



Good Planning Key to Future Success

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Creating a *sustainable*, successful society and economy requires a well thought out, comprehensive planning system that works to maximise efficiencies, returns and quality of life, balanced against fairness and social justice, and minimises wastage, inconvenience and deterioration of services. Effective planning works both sectorally (e.g., economic, health, transport) *and* spatially (local, regional, urban and rural), blending and balancing the needs of different social and economic sectors within and across areas and scales. Good, strategic planning, along with associated targeted investment, is vital to ensure short and, in particular, long term solutions to the present economic crisis. It will work to position both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland favourably to benefit from a global economic recovery when it occurs.

Over the past twenty five years planning in the Republic of Ireland has been both progressive and regressive. Planning was transformed from the mid-1980s onward by the rolling out of a new form of entrepreneurial planning that designated certain zones for regeneration using tax exemptions and public-private partnerships as a mechanism to encourage and drive development. The new approach targeted very select, flagship sites such as the Irish Financial Services Centre (IFSC) that would seek to attract specific industries, notably those of the service sector. Similarly, the Industrial Development Agency (IDA) was charged with encouraging inward investment by skilled, manufacturing companies to selected, ready-made and serviced sites, accompanied by grants and other incentives. As a result, planning became more pragmatic, flexible and results-orientated, focusing on areas that were perceived to have the highest potential for success. This approach, while not free of problems, was very successful in providing the planning conditions conducive to encouraging inward investment, gentrification, and speculative property development that drove the Celtic Tiger economy. Planning thus became more responsive to creating the environmental and spatial conditions necessary to attract inward investment.

From the late-1990s this was complemented by a spatial planning approach driven in part by the new territorial strategy devised for Europe by the *European Spatial Development Perspective*¹. This led to the formulation of the *Regional Development Strategy*² (RDS) in the North and the *National Spatial Strategy*³ in the Republic (NSS). The RDS and NSS aim to achieve a better balance of social, economic and physical development across the island of Ireland (including inter-jurisdictionally), supported by more co-ordinated and effective planning at the regional and local level through, for example, Local Development Plans and, in the case of the Republic, Regional Planning Guidelines (RPGs). In order to drive development in the regions, the NSS proposed that areas of sufficient scale and critical mass be built up through a network of urban gateways and hubs that links Ireland more effectively into a European and global economy. Effectively the NSS is designed to build connections between urban centres and the creation of new relationships between urban and rural areas to capitalise upon the potential of all regions to contribute to sustainable development into the long term.

¹ Published in 1999.

² Published in 2001.

³ Published in 2002.

Despite these initiatives, the public perception of planning in the Republic is that it is at best weak and at worst corrupt, and that the economic successes of the Celtic Tiger happened in spite of planning decisions and provisions rather than because of them. While the latter assertion can be debated, there is plenty of evidence – both from the press and anecdotally – that planning has been performing sub-optimally. There are many reasons for this including cronyism, too many different institutional bodies and vested parties being involved in the planning process (there are 88 local planning authorities in the Republic plus government departments and semi-state agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the National Roads Authority (NRA)), a reluctance to prosecute planning offenders, a high turnover of planners from the public sector to private sector developers, and a failure of elected parties to deliver on political promises. The result has been widespread, inappropriate development projects consisting of poor quality housing with weak infrastructure and services (such as no or low public transport provision, a lack of schools, health services and shops), an oversupply of one-off housing and residential zoning, and disinvestment in public housing. In addition, the timing of the NSS was unfortunate as it missed the opportunity to be tied to the National Development Plan (NDP) 2000-2006 funding stream and was undermined by the decentralisation plan that ignored its recommendations. It now underpins the NDP 2007-2013, although that plan is being massively revised in the face of budget cuts. In addition, new proposed planning legislation in the Republic seeks to address many of the above issues through establishing a much tighter ‘fit’ between the NSS, the RPGs and County Development Plans.

The Independent Report to the Minister of the Environment on *Planning Reform in Northern Ireland* (Lloyd, 2008⁴) concluded that in general the planning system has served its purpose well in ensuring that land and property development has taken place in an orderly and appropriate manner, and resolving most economic, social and environmental tensions to the benefit of the public interest. Nevertheless the planning system is viewed by many as outdated and restrictive; particularly by those bodies and influencers charged with delivering economic investment. Planning in Northern Ireland has remained essentially unchanged since its introduction in 1973 and is a regulatory system based on 1960s practices that have long since disappeared in the rest of the U.K. In addition the impact of the Northern Ireland conflict (the Troubles) depressed both development and investment, and the property boom of the past decade highlighted weaknesses in the planning system.

However, the dramatic changes that the planning systems of both jurisdictions has to deal with has made modernisation an imperative in the light of economic development, climate change, sustainable development, growing social and community concerns relating to issues of affordable housing and infrastructure provision. It is in the complexity and inter-connectedness of these issues often varying across political agendas that the planning system seeks to operate and reconcile differences. While the achievement of sustainable development is one objective included in the ongoing discussion on planning and governance reform, the need to manage and mitigate the adverse impacts of climate change is not recognised as a driver of reform. Nevertheless the planning system must be sufficiently flexible in its approach to reconcile the competing economic, social and environmental demands

⁴ Lloyd, M.G. (2008). *Planning Reform in Northern Ireland*. Independent Report to the Minister for the Environment, April 2008, Department of Civic Design, University of Liverpool.

placed on it by society where living standards are constantly increasing. There must be sufficient vision to plan for these competing uses over the next decade and to adjust targets as demand and market pressures increase.

A key challenge for the Northern Ireland planning system is continuing to meet the changing needs of the Northern Irish economy; given that this has been placed as the priority in the Programme for Government, as well as the major social changes that are taking place. There is an urgent need to up-date all development plans, under the statutory plan-led system, and ensure they are compatible with the RDS which is currently being revised. Establishing a stronger link between economic growth and regional planning is a crucial objective for the Northern Ireland planning system going forward. It is recognised that the RDS did not take sufficient account of the changes produced by economic growth which in turn created tensions between demand pressures and environmental protection.

A strong and transparent RDS is vital to the delivery of economic growth. The revised RDS needs to be published as soon as possible in order to shape key elements of regional planning such as the Regional Transportation Strategy which is being consulted on in advance of the publication of the RDS. A more integrated approach to transportation is required in land-use planning policies in order to avoid the continuing population dispersion with its high economic, social and environmental costs as evidenced by long commutes, high levels of car dependency and congestion.

The ongoing Review of Public Administration (RPA) in Northern Ireland will see the transfer of most routine planning decisions to new sub-regional councils; whereas most regionally significant decisions will remain with central government. The outworking of the RPA is critical to the effective delivery of land-use planning and the new working relationships that will evolve between the councils and the central government departments. The Independent Review identified a reservoir of goodwill for the reform of the planning system but this desire for positive change needs to be capitalised upon and nurtured so that key stakeholders are not demotivated; thereby lessening the impact of the reform process.

While an economic recovery might happen regardless of planning decisions, we would argue that its *chances of long term, sustainable success are greatly increased through a strategically aware and robust planning system*. This means, on the one hand reform of the planning systems and on the other the implementation of the NSS and RDS and investment in sectoral and spatial planning initiatives. If these two reforms take place then planning will help create balanced regional development by ensuring equal access to infrastructure and resources necessary to ensure that businesses are not disadvantaged by locating beyond the major cities; regenerate areas blighted by social issues; enable the rolling out of the green economy; implement a sustainable/low carbon transport infrastructure that promotes economic development; and put the housing and commercial property sectors back on an even keel. Moreover, planning on a cross-border basis, where there is a matching up of investment on key infrastructure projects and the sharing of services, will lead to new opportunities and cost savings and efficiencies.

While reform of the financial system and cutbacks in public spending will help steady the boat, the long term future needs to be driven by a strategic, sustainable,

robust planning system that formulates and implements investment decisions that will pay back handsomely into the future. Planning needs to be seen and positioned at the forefront of providing long term solutions to our present economic predicament. It has to become a central plank of any strategy for recovery, not seen as a distraction or a hindrance. For the island of Ireland this means, in particular, reform of the planning system and pushing ahead with the NSS and RDS initiatives.