

Achieving Balanced Regional Development: Dynamic Regions, Spatial Strategies and Collaboration. Letterkenny (Ireland), 22-23 January 2009

Report by Cliff Hague

The State of the Nations

The need for dynamic “real time” data to underpin the making of spatial strategies was emphasised at an important all-Ireland conference in Letterkenny. Speakers from both sides of the Irish border together with Steve Quartermain (Chief Planner at CLG), Jim Mackinnon (Director of Built Environment for the Scottish Government) and Grant Duncan (who leads work for the Welsh Spatial Plan) gathered along with international experts to provide a “state of the art” review of spatial planning in the British Isles.

The meeting revealed some of the necessary differences between approaches. Steve Quartermain primarily spoke about the process of moving towards single regional strategies in the English regions. He stressed the need for spatial planning to be more holistic than land use planning. “The aim is to energise the regions” he said, while also calling for a stronger focus on delivery. Steve also reminded the audience of the importance of quality of place as a planning outcome.

Grant Duncan noted that the preparation of the Welsh Spatial Plan, and its update in 2008, was undertaken by a small team reporting to Wales’s Minister of Finance, not the Planning minister. Better co-ordination of territorial and sectoral policies was important. The challenge is how to link areas like the deprived South Wales valleys to the economic driver that is Cardiff. In this work an evidence base is crucial – though beware “paralysis by analysis” quipped Grant.

Jim Mackinnon, in presenting Scotland’s National Planning Framework, pointed out that it has a strong economic focus, while also addressing challenges posed by climate change, waste, renewable energy and rural population decline which was contributing to Scotland’s demographic “middle aged spread”. He also highlighted the way that the Framework concentrates on a select list of strategic infrastructure investments. Following widespread consultation with stakeholders during the preparation of the Framework, the final document has now been passed to the Scottish Parliament for a period of 60 days of scrutiny.

Jim declared himself “impressed” by Ireland’s National Spatial Strategy. Niall Cousin, Senior Planning Advisor in the Irish Department of the Environment, described how it has enabled a better alignment of national, regional and local planning, and also helped shaped some major spending by other departments of government. Dramatic improvements had been achieved in laying 50kms of new rail tracks in the Western Rail Corridor. Ireland’s Strategy is being updated, and this involves closer integration with the Northern Ireland Regional Development Strategy. A common chapter is planned for both documents.

The practical reality of cross-border planning was demonstrated in contributions about the spatial planning approaches for the Newry-Dundalk Gateway and the Derry-Letterkenny Gateway. In addition there were presentations on the Atlantic Gateway (based on Shannon) and the Cork Gateway.

Not surprisingly, Francois Vigier, founder of the Institute for International Development, in his summing up of the conference declared himself to be “astounded” by how much joint planning is going on in the island of Ireland. He noted that there was a sense of urgency about the need for a stronger evidence base. “We tend to have to start with data collected for other purposes and defined by outdated administrative boundaries”, he reflected, backing calls made by others for a short list of key territorial indicators that could be used internationally within Europe.

The conference was organised by the International Centre for Local and Regional Development. ICLRD is itself an outstanding example of innovative cross-border and practice-research cooperation, which also includes partners from the USA. Further details of the conference can be found on the ICLRD website at www.iclrd.org