

INTRODUCTION



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This third edition of *Borderlands: The Journal of Spatial Planning*, continues the ICLRD's tradition of linking policy, practice and research. The following articles by academics and practitioners – and influencers of policy – address emerging issues in cross-border and inter-jurisdictional cooperation; with a particular focus being placed on local and regional development.

As local government reform agendas continue to 'trundle forwards' in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland, we continue to be presented with new challenges and opportunities – largely as a result of the continuing economic crisis. These include how local authorities, communities and central government policy-makers bring together different disciplines to ensure clear connections are made between community, work and place.

Largely originating out of the Peace Process, North-South cooperation, especially within the Irish Border Region, is increasingly moving towards long-term, sustainable collaboration. Across both jurisdictions, we face similar challenges and dilemmas while, at the same time, sharing natural resources and similar assets. We each are also trying to create an economic environment where business, especially small and medium enterprises, can thrive. Developing a shared vision and practical measures to take advantage of such common opportunities is beginning to make sense to those responsible

for delivering services in the Irish Border Region, particularly within local government.

But local government in both jurisdictions is facing into real, and challenging, reform; the first major operational and structural changes since the 1970s – if not longer in some spheres. In Ireland, *Putting People First*, which was launched by the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government in 2012, aims to substantially reduce the number of elected officials and number of local and regional councils, while at the same time strengthen the planning system, pursue a greater efficiency agenda and make the political funding system more transparent. The timeline for the delivery of many of these reforms are the local elections in 2014; approximately an 18 month window. This is a significant challenge given the legislative requirements, the new structures to be operationalised, and the mechanisms needed for collection of an increased number of local taxes – all at a time when local and central government is haemorrhaging expertise.

In Northern Ireland, after the long awaited Review of Public Administration (RPA) becomes operational in 2015, the eleven new local councils will have a range of new responsibilities in economic development, land-use planning and regeneration. Taking up these new responsibilities, and actively looking outward for strategic opportunities with neighbours in the Border Region – both on an intra- and cross-jurisdictional basis – has the potential to not only improve on service delivery and economic development opportunities, but also on joint efforts to protect and manage shared environmental resources such as cross-border river basins.

Interestingly, despite the fast-approaching deadline for reforms in both jurisdictions, concerns remain at central government level as to whether local

government has the capacity to take on new services – and deliver on this changed agenda. In Ireland, for example, few Central Government Departments noted any services that they would consider / be willing to decentralise to local government. This begs the question as to whether this time of reform will turn out to be a missed opportunity in terms of the breadth and range of services given over to local government – unquestionably a debate that will need to be revisited.

And yet, if local government reforms go ahead as scheduled, local government across both jurisdictions in the Irish Border Region will share common responsibilities – for the first time since the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement – and this will present increased opportunities to work together. The potential for this enhanced practical cooperation will also coincide with the new round of EU Programmes expected to commence in 2014. Given the importance of territorial cooperation in setting out EU funding priorities, joined-up approaches that promote ‘territorial cohesion’, and which are ‘place-based’, have the potential to leverage much needed external funding. This is of real importance given the ongoing cuts to public funding – and the implications of this for local service delivery.

The reform agendas will undoubtedly impact on how services are delivered by local government. And with a growing emphasis being placed on effectiveness and efficiency / expediency in service delivery, the focus must turn to identifying common solutions that will enable Central, Regional and Local Government, together with public bodies and communities, to meet emerging challenges. Government, North and South, faces massive change agendas at all levels – and now is the time for the tools needed to be agreed and put in place.

This raises the question of capacity within local government across the island of Ireland – not only in terms of actual delivery but also in ‘big’ thinking / strategic planning. Despite the ‘perceived’ pulling-back of both Governments from North-South issues,

in the context of both administrations on the island of Ireland, central government will continue to play a strong role in shaping the enabling environment and sending the right signals for cooperation in the Irish Border Region. In other words, Central Government Departments, as well as EU funded programmes, can make significant contributions to supporting local initiatives. For local government, this means moving with the times, and realising that we are in a new phase of social and economic development which requires new ways of working; while for Central Government it means – or at least should mean – embracing the principle of subsidiarity and entrusting a wider range of functions to local - and regional - government to deliver.

Operationalising a *locally owned - centrally supported* cooperation model would bring significant benefits to the Irish Border Region. It will require new ways of working and models of cooperation among local authorities, and a better alignment with programmes for government. Even in a period of severe fiscal constraints, central government departments in Dublin and Belfast can provide support to regional initiatives by jointly clarifying key priorities for cooperation. For example, the forthcoming publication of the updated *Framework for Co-operation: Spatial Strategies in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland*, which even in its draft form has provided de facto guidance on North-South cooperation in spatial planning, will strengthen possibilities for better coordination among local authorities in the Irish Border Region in the areas of: evidence-based planning, connectivity and infrastructure planning, supporting cross-border ‘gateways’ and strategic partnerships, and protection of regionally significant natural and built environments.

The ICLRD will continue to support these initiatives in the coming two years through our CroSPiAN II Programme. Funded by INTERREG IVA through the Special EU Programmes Body, it brings an interdisciplinary approach to applied research and training which, in turn, will bridge the policy-

practice divide, build the capacity of local authorities to develop joined-up programmes that result in practical solutions and benefits, and explore the opportunities within a shared services agenda. We will also continue to build the Journal as a resource for policy-makers, practitioners and academics looking for new ideas, lessons and dynamic ways of working.

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