

Submission 4.38 Drogheda City Status Group

About Drogheda City Status Group

Drogheda City Status Group (DCSG) was established in November 2009, following a general discussion regarding the downgrading and neglect of Drogheda and its environs over the past number of years. A group of local volunteers – representing business and community interests - set up the Drogheda City Status Group, the Mission Statement being:

“To procure City Status for Drogheda to enable its unique history, location and potential to be appreciated and promoted in industry, business, tourism, education, health and quality of life to the benefit and advantage of its citizens and those of the South Louth and East Meath Region.”

Since inception, Drogheda has grown substantially, but national and local Government has not kept pace with the challenges, opportunities and needs of an emerging city, including the matter of Drogheda being two riverside towns rather than one unified city for the betterment of all citizens in the catchment which would result in the more efficient and effective delivery of State and other services to all; and the need to present one unified Regional Growth Centre (RGC) to both overseas and domestic potential employers to address several of the issues below.

Drogheda & the Greater Drogheda Region

Greater Drogheda clearly has the potential to become Ireland’s next city, given:

Census 2016 confirmed Drogheda as Ireland’s largest town.

The Greater Drogheda Region of Drogheda; South Louth and East Meath has a population of circa 80,000 and continues to grow rapidly, placing further demands on the existing State services, including Educational facilities in the Region. The following points further reinforce this.

A Financial Times publication in 2018/19 declared Drogheda as one of Europe’s emerging cities.

The “Ireland 2040” Plan launched in early 2018 recognised the strategic importance of the Drogheda-Dundalk-Newry axis

Subsequently the EMRA’s RSES Plan acknowledged Drogheda as a Regional Growth Centre confirming its potential to become a city

Greater Drogheda (including East Meath) is strategically located on the recently launched Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor and boasts excellent infrastructure and connectivity.

Within a 25 mile radius/30 minute commute to/from Drogheda , there are 750,000 citizens, probably the most populated catchment outside Dublin. In contrast, Dundalk has just 250,000 people within a similar catchment – and of these circa 125,000 reside outside the State. Thus

Drogheda should be a key centre for the delivery of State services, including education – see MAP attached

Consistent with the EMRA's grouping of its constituent counties, recently IDA Ireland has now adjusted its Mid-East Region, and Co.Louth now joins Kildare, Meath and Wicklow there.

Bord Failte have recently designated Drogheda as a "Destination Town," at the "Gateway to the Boyne Valley," and this is expected to dramatically increase both overseas and domestic visitor traffic in the coming years.

Drogheda, South Louth and adjacent East Meath form a natural catchment area which is referred to as the Greater Drogheda Region – the nucleus of the future City of Drogheda.

Properly planned and delivered by the State and its agencies, all of the above augurs well for improving the welfare of citizens in the Greater Drogheda Region.

However, to date, decades of neglect have resulted in substantial areas of poverty and deprivation in Drogheda and the Greater Drogheda Region with – for example higher than average unemployment and lower than average educational attainment, as outlined below.

We would respectfully suggest that priority be accorded to addressing the urgent needs in the Greater Drogheda Region – and where appropriate, piloting new and innovative initiatives to alleviate the deprivation described below.

Educational Attainment-Household Income-Unemployment

Census 2016 results show that Drogheda has maintained its position as the largest town in the State with 40,956 persons, an increase of 6.2% since the 2011 census. Drogheda has a younger population than the nation as a whole - almost 24% of Drogheda's population were aged 0-14 years old, compared to circa 21% in the rest of Ireland. Additionally, Drogheda has more inhabitants in age 24-44 (32% of the total population compared to the national average of 30%). Drogheda demonstrates lower levels of educational attainment than the national average, with a higher proportion of residents aged 15 and over whose highest level of education completed is primary level (15%) against a national average of 13%. 30% of residents in Drogheda have completed third level education - substantially below the national average of 36%.

It is worth noting that the unemployment rate in Drogheda is consistently higher than the national average of 13% with almost 18% unemployed. Rates of income in the area are lower with the median household income being €38,876, compared with national median gross income per household of €45,256.

Stark levels of deprivation exist in Drogheda. Seven smaller areas within Drogheda were selected for Strand 1 of the RAPID programme in 2001 based on their levels of deprivation. As noted in the Geiran Report, the HP Pobal Deprivation Index demonstrates the electoral divisions of Fair Gate, West Gate, St. Laurence Gate, St. Mary's and St. Peter's as being below average in terms of social class composition and labour market. While this Submission focuses on matters related to education, the Geiran Report (recently commissioned by Justice Minister, Helen McEntee) and its background is further evidence of the need for increased and focused support for Drogheda, especially as education intersects with the child and family services and local infrastructure. Education is more than simply ensuring a population is ready for employment; it is a key pillar in improving safety and wellbeing outcomes in Drogheda in general.

There are twenty-one schools in Drogheda and one LMETB further education facility in Drogheda Institution of Further Education (DIFE) offering PLC courses. There are three DEIS primary schools on the north side of the town where schools' management have reported caring for student bodies experiencing unacceptably high levels of trauma, and significant levels of homelessness. Since Covid, these schools are also reporting major deteriorations in standardised literacy and numeracy test scores.

DIFE – the Drogheda Institute of Further Education - is an excellent facility in Drogheda offering further education and training in a range of areas including technology and design; business; IT; humanities; leisure and tourism; community and health care and pre-apprenticeship courses. Despite the population of Drogheda and the hinterland, there is no Institute of Technology there, or even a campus of an IT or university. Nor does it have any headquarters or major centre of a government department or statutory body. However, Drogheda is well placed to house a campus of Dundalk Institute Technology (or other suitable Third Level Institute or University currently situated on the recently launched Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor - DBEC).

While the Project Ireland 2040 plan sets out a guide for future development in Ireland with the goal of enabling people to live closer to where they work and facilitating sustainable growth and development, Drogheda is not recognised as a developing city – but as Ireland's largest town, only recently secured the status of regional growth centre (along with the smaller towns of Dundalk; Letterkenny; Sligo and Athlone) and is a component of the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor. This, in the absence of targeted education measures, resource allocation and investment in Drogheda, will be insufficient in meeting the education and employment needs of the population and will only perpetuate the current unacceptably high levels of poverty, unemployment and crime, especially in the more disadvantaged areas of Greater Drogheda.

Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty

The Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty ('the Duty') is a statutory obligation for public bodies set out in Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014. Section 42(1) requires public bodies, in the performance of their functions, to have regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality and protect human rights of staff and people availing of their services. Section 42(2) requires public bodies to assess, address and report on progress in relation to equality and human rights in their strategic plan and annual reports in a manner that is accessible to the public.

The Duty should be at the core of any plan that arises out of this Consultation and ensure that the need to eliminate discrimination in education in areas like Drogheda, where it is most deeply felt, should be a central tenet to the strategy that emerges.

Cost of education

The education context outlined in this submission (see (3) above) did not happen overnight. Decades of consistent neglect, underfunding and inattention have damaged not only the educational profile of Drogheda, but the town as a whole. Increased student fees and reductions in access to grant supports have compounded the problems that arise from spending years learning in prefab classrooms, overcrowded schools and the increases in the basic running costs of schools.

If education is to be truly recognised as a basic and fundamental human right, it must be made available on the basis of full equality. In turn, this requires meaningful recognition of the unmet education needs in Drogheda and putting in place the supports required to meet them whether that is regarding the availability of further education places, the increased supports to access third level education outside of Drogheda through grants and fee reductions, and the provision of higher education facilities in Drogheda itself.

In relation to FET, DIFE is well positioned to respond to and grow with the needs of the Greater Drogheda area – and beyond.

In relation to the provision of Third Level infrastructure, given the current population and ongoing rapid growth in the Greater Drogheda Region and adjacent areas along the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor, it would be inappropriate to consider a "token/satellite" solution to the growing and critical needs in this sector. IDA Ireland regularly cite the lack of a local Third Level Institution as a reason for their failure to attract FDI into the Greater Drogheda Region.

In the era of serious climate change, work needs to be locally accessible for as many citizens as possible – i.e. close to where they reside. At present, Drogheda and East Meath have some of

the highest levels of long-distance work commutes – mainly to the Dublin area which has major adverse social, environmental and economic impacts.

Increased targeted support to facilitate the transition from second level to third level education should be enhanced, ensuring that students of all backgrounds, including mature students have access to university places as well as apprenticeships.

The €3,000 annual student contribution charge has a clear detrimental impact on students from the Drogheda area. Many students simply cannot afford to pay this fee in addition to either moving closer to their college or while remaining in the family home and paying substantial travel costs. Ireland has the highest third level fees in the EU and if we are serious about breaking barriers to access to higher education, there is a clear need to address the fees issue.

The value of the maintenance grant does not cover rent or travel costs, or other general costs connected to attending third level and should be increased according to need.

6. Recommendations

Target a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach to all learning resources to improve access across all FET/HEI programmes

Provide training in Universal Design for Learning to teachers/lecturers, course designers, assessors etc.

Set target increase (%) in participation of currently under-represented groups (socio-economic, ethnic, disability, gender, age)

Increase quota of places for different categories of under-represented groups for high demand/low supply courses be applied

Introduce outreach programmes in schools as a means of supporting stepped access onto pre-undergraduate and undergraduate degree programmes. This could be done through increasing support for community based third level initiatives such as the Communiversities programme.

Expand the DARE and HEAR systems

Ensure all FETs/HEIs provide programmes for the most marginalised e.g. those with intellectual disabilities and other challenging needs at level 5 and 6.

Increase use of online and blended learning programmes to broaden accessibility

Equality proof all education initiatives to ensure that measures designed to broaden accessibility do not exclude particular social groups from attending third level

Recognise that online and blended programmes are not a substitute for addressing the lack of affordability of attending third level for many students

Introduce study hubs in local FET/HEI centres where students cannot access broadband

Abolish third level student fees, including PLC fees, and expand student accommodation

Introduce maintenance grants for all postgraduate students

Reverse the changes to the adjacent rate of grant to ensure more students are eligible

Extend the Back to Education Allowance to cover post graduate courses

Drogheda specific recommendations:

Implement the recommendations in the Geiran Report including ;

Explore the potential for more apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programmes in Drogheda, and specifically through DIFE;

Explore the potential for locating a Third Level presence/campus in Drogheda, and also for the development of 'feeder' programmes – particularly those related to vocational and professional education and training – operating in Drogheda.

Increase resources for DIFE to grow in numbers and programme provision including introducing satellite centres outside of its main premises

Ensure local links are developed between schools and FET services and HE in schools, and adequate guidance counselling services are provided in secondary schools

Re-establish a Training Centre in Drogheda to accommodate apprenticeship training

Establish education hubs resourced with appropriate staff, IT and canteen facilities to create an education environment suitable for those who cannot otherwise access FET and HE.