

**PLANNING REFORM ON THE ISLAND OF IRELAND: FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE  
2ND MAY 2013, CANAL COURT HOTEL, NEWRY**

**A Joint ICLRD /Co-operation Ireland Event sponsored by Department of Environment,  
Northern Ireland and Department of Environment, Community and Local Government, Ireland**

**CLOSING COMMENTS**

In closing today's excellent event, the emphasis must now turn to how we, practitioners, policy-makers and researchers in the field of spatial planning and collaborative working, can continue to respond to the issues and opportunities raised today by the Chairs, speakers, panellists and delegates.

Local Authorities will have an increasingly important role to play in shaping the development of their respective jurisdictions through **good planning** - they are the link between central government policies and programmes and their own neighbourhoods and business districts where residents, community groups and the private sector are asking to have a stronger role in shaping development.

The **financial implications** of land-use and planning decisions are becoming more important as the costs of development and services will fall more and more on local authorities, especially in regards to supporting infrastructure and services. Development decisions have financial implications on local budgets, rates and property taxes. With local government under increased pressure to raise budgets locally, citizens will want to know how their rates and property taxes are being spent. Leveraging local assets will be important.

**Capacity building** for new responsibilities is an ongoing need; both now as reform takes place and local governments have to take on new responsibilities - but also in the future. This includes understanding a shift in work culture where local authorities will have to be proactive in finding and developing alignment between their planning initiatives and central government policies , EU Directives and funding programmes.

There will be a constant need to **achieve alignment** between the local planning process (that also require a 'larger than local' perspective) and central government (that need to be aware of local aspirations). Are the two levels of government talking effectively with each other? Or is it a 'one-way' conversation? This is the 'harmonising' we heard about earlier today.

We will need a **strong knowledge-base** to understand the opportunities and implications of development decisions taken by local councils. There are new tools to help us better understand how proposed development decisions link to, and impact upon, neighbouring

councils, and fit into regional development initiatives and opportunities. Real success is when officials and councillors become the advocates for 'this larger than local' cooperation.

New tools can bring data, information and maps together in on-line accessible platforms to support **evidence-informed planning**; the technology has grown tremendously and will grow exponentially. It will be important to build a demand for using these tools among practitioners and policy makers. Both the ICLRD and the All-Island research Observatory (AIRO) - based in NUI Maynooth - are planning to hold 'data-days' in the near future to demonstrate the benefits of such tools. Aimed at council officials, elected representatives, cross-border organisations, community groups, these 'data-days' will consider what the information/data is telling us, what trends are emerging and how these are impacting on our communities (now and in the future), and how groups should position their interventions. As colleagues from the Boston Indicators Project noted at an ICLRD conference in Enniskillen in 2010, we have to avoid the problem of being "data rich and insight poor".

In closing today's session the question arises as to how all of us in this room can support the respective governance and planning reform agendas, North and South, and continue to learn from the experiences of each other? In addition, how can the ICLRD and Co-operation Ireland in partnership with universities, research groups, and central and local authorities help in this regard?

Some ideas to consider:

- Hold topical seminars and capacity building events around the issues discussed today, as well as emerging issues such as: renewables, economic development, environment, regeneration, community planning, infrastructure - with a special emphasis on capital investment planning, heritage, town centre management, and EU Directives and their implications for local governments and new regional plans. These should include a cross-section of disciplines and participants, not just the experts.
- As mentioned earlier today, spatial planning teams need to adopt a more cross-disciplinary approach; we must have planners, engineers, economists, ecologists and sociologists working together. How do we encourage this sharing of expertise?
- Document and make available good practice examples, and models of cooperation such as the Memorandum of Understanding between Newry and Mourne District Council and Louth Local Authorities. While the MOU is one such example of good practice, there are other types of agreements in existence which can lead to enhanced collaboration, joint research, etc. Highlighting examples of good practice from elsewhere, including the EU and other international practices, is important when considering new approaches. There is a lot to be learning from what has worked elsewhere.
- Build knowledge networks using existing forums and networks, including the cross-border networks.

- Involve universities and research institutions in action research to support and critically inform emerging policies and practices. The mix between practitioners, policy-makers and academics is important to innovation and learning, and has been an instrumental aspect of the ICLRD's work.
- The (currently draft) *Cooperative Framework for Spatial Planning on the Island of Ireland* can help to knit these different ideas and approaches together. If/when adopted, this document will help to formalise what is already a very strong informal process of cooperation among central government departments in Dublin and Belfast, and local authorities in both jurisdictions, especially in the border region.

In closing, please give a round of applause to our morning and afternoon speakers and facilitators and, of course, yourselves.

As you heard earlier from Peter Sheridan, Chief Executive of Co-operation Ireland, the ICLRD and Co-operation Ireland recognise that spatial planning and governance reform - and its implementation - is, and will continue to be, an important development in support of vibrant and inclusive communities with shared opportunities.

Thank you for coming and participating in today's event.

John Driscoll,  
Director, ICLRD