns also. The sheer magnitude of

the increases are striking and Ratoath, in particular, witnessed a more than fivefold increase in population over a ten year period.

Table 31.1: Population in selected Meath towns, 1996-2006

	1996	2002	2006	Change: 1996-2006
Ashbourne	4999	6362	8528	70%
Dunboyne	3080	5363	5713	86%
Dunshaughlin	2139	3063	3384	58%
Enfield, Meath	566	1072	2157	281%
Laytown-Bettystown-Mornington	3678	5597	8978	144%
Navan (An Uaimh)	9363	19417	24851	165%
Ratoath	1061	3794	7249	583%
Trim	2665	5894	6870	158%

Source: CSO (various years)

Of course, these population changes have had significant transport implications. Because of the lack of public transport availability in new developments in these towns, they became essentially car-based bedroom communities of Dublin city and its surrounding suburbs such as Blanchardstown, Liffey Valley, and Dundrum, among others. Cleary, a development approach which forces long distance commuting has transport sustainability implications that ultimately reinforce car-dependency and marginalise the role that can be played by public transport in serving travel demand. It also has social implications. A study of Ratoath town, for example, has demonstrated that long-distance commuting negatively influences residents' membership of local voluntary associations, curtailing the extent to which they can engage with local recreational and leisure associations, all of which impacts on the development of social capital and the establishment of community.[30]

Table 2 shows that car use (as driver or passenger) as a means of travel to work, school or college was 62.7% in 2011. This is more or less unchanged from the figure in 1996 (63.7%). However, it is notable that there has been a significant increase in people using the car as a passenger over the period, implying that car-pooling is becoming more prominent in the county. This is likely related, at least to some extent, to the increased cost of fuel which has more than doubled over the period,[31] but is also likely due to greater environmental awareness of the

Table 31.2: Persons aged 5 years and over classified by means of travel to work, school or college in county Meath

Year	Walk	Bicycle	Bus	Train	Motor cycle	Motor car (Driver)	Motor car (Passenger)	Other	Un-stated	Total
2011	15152 (13.0%)	1017 (0.9%)	12236 (10.5%)	1631 (1.4%)	330 (0.3%)	51710 (44.6%)	21097 18.1%)	10035 (8.6%)	2981 (2.6%)	116189 (100%)
2006	13057 (11.7%)	799 (0.7%)	13532 (12.1%)	1789 (1.6%)	488 (0.4%)	51009 (45.5%)	18616 (16.6%)	11622 (10.4%)	1144 (1.0%)	112056 (100%)
2002	10662 (11.9%)	914 (1.0%)	13433 (15.0%)	1081 (1.2%)	507 (0.6%)	36882 (41.0%)	15848 (17.6%)	9344 (10.4%)	1209 (1.3%)	89880 (100%)
1996	3054 (7.6%)	862 (2.2%)	1677 (4.2%)	232 (0.6%)	341 (0.8%)	21578 (53.7%)	4023 (10.0%)	7446 (18.5%)	952 (2.4%)	40165 (100%)

Source: CSO (various years)

impact of unsustainable travel. Another notable trend emerging from Table 2 is the increase in the proportion of people walking for trip-making purposes from 7.6% to 13.0% between 1996 and 2011. Moreover, the use of the bus has also increased substantially from 4.2% in 1996 to 10.5% in 2011 as a result of new services offered to commuters and improved timetabling and fleet upgrading. However, it is notable that bus use has been declining proportionally since 2002. A similar trend is also visible for the train with its use increasing from 0.6% to 1.4% between 1996 and 2011. It is likely that the train will play a more important role in the future especially if Navan is ultimately served by railway.

Long distance commutes are increasing as a result of the jobs-housing imbalance[32] with obvious implications for increasing average vehicle-kilometres-travelled (VKT), energy consumption and the need for the development of new, and upgrading of existing, road infrastructure. Moreover, low density residential development also makes the viability of public transport more difficult. Public transport systems work best when they serve a small number of routes with high volumes and one or a small number of destinations, whereas development patterns that have been permitted in Meath are highly dispersed encouraging travel patterns with both a large number of origins *and* destinations. Furthermore, large-scale commercial greenfield developments were also permitted primarily because of the enhanced rates base offered by commercial land uses which assisted in meeting shortfalls in local authority budgets resulting from declining central government funding. Taken together, land use developments in Meath over the course of the last twenty years have not been conducive to supporting and maintaining the role of public transport in overall trip-making.

A changing transport network

Given the massive development pressure within county Meath over the course of the boom years, it is hardly surprising that the transport network underwent significant changes. While land use planning has a significant impact on transport, so too does prevailing transport planning policy. Meath's transport policy is influenced by a range of national and regional policy documents relevant to the planning system. As mentioned already, the extent to which the local authority adhered to relevant policy over the course of the economic boom is questionable. Nevertheless, the main documents intended to influence transport policy in the county include the *National Spatial Strategy*[33] and *Regional planning guidelines for the Greater Dublin Area*,[34] but others that also have an influence include the *National Development Plan*[35] as well as a range of transport-related policy documents.

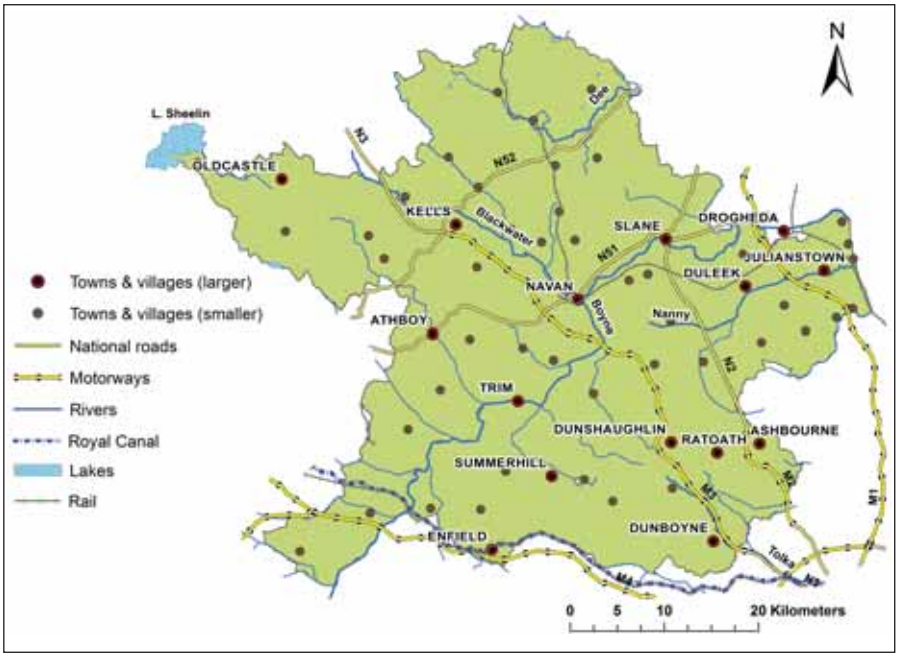

Fig. 31.2: Settlement and transport networks, County Meath (Map design: Francis Ludlow).

In terms of infrastructure, the road network in Meath is extensive. As of 2014, Meath county council has over 3,500 kilometres of road network in its jurisdiction.[36] This is a significant increase even on ten years ago and is largely due to the rapid increases in the development of housing estates over the boom period. Moreover, it highlights the extent to which the development of additional residential, commercial and retail uses requiring access will increase the burden of maintenance imposed on a local authority. The fact that much of the development that has taken place in Meath over the last two decades has been low density has made it very difficult to adequately service by public transport. The county has therefore become much more car-dependent over the course of the Celtic Tiger era. Indeed, recent data shows the extent to which the car is the dominant mode of transport for the journey to work in the county. Figures from the most recent Census show that 67.4% of all journeys to work take place by car.[37]

Perhaps the most significant road development in the recent past has been the development of the former national primary route (the N3) into the M3 motorway between Clonee and the Meath-Cavan border which reportedly cuts the travel time between Cavan/Meath and Dublin by up to one hour. Other developments that have had a significant impact on travel patterns include the full completion of the M1 motorway. This infrastructure runs through Meath county connecting towns such as Dunleer, Slane and Ardee with Dublin and

Belfast, acting as an important connector between Meath, Dublin, Dublin Airport and large towns on the eastern seaboard such as Drogheda and Dundalk, as well as connecting directly with Northern Ireland.

Controversies in relation to the road network have also arrested public attention in the county, nationally and beyond. Chief among these was the development of the M3 motorway which was developed along a routeway which passes close to the ancient site of the Hill of Tara (it is within 2.2 kilometres). The Hill of Tara is an archaeological complex that runs between Navan and Dunshaughlin. The site contains a number of ancient monuments, and according to historical tradition, was the seat of Árd Rí na hÉireann (the High King of Ireland). Whilst plans to upgrade the N3 were largely welcomed by dismayed commuters who had become accustomed to high levels of congestion along this key transport corridor, much controversy surrounded the choice of route. Alongside concerned members of the general public, environmental, heritage, and conversation groups objected to the potential disturbance of the archaeological complex at the behest of the construction works- Protesters argued that since the Tara Discovery Programme started in 1992, there is an appreciation that the Hill of Tara is just the central complex of a wider archaeological landscape heritage that should be preserved and left undisrupted. Moreover,

Plate 31.2: Protest against the Government's decision not to re-route the M3
(Source: http://www.indymedia.ie/article/83936)

concerns were raised surrounding the level of transparency in the route selection process as several landowners who stood to benefit from the selected route were known backers of Fianna Fáil with further links to corrupt politicians who were exposed during the Tribunal of Inquiry into Certain Planning Matters and Payments.[38] Despite significant opposition, the scheme was put before An Bord Pleanála and was subjected to a 28 day Oral Hearing where various contributors argued for and against the proposal. The scheme was subsequently approved with modifications by the Board in 2003 and was opened in June 2010. As a direct result of the motorway's construc-tion, the Hill of Tara was included in the World Monuments Fund's 2008 Watch List of the 100 Most Endangered Sites in the world.[39]

There have also been changes in the public transport network. The most significant of these relates to developments along the rail network. At present, Meath is served by rail at stations located in Dunboyne, Pace (M3 Parkway), Enfield and Laytown, with a limited service provided from Gormonstown. The most notable recent development has been associated with the old Navan rail line. Under the Transport 21 programme published in 2005, the Navan rail line was to be re-opened in two phases. The first provided for a spur off the existing Maynooth line at Clonsilla to serve Dunboyne and this was completed in 2010. The second phase was to extend the passenger service to Navan providing for approximately 34 kilometres of double tracking together with associated infrastructure such as signalling systems and bridge works. It was to service four stations at Dunshaughlin, Kilmessan, Navan Town Centre and a terminus station at the northern edge of Navan town. However, the project has been one of the high-profile casualties of the economic crisis and has been officially deferred (not cancelled). Thus, while the project is currently off the table, it is likely that it may form part of future capital spending programmes announced by government.

Rural Transport

As outlined in previous sections, Meath is very much part of the economy of the GDA and many of its towns have effectively become suburbs of Dublin. On the other hand the county still possesses a distinctive rural character alongside its newly urbanised towns. In this sense, Meath is very much a county at the urban-rural fringe.[40] From a transport perspective, the rural dimension of transport is important in maintaining mobility among populations that either may not own a car nor have the capacity to drive it. These cohorts include socially deprived populations as well as the elderly and people with mobility, sensory and cognitive impairments.

In order to facilitate mobility among these cohorts, the government operates a community-based public transport initiative called the Rural Transport

Programme (RTP). The programme was designed as a bottom-up initiative that works directly with local community development organisations in response to local needs. The programme was established in 2002 as a pilot (originally called the Rural Transport Initiative) and because of its success was rolled out on a nationwide basis in 2006. It has proved to be highly successful in reducing social exclusion among vulnerable groups and in enhancing mobility for impaired populations. As a mark of this success the programme has gradually been expanded and the funding allocated to it from central government has increased substantially over the years. In 2010, more than 1.4 million passenger journeys were undertaken on the service with 76% of those being door-to-door trips.

In Meath, the programme is operated by the Meath Accessible Transport Project Ltd. and operates locally under the Flexibus brand. It was established as one of two original pilot programmes of the then Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform and was originally focussed on improving the mobility options for people with physical disabilities. It has since expanded to include provision of services for marginalised groups more generally, irrespective of disability status or age. Meath Accessible Transport now has a fleet of 19 buses and operates 22 timetabled services throughout the county as well as 27 Dial-a-Ride services. The range of services available to local communities is extensive and includes (see www.meathtransport.com):

- Weekly services to access pension and shopping facilities;
- Weekly services to access hospital and health facilities;
- Services to access active retirement groups;
- Services for groups to attend activities;
- Cinema services in rural areas;
- Daily services to access education, employment and training;
- Monthly services to Blanchardstown and Dundrum;
- Services for disability groups;
- Individual services to access health appointments.

In addition, there has been a significant push in recent years to integrate the various rural transport services across the country (there are 34 in total). This is being achieved through the Local and Rural Integrated Transport Services (LARITS) Process.[41] The aim of LARITS is to improve how Bus Éireann, the Rural Transport Programme (RTP)/Pobal and the Health Service Executive (HSE) work in partnership to achieve greater synergies, meet identified transport needs and deliver increased value for money for the exchequer. In this sense the RTP is maturing towards a situation where it is streamlining service delivery in a more efficient manner.

Conclusions

This chapter has provided an exposition of contemporary developments in transport and planning in county Meath. What it demonstrates is that, perhaps more than any other county, Meath's built environment underwent an enormous transformation over the course of the Celtic Tiger boom period. The explosion in housing development, in particular, and the magnitude of the associated population increase has permanently altered the transport infrastructure as well as the patterns of trip-making in the county. While there has been more investment in public transport in recent years, Meath is nevertheless now a heavily car-dependent county. Much of this is due to a lack of integration between land-use and (public) transport during the Celtic Tiger period when significant amounts of greenfield residential and commercial developments were granted planning permission without the requisite public transport facilities being put in place either simultaneously or retrospectively to serve those developments.

It is also notable how the planning context has shifted over recent decades in the county. There is little doubt that over the course of the Celtic Tiger period it moved towards being increasingly facilitative of development interests. Too much greenfield land was zoned for development with little thought for broad principles of environmental and social sustainability and the reduction of travel demand via the provision of high-quality public transport and mixed-use development. While there was not a significant level of over-zoning generally in Meath compared with other counties during the boom period,[42] there was nevertheless a considerable volume of over-development highlighting the extent to which the planning system failed to adequately control excessive land development. Looking to the future, is seems that recent changes to planning legislation at the national level has forced a renewed focus on the integration between public transport provision and land-use development. This is a positive development for future land-use and transport planning in the county.

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