

**Speech by Minister Conor Murphy, MP MLA
Department for Regional Development**

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**CROSS BORDER SPATIAL PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT:
FOSTERING CO-OPERATION**

Go raibh mhaith agaibh a chairde agus as an cuireadh le bheith anseo libh ar mhaidin.

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am delighted to have been asked to speak at this important Conference on cross border spatial planning. I would like to congratulate and thank the International Centre for Local and Regional Development for their continuing commitment and energy in bringing us all together today to ensure that the importance of this area of co-operation remains uppermost in our minds. I am sure that the conclusions of the Conference will be most helpful to both governments, local authorities, businesses, academics and others as they continue to take forward cross border spatial planning.

It is just over a year since Dick Roche was joined by a senior official from my Department to launch the ICLRDC Collaborative Spatial Planning Research Report, which has provided the basis for work on cross border spatial planning in Ireland. A great deal has happened since then, for example, I am now here as the Minister responsible for regional development in the north of Ireland.

This responsibility brings many challenges as the people across this island look forward to a more positive shared future. But it also brings opportunities to shape new ways of thinking and working.

Many significant changes have been taking place over the last 12 months. Following devolution, the Executive in the north have given priority to preparing a Programme for Government.

The Programme for Government sets out plans to create 6,500 new jobs by 2011 with 600 companies becoming exporters for the first time in the same period.

The Draft Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland will see £5.6 billion spent on infrastructure projects in the next three years – that's 25% more than in the last three years of Direct Rule.

Our over-arching aim is to focus and harness economic development, regeneration and prosperity within a just, peaceful and stable society. We will do this by addressing head-on, decades of underinvestment, regional imbalance and inequality so everyone can enjoy a better quality of life now and in the future.

We are determined to make sure that we continue to make a difference as we all move forward together. For example we will be delivering major works at more than 100 schools, including eight special schools, to make sure our children are taught in first class facilities. We will also be ensuring that young families have access to social and affordable housing and that our roads and water infrastructure is brought up to 21st century standards

To support our priorities and help realise our goal of a better future we have developed a framework of 23 Public Service Agreements (PSAs) which address key cross-cutting issues and challenges. The PSAs therefore cut across departmental boundaries and many of the outcomes are interdependent.

We have also seen the recent creation of a single energy market within the island, and the decision contained in the review of the National Development Plan to make significant strategic investments in the north. These investments will have the effect of improving communications across the whole island.

For this island that we all share is an island undergoing huge changes. Let me illustrate the scale of the challenge that lies before us with a few examples looked at from an island perspective.

- In 20 years time there will likely be a further 1.5 million population north and south with a consequential demand for homes, jobs, schools, and hospitals.
- Around 41% of people in the north live in rural areas. In the south it is around 52%. Traditional agriculture is declining and with it employment and income.
- While the pattern of settlements is very different north and south there is increasing reliance on urban areas for employment opportunities. Where these opportunities are not accessible rural communities will come under further pressure and need support.
- The modern way of life depends upon travel. Between 2000 and 2005 there were an extra 600,000 motor vehicles on our roads.
- The car is the main method of travel with 60% using it to travel to work.
- In the same period freight moving through our ports increased by 10 million tonnes.
- Travel through our airports showed similar scale increases.
- Our economies continue to grow but in this instance more strongly in the south than the north. We are no longer amongst the poorer countries in Europe.
- Employment rates north and south exceed EU averages. There are strong similarities north and south in the pattern of employment. Construction and production industries, wholesale and retail trade, education and health services account for around 60% of all employment.
- In the south there is a stronger service sector than the north which has a much higher rate of public sector employment.
- However we share environmental challenges. We are producing an increasing amount of greenhouse gases. These increases are in line with the increase in our population which would suggest that in the future, if we are to reduce our carbon footprint, we must find ways to reduce individual footprints.

To summarise. There are considerable growth challenges north and south but there are many similarities in the trends that we measure. Solutions will require very positive attitudes, long term planning and co-ordinated actions if we are to achieve long term economic success coupled with high quality of life.

The decision to commence work on a cross border collaborative spatial framework was made before I took office, but it is one that I fully endorse and support.

Cross border co-operation is something close to my heart. Having lived in a community divided by a border all my life, I understand its consequences. I understand how many border communities have been isolated and marginalised. I understand how decisions taken in Dublin and Belfast can have unintended consequences in border areas.

And so I understand and clearly see the benefits of co-operation. Co-operation in the provision of infrastructure and services to our citizens. Working together we can provide better health care, better prepare our young people for work, and better protect and manage our environment.

The work of preparing the draft framework has had to take account of all the changes north and south. Officials have been pressing on with the important preparatory work needed to put together a framework capable of being shared north and south. There are many different strands to be considered. Although we share similar development issues, we have different ways of dealing with them. Different central and local government institutions, different statutory procedures, different budgetary and investment processes.

Despite this a draft Framework has been prepared with the advice of our various Departments. In the north I will shortly be considering its implications with Executive Colleagues and with the Assembly.

This draft raises some difficult questions, for example, how to align the statutory planning processes north and south. I am confident that answers will emerge through continuing dialogue. But working to prepare the draft has also reminded us of the need to better understand the changing dynamics of growth in a modern Ireland. And, it has encouraged us to review existing lines of co-operation to be sure that they are effective and appropriate.

The need to take the draft through the Government process north and south does not mean inactivity. We continue to build on the work to date, updating it with the latest information and developments. Finalising this Framework will take just a little longer, as we ensure that we have properly taken into account our long-term needs and that there is a good fit with the processes driving change.

Both the Regional Development Strategy and the National Spatial Strategy will be reviewed in the next two or three years. And, in the north, Arlene Foster has announced a root and branch review of the planning system, with an emphasis on early action to streamline and focus the process.

With this in mind, it is vital that we maintain a rapid pace to put in place a shared cross border spatial planning framework. I look forward to engaging with Minister Gormley on this, and, on an ongoing basis to ensure that that the Framework, and the process to support it, remains fit for purpose.

There have been early wins in this process. Later today there will be the launch of the “Atlas of the Island of Ireland” This atlas provides a fascinating insight into the rapidly changing nature of the space that we share. But, it is merely the visible evidence of important work going on in our universities and research institutions to measure change and provide advice on how we can manage change in a beneficial way. This work provides an essential contribution to the spatial planning process and must continue to be supported.

I know that others have not sat still. The North West Region Cross Border Group commissioned a study to determine how different data sources north and south can be used to inform cross border development decisions. Their conclusion was that this apparently simple process is far from simple in practice. This conclusion is mirrored in work that Professor Rob Kitchin will describe later today.

I have also been encouraged by the work of elected members in Newry and Mourne District, and in County Louth and Dundalk Town who have committed to the challenge of developing a twinned gateway centred on Newry and Dundalk in line with the objectives in our two

spatial plans. I have had the privilege of meeting with these members to discuss their proposals and to offer my support and advice.

I have also had the opportunity to meet with elected members of other border councils, and I know that there is great enthusiasm for practical cooperation. There is much that enthusiastic people can do to help themselves. The Irish Central Border Area Network are most proactive in this area and are presently settling a programme, supported by EU INTEREG, to drive forward practical cross border partnership supported by local cross border spatial planning frameworks.

There is more reason to be optimistic. I have already referred to the important decision to use National Development Plan resources to invest in road communications in the north. Better communication will strengthen trade and economic links between us north and south, east and west. It will be good for everybody, but it will also provide opportunity for local cross border initiatives. I know that Rural West Councils have already identified this opportunity.

Also in the news over the Christmas period, is the Newry/Dundalk initiative for a Geopark based around the Cooley, Gullion and Mourne Mountains. I am sure that we all know what a remarkable landscape these mountains provide, but not all will know about the many geologically unique features they contain. Geoparks are now internationally recognised as an excellent way to exploit these features as visitor attractions, but in a controlled way, which protects these important natural assets.

To conclude, I have been pleased to assure you that work on a cross border spatial planning framework continues and is well advanced. There have been many changes in the north over the last year that has had to be reflected in the framework. The level of cooperation between my Department and that of Minister Gormley's has been considerable, and I thank him for his continuing support. This work will continue. This work could not have progressed without the support of ICLRD and its academic partners. I thank them wholeheartedly. And we must be strongly encouraged by local initiatives, which have recognised the potential created by enhanced levels of co-operation north and south and decided to create local competitive advantage.

Finally, I encourage all of you present to take home the message that cross border spatial planning matters in many ways. You will learn more about these opportunities today. Everyone has their part to play, and often these parts need no formal framework to be effective.

May I wish you a Happy New Year.

Go raibh mile mhaith agaibh go leor