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Spatial Planning in the Republic of Ireland: Progress and Potential

Niall Cussen

The Republic of Ireland, as with other countries in Europe, has been making significant progress over the past decade in adapting and reforming its planning systems towards the broader and more strategic purpose of spatial planning, extending beyond a traditional focus on physical or land use planning. Here I want to outline the steps that led to the preparation of the Irish Government's National Spatial Strategy in 2002, key events in the implementation of that strategy, and the prospects for spatial planning in Ireland over the next decade.

Evolution of Spatial Planning to 2000

It is fair to say that since the establishment of the Irish planning system in 1963, until the end of the century, planning took place mainly at the level of the city and county councils (34 units by 1993) and through the 54 Borough Council and Town Councils. Forward planning spread across 88 planning authorities for a population of around 4.4 million people can, especially at times of rapid growth, pose challenges in ensuring good co-ordination and strategic purpose. Until the introduction of the *Planning and Development Act* (2000), there was no place in the Irish planning system for any type of higher level plan. Despite some attempts, principally in the capital, Dublin, and the cities of Cork and Limerick (with the nearby international airport at Shannon), regional planning did not flourish in Ireland. Successive Irish governments did not see an overall spatial plan for the country as a priority until the late 1990s. At this time of unprecedented national development, prosperity and convergence towards EU levels of economic performance, a consensus emerged that Ireland needed a long term spatial development framework to assure its progress on a path that was economically, socially and environmentally sustainable. It could be said that with the commitment to prepare a National Spatial Strategy in the National Development Plan 2000–2007, the word 'where' was added to the lexicon of Irish Government policy.

The factors that led to the decision to go down the route of a national spatial plan were many, but in my view, the critical ones were as follows:

- The extra-ordinary progress made by the Irish economy in the late 1990s and which continued into the middle of the following decade. This raised political concerns regarding the *unequal economic and physical development* between different parts of Ireland. This principally concerned the very rapid development of the capital Dublin and its environs compared to more underdeveloped areas in the west.
- The views of the key *economic development agencies* and certain government think-tanks, including the Industrial Development Authority (IDA), Shannon Development, Forfás and the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). The consensus was that in order to position itself in an increasingly globalised and competitive economic context, Ireland needed a longer term spatial plan to organise strategic investment in infrastructure, thus creating the conditions conducive to long-term sustainable economic development and investment, especially foreign direct investment (FDI).
- A national strategy for *sustainable development* had been published by Government in 1997. The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government which prepared the strategy was also responsible for planning, local government and many of the key infrastructural investment areas central to planning including all road investment, water services and housing. It was aware of the increasing importance of coordination at local government level in the context of growth of the so called Celtic Tiger economy.
- Experience in relation to *planning for Dublin* had heightened the awareness of the positive role of a more strategic level of spatial planning in the minds of Ministers and civil servants. The reform and consolidation of Irish planning legislation under the Planning and Development Act (2000) also introduced the concept of Regional Planning Guidelines and retrospective legal recognition for a document that had been previously agreed between the seven planning authorities responsible for planning in and adjacent to Dublin: the Strategic Planning Guidelines for the Greater Dublin Area. This strategic Dublin document had been a collective effort between the Department of the Environment,

the relevant local authorities¹ and the two regional authorities² for the Greater Dublin Area and was part of a range of initiatives emerging at the time to deal with the rapid development of Dublin with associated affordable housing and transportation problems.

- As the Celtic Tiger economy developed *significant deficiencies in Ireland's stock of infrastructure* emerged, especially in relation to transport, housing, water services, energy supply, communications and education. Driven by EU structural funding measures and co-funding requirements the Irish Department of Finance could see the merit of a longer term 20 year spatial framework. Initial discussions between the Departments of Finance and Environment in the context of the preparation of the National Development Plan 2000–2006 led to an agreement that the plan would contain a commitment to prepare a National Spatial Strategy by 2002.

Preparation of the National Spatial Strategy

Minister Noel Dempsey T.D. took a keen personal interest in the preparation of the NSS and personally oversaw the establishment of a variety of measures to support the development of the strategy including:

- A high level *interdepartmental steering group* to drive preparation with membership from all the key departmental and agency stakeholders ;
- An *expert advisory group* with representation from the fields of academia, EU policy, practitioners and other administrations that had already made good progress in the field of spatial planning, most notably Northern Ireland , that had prepared its own Regional Development Strategy ;
- A sophisticated *public participation and communications initiative* supported by expert consultants and designed to engage at local and regional levels to assure the highest level of consensus ; and
- The establishment of a *dedicated Spatial Planning Unit* within the Planning Division of the Department of Environment to drive the actual day to

¹ Dublin City Council, Fingal County Council, South Dublin County Council, Dunlaoghaire Rathdown County Council, Meath County Council, Kildare County Council, Wicklow County Council.

² Dublin Regional Authority (responsible for co-ordination matters between the first four local authorities above) and Mid East Regional Authority (responsible for co-ordination matters between the latter three local authorities above)

day preparation of the NSS.

Work proceeded quickly and involved a series of research and consultation papers which are documented on the NSS website.³

The NSS was launched with much fanfare and media attention by An Taoiseach Mr Bertie Ahern T.D., and the new Minister of the Environment Martin Cullen T.D. in November 2002. This was followed by an intensive round of regional launches attended by the Minister. It could be said that along with national investment plans of the time and developments in the northern peace process, the NSS was very much part of a new-found confidence about Ireland and its future prospects.

Key Elements of the National Spatial Strategy

The NSS established, for the first time, an overall strategic planning framework for the country as a whole looking forward to 2020. It was not a redistributive strategy, but drawing upon the then new European Spatial Development Perspective (ESOP), one based on the concept of the optimal development of the potential of different places, recognising that this will differ between the various urban areas and between rural and urban contexts. The NSS is highly significant in that it was and remains closely associated with investment in infrastructure under the National Development Plan, and also links to Northern Ireland and its Regional Development Strategy.

Comprehensive arrangements have been put in place to support implementation of the strategy. For the Department, this has been new territory. The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government is responsible for driving the implementation of the NSS, supported by reciprocal responsibilities for follow through on the strategy by regional and local authorities. This is overseen by an interdepartmental steering group with representatives from all the key spending departments and certain agencies, notably those responsible for enterprise promotion.

In spatial planning terms, the NSS envisaged Ireland's strategic development being organised around an integrated set of interrelated elements, including

- Nine differently sized *Gateway* cities and towns, some with links to Northern Ireland, that are envisaged as strategic economic motors for their wider regions of influence;

³ www.irishspatialstrategy.ie

- Nine differently sized *Hub* towns located strategically between the Gateways and extending their influence to wider areas;
- *County Towns* working in support of the role of Gateways and Hub towns;
- Other *smaller towns* focusing on their own individual potential for development and identity;
- Villages and wider *rural areas* that would be supported in their ongoing economic transformation towards a more broadly based rural economy by capitalising on and conserving their unique environmental and heritage qualities.

A key concept alongside that of potential already mentioned was *critical mass* and the need to grow certain locations, most notably the Gateway centres and Hub towns, to create the conditions essential to sustained private sector investment and innovation.

At the time of the launch of the NSS and subsequently, there has been some criticism of the NSS, often on the theme that the NSS sought to designate too many centres and that it would have been better to simply focus development on one or a small number of cities . However, careful analysis of the actual document will confirm that Government strongly acknowledges the key role played by Dublin and the main cities and the need for investment to support such roles. In addition, the Government's desire is to ensure that the spatial plan also sets a development framework for the country as a whole.

Progress Since 2002

Writing this paper in early 2010, Ireland's development since the NSS was launched in late 2002 has swung from the heights of economic progress and prosperity to unprecedented challenges to our economic and banking structures, as part of the broader EU and global economic challenges.

So too with the NSS: there have been good steps forward, and difficulties to contend with, and the challenge now, as the mid-term point of the NSS approaches, is that lessons are learned and that those lessons are put to good use in the new economic context Ireland will find itself in.

In terms of progress, highlights since 2002 have included:

- Major buy-in to the strategy by key Departments and agencies who have in the main co-ordinated their investment programmes around the spatial framework of the NSS, resulting in a major transformation

of the country's stock of physical and social infrastructure;

- The National Development Plan 2007–2013 was heavily influenced by the NSS, and included a €300million measure to stimulate development of key areas in Gateway locations through a Gateway Innovation Fund;
- The emergence of excellent models of regeneration, based on the strategic plan and on 'place-making', that have created dynamic and more sustainable new communities in both brownfield (Dublin Docklands) and greenfield locations (Adamstown Strategic Development Zone in west Dublin) and in other Gateways (Cork Area Strategic Plan and re-instatement of Midleton rail line to facilitate new housing development);
- Turnaround in patterns of housing development in and around Dublin: prior to the economic difficulties beginning in late 2008, there were indications that development was beginning to consolidate around the city, reversing the pattern of previous years in which substantial levels of housing were developing on radial commuter routes, due to housing availability and affordability problems in Dublin coupled with the ample supply of land and services outside Dublin;
- Publication of Regional Planning Guidelines in all regional authority areas by 2004, which were launched by the then Minister for the Environment Mr Dick Roche T.D. to further develop the approach of the NSS at city and county development plan levels and creating an integrated hierarchy of national, regional and local plans;
- Progress in working with Northern Ireland on co-ordinated approaches to spatial planning in an island of Ireland context; and
- Further reform of the planning system, including the introduction of a one stop shop for major strategic infrastructure type development, the assessment criteria for which includes the implementation of the NSS.

Nonetheless, implementation of the NSS has also faced challenges, notably:

- The fact that the 2006 census indicated that population growth was tending to happen in locations at a remove from but under the influence of the Gateways, which in some cases were declining in population and leading to concerns about so called doughnut cities, as well as urbanisation of the countryside and the transformation of small character-laden villages and towns into commuter suburbs, dependent on car-based commuting and therefore vulnerable to changes in the price or availability of fossil fuels;

- Rapid increase in the zoning of land at locations outside the main centres: this threatens unsustainable demands for the provision of essential physical and social infrastructure to meet the needs of rapidly growing areas that are driven by cheap credit and high levels of housing demand; as a consequence, there have been a series of interventions in local plan making by successive Ministers for the Environment;
- Significant increases in CO₂ emissions from the transport sector as a result of rising car ownership, rising car usage and small increases in the usage of sustainable travel modes; all of these are driven by settlement patterns that pose difficulties, even in the major centres, to the provision of public transport;
- Increasing concern by the EU regarding Ireland's efforts to ensure that development took on board and worked to conserve and improve environmental qualities including the integrity of sensitive habitats, the quality of ground and surface waters, both inland and around coasts;
- The postponement of the Gateway Innovation Fund (GIF) and general pressure on the availability of resources for capital investment as a result of the very challenging budgetary and economic context faced in 2009 and into 2010.

Furthermore, many analysts have contrasted the messages of the NSS with the decision by Government to decentralise a range of Government Departments and agencies to 53 locations around the country, and have questioned the degree to which the NSS really is an influence on Government policy.

However, on balance, the NSS has had, since 2002, a wide ranging influence on Government policy in a range of areas, including investment, enterprise policy, transport, planning, and housing. In the context of the timescales involved in implementing a 20 year strategy and influencing spatial development patterns that evolve over decades, centuries and in some cases millennia, it can be said that a very good start has been made. Today, the challenge is to adapt and evolve the implementation of the NSS to current and future challenges ensuring that planning is to the fore and plays its full part in dealing with the economic, social and environmental challenges of the future.

Outlook 2010–20

As outlined in the *NSS Update and Outlook Report* (2010), priority actions to further the contribution of spatial planning in Ireland to the restoration of competitiveness and sustainable economic growth can be grouped under three key headings, namely:

1. Continuing with investment and prioritisation to support strategic planned development;
2. Strategic leadership and vision; and
3. Proper planning and sustainable development.

Investment

Notwithstanding the very significant current economic, banking and budgetary challenges being faced by the Irish Government, there remains a strong commitment to continue with a high level of investment in infrastructure. Such investment has resulted over the past ten years in:

- The completion (by end 2010) of over 1000 km of inter-urban motorways/dual carriageways between all the key cities;
- Total renewal of the intercity rail infrastructure, including track, signalling, rolling stock and many stations;
- Provision of proper water services infrastructure in most centres of population in compliance with EU requirements, as well as targets to deal with any outstanding issues over the short-term;
- Substantial urban renewal and regeneration of many existing housing areas in Dublin and other regional locations.

Progress is readily identifiable, and although capital investment to 2013 will be dependent on available resources, investment will continue in support of the NSS. The Department Environment, Heritage and Local Government continues to work closely with the Department of Finance in ensuring that the capital review supports the implementation of the NSS.

Leadership

The myriad of local authority structures and their effect on securing strategic, well-thought-out and integrated planning that transcends administrative boundaries has been mentioned already. Most of the Gateways are composed of at least two and in some cases several individual local authorities, each responsible for their own planning, housing, infrastructural and economic development activities. Political perspectives and orientation

can differ amongst authorities, as between a city council, for example, and a county council that is responsible for administration both of the environs of the city and also for a wider rural area as well.

Challenges such as this are not unique to Ireland and are very common in the field of planning and public administration. Nonetheless, within the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, the very real challenges experienced in implementing high level plans while simultaneously giving expression to the perspectives of individual local authorities, are being examined in the context of further proposals to enhance the opportunities for political leadership and vision. For example, legislation is at an advanced stage of preparation for the introduction of a directly elected Mayor for Dublin, who would have key roles in relation to planning and transport for Dublin. The options for enhancing co-ordination, leadership and vision at other levels of administration, including other gateways, is also being examined, another example of the practical influence of the NSS on national government policy.

Joined-up Planning and Sustainability

The very rapid phase of development in Ireland's so called Celtic-Tiger era has left both positive and challenging legacies. While record numbers of people were housed and major progress made in developing essential environmental infrastructure, concerns have been raised as to whether decisions are sufficiently shaped by issues such as the protection of key environmental assets, particularly habitats and water quality. In addition, Ministers for the Environment have, since 2004, intervened on six occasions through the Ministerial Direction process that requires planning authorities to remedy identified deficiencies in their plans. In each case, these directions have, *inter alia*, focused on the quantum and location of lands identified for future development.

As a result of these experiences, reform of the planning system has been delivered under the *Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2010*. A central element of the reform is the introduction of a requirement that future city and county development plans contain a *core strategy* which will quantify how much development is envisaged over the plan period, the distribution of that development and how that quantum and distribution will be consistent with the objectives of higher level plans such as the NSS and regional planning guidelines.

In addition, the 2004 RPGs have been reviewed, with more emphasis on specific targets and parameters as regards future population, housing and land

requirements to link with the core strategy concept of the 2010 Planning Act. The critics may have concerns about such developments being a reversion to traditional ‘predict and provide planning’ but experience in implementing the NSS since 2002 points towards the basic value and critical importance of all planning authorities in each region working from an agreed set of future development parameters. This permits practical planning for infrastructure such as water services, transport and even schools to integrate with local authority plans.

More widely, reform under the aforementioned Act, taking on board a range of EU Directives, will bring about a more discerning and precautionary approach in finding a balance between economic, social and environmental aspects of planning and thus ensure that the planning system lives up to the purpose of the preamble in the legislation as regards ‘Proper Planning and Sustainable Development’.

Conclusion

The journey so far has been varied and always interesting—and it has been this writer’s privilege to have been there for the inception, delivery and development of the NSS. As we currently wrestle with getting the message across about the value of planning, even more so in a time of economic challenge, it is remarkable how far-reaching the effect of the NSS has been in influencing not only legislation and policy but practical delivery on the ground. The journey is only beginning!⁴

Irish Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government

⁴ The views in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect official policy.