

## **ICLRD CONFERENCE**

**LETTERKENNY, 22 JANUARY 2009**

**Address by Conor Murphy MP MLA**

Thank you for the invitation to address your annual conference alongside Minister Kitt. Our two Departments have continued to work together to discover how our spatial strategies can deliver real benefits, and to have an impact on the ground, particularly in cross border situations.

For example we now enjoy better road and rail connections in the Dublin – Belfast Corridor. For us this has been a good news story providing much higher levels of accessibility to all towns in the corridor. However the experience serves to remind us that good roads, or rail lines, are in themselves a neutral benefit linking places together. It is the use that we make of this connection, and the attractions of those places as favoured destinations, which creates the lasting benefit. This is where spatial plans provide the focus to look at all the factors at play, understand what is happening based on the best information possible, and guide our decisions.

In this way we have also been able to provide support, advice and guidance to the North West Gateway Initiative and the Newry Dundalk Twin City Project. Proposals are well advanced for both projects and we can expect to hear a great deal from them over the next few months.

The success of this work has been encouraging and I believe that we are now ready to move on to the next level and give these working relationships more substance, and more transparency, and so become more effective.

I refer to our work to develop two spatial frameworks, the first to deal with spatial planning linkages island wide, and the second to develop a consistent approach to policy and development issues across the North West where we are today.

Minister Kitt has already outlined the nature and purpose of the Framework for Collaboration. Can I outline our thinking about a North West Spatial Planning Framework and also make reference to the Newry Dundalk Twin City project?

The North West Spatial Planning Framework will look at this region for the first time in its totality rather than previous “back to back” planning. The objective will be to make cross border policy development and planning more effective, find better ways to implement development through co-operation, and to identify infrastructure and investment gaps for priority action.

These objectives will be achieved principally through the work of the North West Gateway Initiative but the framework will also provide strategic guidance for decision makers in the public and private sectors.

Action will be proposed around four interconnected themes designed to build a higher value economy; create high quality environments for living, working and leisure; improve physical and electronic connections within and beyond the region; and, make shared planning and investment more effective.

I have followed the progress of the Newry –Dundalk Twin City Project with real interest. I feel close to the issues being a resident of that area. The ICLRD led project team have now completed their report and I have been told that we can expect an announcement from the respective councils very soon.

The fundamental objective, working together, will be to secure higher inward and local investment and employment for people in Newry and Dundalk and indeed for people in the wider region for which the two cities act as focal points.

The concept of a Newry-Dundalk twin-city region is beginning to take hold and be accepted as an integral part of a key corridor on the eastern seaboard. The impact will be positive. This will be reflected in cost savings on economic

infrastructure; pooling of expertise; sharing of good practice and efficiencies in enterprise development and sustainable management of the twin city's unique natural heritage

Alongside this work I am also carrying out a major Review of the Regional Development Strategy.

I consider the Regional Development Strategy to be of huge importance. It provides us with a unique opportunity to take decisive action at a time when our needs are changing, taking into consideration many of the global challenges and opportunities such as climate change and sustainability. A revised Strategy will set a long-term vision for all our actions. It will provide clear directions about our places and spaces, how government at a regional and local level in partnership with communities can maximise change to enhance development opportunities.

This must include Belfast as our economic driver, the North-West with Derry at its centre, and also our rural communities which account for the vast area of this region who require sustainable growth including that of the border corridor.

At a local level it will be of key significance to the functions of the proposed new Councils. It will set out a framework for decisive action based upon the growth and investment of the region addressing regional disparity and imbalance.

It will explain our position in an all-Island, East / West, European and global context.

It will reflect and complement other key government strategies. And, importantly, it will inform decisions on the location of jobs, schools, hospitals, services and key infrastructure projects.

This is what I see as the role of a revised regional strategy document.

Our initial work has concentrated on the collection and analysis of a large amount of data. We have also carried out a regional audit looking at our people, infrastructure, skills and environment.

The purpose of this work was to assess our performance as a region locally and internationally. As a result of this work, there are some clear trends and issues which now must inform how we plan for regional growth.

We are a small region of about 1.75 million people competing in a global economy. Our population is expected to grow to around 2 million by 2031. Our cities are small by international standards. And, by international standards, we have a youthful population, who are also vibrant and have much to contribute to this society now and in the future.

But, in some respects, we have much to improve on. While basic reading, maths, and scientific literacy are on a par with or about OECD average, 24% of working age people have no qualifications. And, we still lag behind many EU countries on life expectancy, infant mortality and rates of childhood and adult obesity.

Over the last two decades population growth has been highest in Armagh City, Banbridge, Newry City and Down. Belfast, however, has experienced population loss of 12% and presently it is ranked lowest out of fourteen cities on these islands. Derry, like Belfast, compares poorly with similar sized cities in terms of a range of social indicators.

These issues clearly are not unique to the North. Most regions must now compete at a global level for growth and investment. What is required is a new way of looking at how we develop, particularly in the short term. It is a challenge to plan for the future in a way which will allow us to compete internationally.

To be a successful region requires a strong Belfast and a vibrant North West centred on Derry. We must ensure that the population loss in Belfast is reversed and that it maximises its potential as the second biggest city on the Island. This means more jobs, houses, services, and investment in infrastructure.

This approach brings with it the potential for other places to work better together. To complement roles and ensure efficiency in the provision of services and jobs. It allows more co-ordination in infrastructure planning and potential to get better integration between where people work and live. And, to ensure that places recognise how they relate to neighbouring areas, including those with a North / South or cross border perspective.

We have already seen the transformations along the Belfast-Dublin corridor. Planned investments will open up enormous opportunities for economic development between Belfast and Derry and between Derry and Dublin. It will mean improved connections along these corridors and also to our regional gateways. This will be essential to allow us to compete nationally and internationally.

Earlier today you will have heard Jim McKinnon telling you about the Scottish spatial planning experience. I have had the opportunity to meet with my Ministerial counterpart in Scotland and share views and experience about transport links between us and how they contribute to the competitiveness of the whole of the island of Ireland, and indeed to Scotland. It will be useful to extend this dialogue to Wales and English Regions in the future.

I am also fully aware of the need to take account of structures emerging as part of the Review of Public Administration. It is clear that the relationships with local planning and development management must be structured in a way which is efficient and effective and deliver!

In dealing with all these issues, the RDS must set out a clear high level vision for the North as a place, but also recognise the need for all-Island collaboration particularly in terms of spatial planning. It will have a strategic focus. And it must be seen to enable change rather than constrain it.

These Annual Conferences provide us with opportunities to make milestones and mark progress. The knowledge that we all have to give account of what has been achieved, or not, is a spur for progress. And the opportunity to bring elected members and experts face to face is a valuable reality check.

The Framework documents which our two Departments have prepared have drawn heavily on advice and information from ICLRD. The structured approach of ICLRD to its research, carefully gathering views from stakeholders and gathering bottom –up evidence, has given us confidence that our ideas are capable of meeting needs and producing results. I am indebted to ICLRD for their continuing support and advice.

In closing can I thank you all for your interest in spatial planning and ask for your continuing support as we tease out the many strands of our work in the coming months.