

**Speech by Minister Batt O’Keeffe, TD
Minister for Housing, Urban Renewal and Developing Areas**

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Introduction

- I’d like to thank you for the invitation. I’m delighted to have the opportunity and to be part, with my counterpart Conor Murphy, in officially opening this conference.

- This is a very high-profile audience. I met some of you last evening. We’ve had engaging discussions on the various issues, and I’m delighted that so many of you have shown the interest, have taken the time to participate with us in what is an extremely healthy and engaging debate in relation to spatial strategy.

- I think back to twelve months ago to your last conference. We now have a new partnership in Government in the South. Here you have the restoration of devolved Government in the North and while the political landscape may have changed so much, I think it’s important that I would reiterate that our government and indeed our counterparts in the North, we remain steadfast in our belief and indeed in our commitment to realizing the full extent of the work that has already been undertaken by the ICLR, by *InterTradeIreland* and of course all of the key players here in the North and South.

- I want to put the prophets of doom aside for a minute. I think we should have a realistic and objective look at what our landscape is and where our economies are at. Despite the relative slow-downs that have taken place in the global and indeed in the Irish economies, the entire island is still recording huge levels of population growth. Of course that’s driven primarily by the high inward migration that is evidenced in the North and South. We had last year, as per the census in the South, a 100,000 increase in population in the Republic itself, and there are strong demographic growth signs here in the North as well. And we are going to continue to face huge challenges to plan, and indeed to accommodate, this growth north and south.

- There has of course been some levelling off on recent demand trends, and we are now attaining far more sustainable levels. And that presents us with an opportunity to take stock and of course presents us with a challenge as to how we are going to manage future growth and how we are going to meet the projected needs of a population growth in this island of over 7 million people by the year 2020.
- Just to give you an idea, in the South, our indications are that we are going to need 60,000 residential units on an annual basis over the next nine years. That's why there is a major commitment to social and affordable housing. And even though there has been a downward trend in terms of the finances available to the Exchequer, our commitment to the NDP in terms of housing growth social and affordable continues and that front has not in any way been diminished because of the scarce resources that are now part and parcel of the Southern economy.
- This is why all of us are going to have to share a spatial vision for our entire island. This is why spatial planning is absolutely crucial in ensuring a balanced regional development throughout the island.

NSS prioritisation in regional investment

- Early in 2007, the Irish Government published its seven-year National Development Plan, and it put in place over €185 billion to be invested right up to the year 2013. The Government has put an emphasis on the National Spatial Strategy, has put it centre stage, and has centred its future investment decisions by setting the NSS as the main plank on which to base all of our decisions.
- Moreover, many of our sectoral programmes are now prioritising investment in the nine NSS gateways and nine hubs. And what I want to do is to ensure that we build critical mass in these cities and in these towns. And crucially, from your point of view, for the first time, the Plan acknowledges the need to take account of the North-South dimension in the policies and the programmes that are part of the plan itself.
- But of course, in terms of realising and achieving balanced growth, it is more than just achieving economic prosperity and raising GDP – it's all about improving the quality of

life, improving the place where we live, ensuring that we have proper infrastructure in place, whether it's our schools, whether it's our community facilities, whether it's our open spaces, and the opportunities we give for economic growth that is in keeping with a healthy and a lively environment.

Developing Areas

- We obviously look back at the major growth that has taken place within the South. We look at the developing areas and we ask ourselves this question: that at the end of the cycle of the Celtic tiger, have we made some mistakes in terms of our planning? And of course we have in the South.
- This year alone we are going to have to build 32 primary schools in the greater Dublin region, and we have to have it in place by September 2008, “fire-brigade” action. And that begs the questions, where was the coordination? Where was the joined-up thinking? And this is something that all of us are going to have to address henceforth in relation to the burgeoning towns and indeed cities within our realm.
- Having taken over the portfolio of housing and developing areas [Minister O’Keefe], the Taoiseach has indicated quite clearly that he never wants to witness again the lack of joined-up thinking within environment and indeed among the main players, interdepartmental, and of course all of those units that are part and parcel of proper planning within the system itself. We within our department already have put in place a key strategy team based at Assistant Secretary-General level. Whether it's planning, whether it's housing whether its water, sewage, all of the services, we have now put together a key Development Area Team within the department itself at the highest level to ensure that there is coordination. We have now taken that into the local authorities, into the city and the county managers, and we are concentrating on the gateways and indeed the hubs to ensure that going forward we will ensure proper growth procedure.
- We also are then looking at all of the North-South links, and I think I will be talking to Conor Murphy further on how, in terms of developing areas, we can learn from our experiences and how we can put our expertise that is available right throughout the

country and in this room as to how we might go forward to ensure that we do establish proper planning and spatial policy right into the future.

Collaborative Spatial Framework

- I'd like to come to the collaborative framework, because that obviously is of extreme importance to us, North and South. And indeed along the border corridor, many of the local authorities are striving to do their best for the people that they have served. It has not been easy for those local authorities. They have borne the brunt of the troubles. They have evidenced at first hand what divisions can do and the lack of progress that can be made. In the new Ireland, we need urgently to join up the pieces.
- This is exactly what collaborative framework is all about, and what we are proposing is absolutely not rocket science. Joined-up thinking on roads, on shared municipal services, on environmental challenges, on infrastructure and complementary areas, make absolute sense for all of us. And for our part, we want to be in complete partnership, Conor, with you here in the North to ensure that that's going to happen. And we are prepared to put money into that commitment, and as you already know, on the NDP we have committed 570 million to the construction of the Dublin-Derry-Letterkenny Road, and 35 million has already been committed to the restoration of sections of the Ulster Canal.
- It is important as well that this collaborative framework would be brought to a conclusion, and there has been a high level of cooperation within our departments, and I'm hoping, Conor, that this summer we will be in a position to ensure that that framework document is in fact published. And I hope at that stage that we can agree to give an opportunity for you, the stakeholders to give your views and give your input, and ensure that we have a document that is not ambiguous but is certainly ambitious enough to ensure that we have proper road signs in terms of our spatial planning.
- The Regional Development Strategy is obviously going to come in for review as well this year. And I think that is absolutely necessary if we are going to meet all of the new challenges, because we are going to have to be vigilant in terms of looking forward and going forward and planning the road ahead.

- I want to say to Conor that our respective officials will ensure and you will have our cooperation and you will have our whole-hearted support in any revisions that take place and in any of the framework that we want to put in train as well.

Gateway Innovation Fund

- I want to also mention the fact that in terms of investment decisions and in terms of spatial vision, we have established a Gateway Innovation Fund. We have put in place €300 million of a fund in terms of the strategic collaboration between the key players; a healthy sum of money.
- And in the context of border gateways of Letterkenny and Dundalk, we want to ensure that the symbiotic relationship that exists can be noticed and indeed can be brought to bear, and to say to you that the gateways have now made their submissions, made their plans available to us, and all plans are being evaluated at the present time, and we're hoping that we will be in a position to make decisions within the next two months.

All-Island Atlas

- Before I conclude, I'd like briefly to mention the publication of the All-Island Atlas, which will take place later this afternoon. I unfortunately have a meeting in Dublin at lunchtime and will not be around for the launch of the book, and I regret and apologize very much for that, But I think that you will understand that my notice to speak at the meeting was pretty short-notice as well so I'll be forgiven.
- But I got fortunate enough to get a copy of the atlas; it's one of the perks of the job, and from our point of view in the department, it is an outstanding document, and it is a document that we have been very proud to be associated with. Because I think, into the future, all planning will have to be based on relevant data, up-to-date data, concise data, and this is exactly the benchmarking that this publication provides for us to ensure that there is proper alignment of thinking and data, in terms of analysing the trends as they take place.

Conclusion

- Planning into the future is not a quick fix and it's not a process that can change matters overnight. However, by setting ourselves on the right road in terms of the spatial planning policy, I think that we can walk towards achievable and very much common goals.

- I think for all of us, at this juncture in Irish history, that history is going to judge us on the decisions that we make now and the courage that we show and the cooperation that is in existence, and indeed the comradery that is part and parcel of all ongoing deliberations.
- It is important as well that into the future, we look at the communities that we are going to be responsible for. We are going to have to ask ourselves the question, are we going to develop sustainable communities into the future? Are we going to develop a community that can live with itself in peace, a community that is self-enriching within itself, a community that will take pride of place?
- That is the ideal that we have. This is the policy that we are working towards. And this is why it is incumbent on all of us to give our commitment, to give of our expertise, and to give of our vision, and indeed of our lives to ensure that we do leave behind us an Ireland that has been enriched by the spatial planning policy that we put in place and by the outstanding and the open mindset that all of us hope will be part and parcel of a future Ireland.