

CLLR. JOE LEONARD, SLIGO COUNTY COUNCIL: ISSUES SHAPING PLANNING

It struck me in preparing a few words that the conference title, “Planning Reform on the Island of Ireland: from Policy to PRACTICE” gives us some clues about the nature of the problem. “Planning Reform”, like the poor, you always have with you (Matthew 26:11). As for the “Island of Ireland”, the not insignificant matters of insularity, economic and community divisions, a tortured political history (not to mention the Border and jurisdictional issues), all complicate the picture. But “Policy to PRACTICE”, with “practice” in bold capitals, suggests to me, at least, that there appears to be too much planning policy but too little planning practice. Let me rephrase that, translating planning policy into effective planning practice must surely be the urgent challenge and perhaps we should be concerning ourselves today primarily with the notion of “best practice”. i.e. identifying and applying best practice and, ultimately, delivering best planning implementation. And this is where the local councillor comes in!

Bearing in mind that 15 minutes, unless you are Andy Warhol, gives me no time at all to explore these important issues in detail, I would like to suggest the following points:

1. I am a local councillor because I genuinely believe in local democracy. I also believe in planning as an agent of change and community participation in the development process. And developing the link between planning policy and planning implementation and embedding communities at the heart of this process has been and continues to be a tough business.
2. Question, “Why are communities not de facto at the heart of the process?” Answer, they are alienated. They are alienated from a planning process that tags a National Spatial Strategy onto a National Development Plan instead of the other way around. They are alienated from Decentralisation Strategies based on non-planning principles, stop-start Infrastructure Development Programmes, Planning Corruption Tribunals and impenetrable planning jargon: the jargon that dreams up “nucleated settlements”, “gateways and hubs”, “Section 140 procedures”, “sustainable (when what is meant is simply well-planned) development”, ad nauseam.

We the Councillors by vote adopt the County Development Plan but if the plan was subject of a plebiscite, if the people we represent were given an opportunity to vote

on the plan it would most certainly be comprehensively rejected. In fact it would hardly register enough support to outscore the margin of error in a Millward Brown opinion poll.

Ordinary people, in an era of austerity, unemployment, economic uncertainty and God Knows What other problems do not need to be alienated from a planning system and planning processes that appear to be overly complex, bureaucratic, exclusive and increasingly irrelevant. Ironically, when banks enjoyed “light-touch regulation”, planning became so over-regulated that we need a degree in Planese to start to understand what’s going on!

To end this rant, I simply want to state that planning and its reform are highly complex issues that impact the daily lives of ordinary people in their communities. An agreed, simplified vocabulary along with simplified codes and procedures, all grounded in the guiding principle of involving fully our local communities might be a useful starting point. So-called experts on planning reform and administration constantly talk about “community buy-in” to planning initiatives and, no doubt, community acceptance is a worthwhile objective. My point today, however, is that communities cannot be expected to buy-in, or accept or endorse planning policies that they simply do not understand. I can illustrate this further with a specific example from recent experience in Sligo.

EXAMPLE 1

Two elderly bachelor brothers, small farmers living and working the family holding all their lives. Their house, a 3 roomed well maintained thatched cottage, is ideal for a John Hind photograph.

Each new County Development Plan had a proposal to include this house in the record of Protected Structures, Each time the Councillors by majority vote deleted this and many others from the list believing the financial consequences are an unfair burden on the owners. Eventually the ravages of time take their toll and the roof timbers give way and the brothers for the first time come in contact with Sligo County Council, its Development Plan and the myriad of interactions inherent in progressing a planning application. This is a process that will take at least 12 months in its preplanning stage, among the issues the brothers have to deal with is the preferred option of the planners for a house that has no windows at the front in order to

preserve what they believe to be a courtyard at the rear of the house, but worse than that for the brothers is the belief by the Heritage Officer that there may have been bats in the roof space. The brothers believing that they or the generations before them never had evidence of bats in the building offered to provide bat boxes believing that if after a report by a bat inspector they found that bats were present this would be the recommended procedure thereby Speeding up the process and saving them the cost of the bat survey after having already paid for a site assessment test. Meanwhile the brothers have a serious housing need and continue to live in the house with a partially collapsed roof .

Each of the specialists that they come in contact with are experts in their area, they are competent and carry out their function appropriately but their position in the process doesn't allow for the flexibility required to make a common sense decision. Meanwhile the two old boys have to continue their star gazing through a hole in the roof.

3. I think the ICLRD should be commended for their background research work on these issues. I would refer all here today to the Borderlands publication of January 2011, particularly the articles entitled "Planning and Governance Reform" and "Sustainable Communities: Planning for Integration in Fractured Places".....and no, they weren't talking about Fracking! These articles give an excellent summary of emerging planning issues, notably the need for stronger local government North and South to counter democratic deficits, the frustrations of training and capacity-building, the need for a strong regional dimension to spatial and economic planning and measures to counteract excesses of the past in terms of over-zoning, housing oversupply and moribund growth in Austerity Ireland.

The ICLRD also highlighted examples of cross-government support for the Derry-Dublin road (A5-N2)...ahem!... and proposals for speeding up decision-making in matching up environmental protection and related programmes. So far, so good, but the multiple dip recession has intervened to create a climate of uncertainty and inertia in progressing such positive ideas. That said, there can be no excuse for not harmonising central government programmes with local action plans.....to provide some quality of cohesion and reassurance for local communities concerned about

incremental improvements and development projects in areas experiencing relative disadvantage.

Equally on the ICLRD research, whilst most of the structural issues of central versus local government and service delivery dominate the analysis, there is a welcome recognition of the notion of “place” in planning. “Place” is bound up with community identity and commitment to collective efforts to get things done. And very often “place” registers highly in a community’s consciousness when National Development Plans and Regional Planning Guidelines do not. A fundamental point about this is the notion of “the homeplace” in the Irish rural psyche. Where a person was born, grew up, socialised and contributed to community life is central to a person’s identity and community stake. And I am not convinced that such an essential recognition is incorporated into the planning orthodoxy.

The policy makers and planners seem at times to lack understanding of the sense of the home place that is such a strong feature of the Irish psyche. Landownership and the importance of the homeplace is something that deeply ingrained in the Irish psyche. Planners will say the applicant has no connection to the area, but to the applicant and the applicant’s family this homeplace and the trans-generational succession to the land and to the place is of huge importance.

Let me give another illustration, again from recent Sligo experience.

CLIFFONY EXAMPLE

In keeping with the national policy and the current CDP, incorporates a series of mini plans for the villages throughout the county for the following reasons:

- to cater for anticipated population growth
- to ensure that the growth of settlement is in keeping with the Core Strategy and Settlement Structure
- to establish a development limit for each settlement
- to facilitate the application of Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000
- to provide guidance on the design and layout of future development
- to identify existing built and/or natural features to be protected
- to facilitate improved circulation within and around settlements

A girl who was reared in a council housing estate in Cliffony, works locally, getting married next year decides she is going to build a house on family lands some 5 miles from the village. This land has been in her family for generations, is located in an area designated as normal rural landscape in the CDP but she is informed at a preplanning meeting that, as her housing need is considered in the terms of the CDP as urban generated, she therefore does not comply with the policy on rural housing. The village of Cliffony has a population of 425 persons, it has no choice of place to worship, it has no burial ground and because of its inadequate waste water treatment system, something that is not likely to be remedied in the near future, cannot accommodate any new housing. It is difficult to explain the logic of this policy .

I think this makes my point about homeplace, localism and importantly, an unanticipated consequence of a welcome planning initiative in producing focused village mini-plans, i.e. a village mini-plan locks in village community to urban planning issues disproportionate to the scale and common-sense reality of that village community. Cliffony is not a sprawling metropolis, gobbling up high-quality agricultural land and extending the urban ghetto. It is a small rural village with a range of small-scale, soluble planning challenges that must be address with a major dollop of common-sense and flexible thinking. Without belabouring the point further, I would only say that planning has a tendency to codify policies and response to such an extent where the particular personal and social circumstances of individuals and local communities get overlooked, dismissed or treated as narrative afterthoughts.

That is why I consider local planning approaches to be most relevant to this debate. Local place, local development initiatives, local democracy and local planning strategies have a resonance with local people....and yes, bottom-up approaches are indeed my preferred way to go. On this last point, Professor Peter Roberts' Borderlands Article on "Sustainable Communities" should be required reading for all planners, policy makers, elected members and community development agencies. His common-sense article on sustainable communities concludes, "this requirement to be realistic need not diminish the aspirations of a community, but it is important to be honest.....and early wins can help build confidence".

4. I now want to be positive and, with one important caveat, optimistic. The Sligo County Development Plan and a whole series of Local Action Plans are undoubtedly democratic vehicles for community participation in the planning process. From

Village Design Statements to Issues Papers to Community Information/Discussion/Participation Fora to Manager's Reports to Members' Adoption, the entire process has evolved as exercises in consensus-building and reasonable democratic debate.

Indeed, recent planning reviews in Sligo and elsewhere succeeded in curtailing some of the worst excesses in recent times, namely overzoning and appropriate de-zoning.

Another key success in the most recent plan has been in the measures to accommodate genuine rural generated housing need throughout the County by making provision for persons who want to build their first home on a site within 5km of the original family home to accommodate persons who have a vital link to the rural community in which they wish to reside by reason of having lived in the community for a minimum period of seven years or by the existence in this community of long established ties with family members.

Planning policies have broadly succeeded in preserving scenic landscapes and important heritage sites and, hailing from Lissadell, I recognise the value of the planning process in safeguarding public rights of way. My concluding caveat is this, democratically-agreed policies, fair treatment of planning applicants and high standards of professionalism where community engagement and participation are foremost are to be commended. But what should be commended overall is a spirit of FLEXIBILITY that allows all planners and those receiving end of planning decisions to be certain that all local factors have been fully considered and translated into action

5. Issues Summary

Simplify planning process, procedures and system.

De-jargonise and highlight community participation.

Emphasise local democratic nature of planning and develop "localism" as the primary focus.

Translate National and Regional planning policies into locally-relevant practice and provide for primacy of “the local” over other considerations.

All in all, “local-proofing” and the guiding principle of FLEXIBLE DECISION-MAKING can make planning both focused and effective.