

Local Government and Spatial Planning in Ireland

John Martin, Jack Keyes, Ruth Minogue and Seán Ó'Riordáin

Introduction

Irish Local Government has delivered a wide range of services and fulfilled many complex roles over the past 20 years in particular. Very few if any organisations are asked to develop expertise in and deliver positive results in the areas of regulation, agency delivery, sustainable planning management, local agency coordination, social inclusion, economic development, cultural management, citizen engagement and traditional engineering service delivery. It plays a pivotal role in the democratic system through the management and nurturing of the local democratic voice. The system is viewed in some quarters as a model of good governance, while others do take the opposite view.

Nonetheless, the broad brief that is the responsibility of local government is scarcely comprehensible to many private, community and other public sector managers. At the heart of local government is the simple fact that the system is responsible for many of the policies that impact day to day lives from housing, or the lack of it for some, to economic development potential and where employment is to be placed, to where our future communities are to live, work and recreate. It is the sector which provides the platform on which our communities can grow, flourish or decay. Local government is therefore central to how communities come to self sustain and, ultimately, how people engage with their locations as they live their lives.

Arguably, it is at the interface between meeting the current and future needs of citizens and others in the State and the demands for growth, employment, accommodation, recreation and travel, among other policy sectors. Local government is a multi-functional and integrated policy platform which seeks to underpin how public policy is delivered...or, for some at least that is, what might be expected in an advanced open economy. In an expanding country and growing population the question has been and is being put on whether the local government system in Ireland is fit for purpose. Demands for national delivery of many local government functions are and will remain a feature of policy dialogue in Ireland over the lifespan of the next government. The question is how government should respond, and is there a role for local government?

The new National Planning Framework: Building on the National Spatial Strategy

In a critical initiative the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government has announced that the current National Spatial Strategy (NSS), which was due to run until 2020, should be replaced in the coming year with a new National Planning Framework (NPF). It could be suggested that this will be one of the most important policy developments under an incoming government. It might also be argued that in drafting the new Framework, much could be gained from analysing the successes and failures in implementing the NSS and what lessons could be learnt from comparison with Scotland's Third National Planning Framework. A key principle will be the acceptance of how our citizens engage with each other and the institutions of state, in their daily lives, must be central to how Ireland, local and national, will be planned and serviced over the immediate future and into the longer-term as our population grows beyond that which existed pre-famine.

The proposed national planning framework is central to such thinking and as it is prepared what impact it might have in how public services are configured if we are to cope with the pressures of growth and development across the Republic and, indeed, into Northern Ireland.

Background to the NSS

The need for a national spatial strategy from a policy perspective was highlighted by a range of public bodies in the late 1990sⁱ, in order to promote more balanced regional development and to co-ordinate sectoral policies (such as transport) across Ireland. The National Development Plan for 2000-2006 had identified Dublin as a national gateway serving the whole country with Cork, Limerick/Shannon, Galway and Waterford acting as regional gateways for extensive parts of the country; the Government endorsed the view of the ESRI that the specific designation of a secondary tier of regional gateways required further detailed study in the context of developing a National Spatial Strategy for the country as a wholeⁱⁱ. The Department of the Environment, supported by an expert advisory committee, was charged with preparation of the NSS; an extensive research programme was commissioned, and public consultation was facilitated by the publication of scoping and issues papersⁱⁱⁱ.

The NSS, launched in 2002, was designed as a twenty year planning framework designed to achieve a better balance of social, economic, physical development and population growth between regions. It was intended to achieve complex, multi-faceted objectives, including:

- Supporting a better balance of activity and development between areas experiencing rapid development and congestion and areas that are economically under-utilised
- Setting a national context for regional planning guidelines and county and city development plans
- Providing a framework, in conjunction with the Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland, *Shaping our Future*, for the spatial dimension of the development of an all-island economy, and
- Informing strategic investment, transport and other infrastructure policy decisions, for both the public and private sector^{iv}.

The NSS was ambitious in scope and in its objectives. It was also an innovative undertaking for a Department which, while broadly responsible for overseeing the statutory landuse planning system in Ireland, had never before prepared a spatial plan. Given this background, and the depth of the crisis which hit the country in 2008, it is hardly surprising that the results of implementing the NSS have been mixed.

No comprehensive review of the NSS's performance has yet been carried out^v, but it is possible to identify some of its key outcomes; build on its strengths, and address its weaknesses. Doing so should add robustness to any successor strategy. In terms of its strengths, the NSS was given statutory recognition in relation to providing spatial policy guidance for the regional planning guidelines and, through them, for city and county development plans. This was an important step in moving our planning system into a more co-ordinated policy framework, something lacking prior to this being put in place. The requirement under the 2010 Planning Act that local, city and county plans must include an evidence-based approach to zoning is a further strength. Substantial progress was also achieved in improving the inter-urban road and rail links, and all of the gateway cities have put sustainable transport strategies in place. Some Departments have created or improved institutional structures to facilitate co-ordinated spatial development, planning for new schools being a notable example. It does seem extraordinary that prior to the NSS there was limited effort to co-ordinate, build policy on an evidence based platform and even get policy-makers and advisors to relate population location to schools provision! At least it might be argued that these simple but

important factors in how we plan the country are now in place and will be further underpinned by forthcoming planning legislation.

However, there is much which remains to be put in place and any replacement for the NSS should also address its shortcomings. For example it can be argued that the NSS preceded the preparation of the first regional planning guidelines in 2004, and may have been overly detailed. In addition, there were too many gateways and hubs, which militated against effective prioritisation. It would not be unreasonable to question whether the linked gateways (such as Athlone-Tullamore-Mullingar) worked in practice – whether this is the case or not an objective analysis is needed to determine whether administrative and other linkages were effective in overcoming the disadvantages of the small scale of the towns involved and the distances between them.

The above lessons, positive and negative, suggest that the National Planning Framework should focus on the role of the five original gateway cities in driving regional economies^{vi}, leaving the designation of supporting hub towns to the regional strategies which are to be prepared under the Local Government Reform Act, 2014. The new Regional Assemblies, established as a central platform of the recent local government reforms, are much larger than the former Regional Authorities, ranging in population size from 837,000 (Border and Western) to 2.2 m in the Eastern and Midlands^{vii}, and they should provide a suitable context for devolution of regional planning functions.

Secondly, the NSS was not as well integrated into national capital expenditure programmes as it might have been. There have been deficits in funding key infrastructure at gateway level – the shortage of serviced housing lands in Dublin being a prime example, one which is still a challenge as the country begins to grow once more.

Thirdly, regional economic disparities remain^{viii}. In this regard the recent commitment by IDA Ireland to a greater dispersal of investments throughout the State should be welcomed; a minimum increase in investment of 30% to 40% is being sought in each region outside Dublin, with Dublin continuing to attract similar high investment levels as before. While foreign direct investment is still likely to be attracted to the main urban centres, there is considerable scope for promoting indigenous enterprises in smaller towns. Again, the new regional spatial and economic strategies, which will take their lead from the National Planning Framework, offer an opportunity to combine the expertise of the State agencies with local knowledge and dynamism, particularly at the level of city regions.

These lessons suggest the need to address how the local and regional governance of the State is to be progressed in order to deliver on the necessary policies and infrastructure needed to equip the State into the future. One of the weaknesses of the NSS was the expectation that the existing local government system would and could deliver on its part, the objectives of the NSS. Given the impact of reform and more particularly the austerity of the past several years perhaps this was always going to be an expectation which could not be met, a point to which this paper will address shortly but, before doing so, looking to international if adjacent experience is worthy of consideration.

Scotland's Third National Planning Framework (NPF3) 2014

The Department of the Environment has indicated^{ix} that it is looking at Scotland's Third National Planning Framework as a possible model for the successor to the NSS. NPF3 is the spatial expression of the Scottish Government's Economic Strategy, and of its plans for development and investment in infrastructure. What lessons can be learnt from the Scottish experience?

- Firstly, there is a strong emphasis on nationally-important infrastructure – 14 national developments, to be delivered by both the public and private sectors, are identified, ranging from high-speed rail to the comprehensive redevelopment of the former Ravenscraig steelworks.
- There is also a focus on the role of city regions which are home to the majority of Scotland's population and economic activity.
- It is the ambition of the Scottish Government to be a world leader in low carbon energy generation, both onshore and offshore. The strategy shows where there will be opportunities for investment in the low carbon economy.
- The strategy also provides links with marine spatial planning^x, for example, by identifying onshore locations for serving the offshore renewable energy sector.
- The strategy is reviewed at regular intervals, which means it can adapt to changing economic and social circumstances.

Critically, the Framework is being integrated into a whole of government policy environment already well established in Scotland. It means that across the various parts of the Scottish Executive and local government there is a planning framework applicable to all business and corporate planning, something clearly absent from our experience with the NSS and something only fully appreciated at national level in Ireland with the advent of the local government reform programme, *Putting People First*. As a result of the programme the Country is now in a position to at least bring greater integration into the delivery of local and regional planning which, as acknowledged above, would

have been seen as a critical weakness in the implementation of the NSS. The issue now arguably is whether even the changes brought forward under the reform programme are, in fact, fully developed to ensure a successful adoption and implementation of a national planning framework in Ireland.

Outlook for the new National Planning Framework

Despite a return to net outward migration in the years leading up to Census 2011 the population has continued to grow strongly due mainly to the high number of births of recent years. The CSO has projected that the population of the Republic could increase by over 600,000 by 2031, and on present trends over 400,000 of these will be living in the Greater Dublin Area^{xi}. Some projections suggest an even more rapid rate of expansion. In the event of such growth the challenges of regional disparities, urban sprawl and long-distance commuting must necessarily be addressed or they will persist to the long term detriment of the State as it grapples with climate change and international competitiveness.

In addition, many of the key policy drivers which confronted the NSS planners remain to be addressed in the next spatial strategy. The economic outlook globally is less optimistic than it was around 2000, and funding for major capital projects is more constrained. In these circumstances, it is all the more important that the regional development implications of national investment decisions are carefully considered within a strategic development framework which will prioritise sustainable development of the State and its regions.

Environmental Challenges

The environmental challenges facing the island of Ireland remain considerable and increasingly require a multidisciplinary and multifaceted approach to both capture and assess evidence and, in turn, develop appropriate policy and management responses. What is striking, and notwithstanding the efforts of the past decade, is the uneven evidence base and data upon which to assess and address environmental issues. For some parameters, notably water quality and protected habitats and species (driven largely by the requirements of the EU Water Framework Directive and the EU Habitats Directive), the period since the NSS has seen significant research and publication of data and reports. For other environmental parameters the evidence base can be much weaker, less quantifiable when compared to the natural sciences but of equal importance to communities and our own identity. Given the resources being allocated to promote a range of initiatives premised on our quality landscapes (Wild Atlantic Way and the Ancient East by Failte Ireland, Origin Green

Certification, Bord Bia, to name but a few), the need for a planning framework to respond and manage such issues remains at the heart of how our urban and rural communities are to develop. Questions remain as to how our landscapes are being managed and how do we ensure that the evidence base is robust enough and capable of being tested to ensure that sound decisions are made.

In addition recent community based opposition to a range of development activities, most notably wind energy and associated infrastructure (particularly pylons) has shown that seemingly intangible concepts such as identity and landscape can become a rallying cry for communities who lack faith in the local and national planning process. Such controversies are likely to continue to be a feature of policy development and there remains a very real need to bridge the gap in public trust of both our local and national policy processes, particularly if the hard decisions confronting government concerning the nature and impact of such policies are to be fully understood and deliverable. This leads to a second point – public engagement and input to policy at local and national level. In its 2014 report, for example, on building community engagement and wind energy the National Economic and Social Council states the *'information provision and minimal consultation, as required under the planning process, seems unlikely to be sufficient to gain support for wind projects, now and into the future.'*^{xii} **It suggests four responses and acknowledges a combination approach as the best scenario: consider how revisions to local authority structure and planning systems may contribute to more meaningful engagement, invocation of the Aarhus Convention, focus on bottom up approaches and finally guidelines.**

As the NESC report concludes in relation to improving engagement: *'a central argument in this report is that rather than choose one of these approaches, we need to devise an approach that contains elements of top-down planning and framing combined with the front-line dynamic of project development and the bottom-up generation of local legitimacy. This need is most evident in relation to value-sharing. Local communities need a stronger role in shaping and sharing local value. They need to be able to identify resources and potential value, problem-solve and find solutions as to how value is owned, distributed and for what purpose it will be used'*^{xiii}

This clearly does not apply only to wind energy but the role of public participation has also to be embedded across all policy development at local and national level. The question thus arises on whether our current practices and the tools we have available remain sufficient to provide the necessary platforms on which such policies can be developed? Returning to the example of Scotland,

it is worth noting that Scotland made the decision (through the Scottish Parliament and supported through public consultation) to become a world leader in Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA). The decision was made to take SEA beyond the requirements of the EU SEA Directive and extended legislation to cover all public plans, programmes and strategies. This decade long approach to SEA in Scotland has facilitated a strong evidenced based planning approach across policy areas and also encouraged a more responsive and strategic approach to spatial planning. Whilst many local authorities (particularly the planning teams) in Ireland now recognise the utility of SEA and see the environmental benefits, this attitude may not yet be shared across departments; there remains some institutional and/or political resistance and understanding of SEA in certain sectors.

The key point is that in Scotland there are on-going efforts to build policy. This is based upon a rigorous consultation platform and within an integrated framework, in this case provided through the methodologies of SEA, which have provided an evidence base which has allowed informed debate around the spatial direction of the Country and which is inter-departmental and multi tiered. This is something which is, and remains, a central challenge in Ireland.

Time for comprehensive local government reform...or at least a debate on what is fit for purpose...

Such a framework will require institutional platforms that will be fit for purpose. Against the backdrop of a new national planning framework how can we achieve a system of local government that is capable of responding to current and future challenges arising from population growth, increased public expectations and the need to demonstrate performance in a transparent and accountable manner? To achieve a system of responsive, responsible and representative local government, *clarity* on the purpose and role of local government has to be a central consideration. Notwithstanding the well considered principles underpinning a vibrant local government, which were set out in *Putting People First*, there remains a large gap in *capacity* for action at the local level, *cohesiveness* in central-local interaction is uneven, *committed* leadership at both levels can be difficult to identify while *community* involvement and *citizen* engagement remain real challenges. *Continuity* in a reform strategy which is public sector wide but firmly grounded on the objectives of a planning framework will be something confronting an incoming government.

In addition, and set against the backdrop of the reforms of the past 5 years and the on-coming challenges of the next 20 years, reforms will have to be cognisant of the fact that a 21st century urbanised society requires systems that reflect 21st century functionality. This is a central lesson if Ireland is to follow the model of the Scottish NPF. The 19th century agrarian based institutions that

have sustained Irish local government may have limited relevance to how people live and will live over the next century. International experience suggests that citizen-based services and many routine public services are best delivered at local level, promoting a sense of identity and providing opportunities for local accountability and responsibility. A general move towards devolving person focused public services to local government is discernible across the OECD as the problems of service delivery on a large scale become obvious.

It is true that some local services can be very complex. Delivering public services across a large area to a dispersed population while, at the same time, providing for the local democratic voice will always be a challenge no matter what the size of the organisation delivering such services. Nonetheless from international experience, it is clear that certain services are best delivered at district/town level, others at city/county level and others at regional level. This allows central government to do what it is supposed to do...give direction, evaluate performance and deal with international challenges.

Does this mean that current county structures can remain as the most appropriate platform for local delivery of citizen centred services? *Putting People First* would clearly suggest that this is and should remain the case. However, there have been calls for a migration towards more regionally or nationally based delivery platforms, particularly in regard to engineering based services which increasingly call for complex responses to functionality and service delivery. If the National Planning Framework is to be effective there will be a need to address the institutional framework through which it can be delivered.

Considerable effort has, of course, been invested to address such structures with the advent of *Putting People First*. Notably however, these have had to respect the existing nature of county boundaries with relatively limited effort to focus on our understanding of what a 21st century local authority should be configured. There is also limited perspective on how a local authority might drive potential within its functional context. There is a further challenge of trying to engage a largely disinterested public where even the limited discussion to date, notwithstanding the most extensive reform of local government in the history of the State under *Putting People First*, has been relatively poorly informed. There is limited acknowledgement of the improved performance of the existing system thanks to the efficiencies achieved under the Local Government Efficiency Review and there is almost a complete absence of debate on what our local government system should look like if the State is to confront the challenges of implementation of the National Planning Framework.

So there are considerable challenges ahead and what is now required is an *informed* debate, debate based on evidence, something which can, at times, be all too lacking given recent experience. Such debate has, however, to be led by the national policy process as there is limited evidence of the existing local government being able to advance such considerations. Local government serves democratic and developmental as well as service delivery purposes. Unfortunately, the underpinning philosophy regarding democratic norms and institutional forms are rarely debated at local level and frankly without the publication of *Putting People First* would have been totally absent at national level.

This is not to say that local government has not shown itself capable of change and delivery. In fact in some respects local government has demonstrated the capacity to deliver effective local services. But while it is worth acknowledging some good performance relative to other sectors such as health and education, during the cutbacks of 2009 to 2015 period, can the existing system be considered as an appropriate platform to confront the challenges outlined earlier in this paper? The reputation of local government as an effective delivery agent is poor in many influential national arenas. What type of local government structures should be the platform for a successful and clearly necessary National Planning Framework should form the centre piece of any policy development for the local government system under an incoming government. *Putting People First* has created a potential platform for such thinking but most will agree that a substantial debate is now called for on what type of system is needed if the State is to continue with a form of local democracy that is relevant to the lives of the people in the country. In recent years there has almost been an on-going call for merging local authorities or an unevincenced acceptance that bigger is better. However international studies cast serious doubt on the ability of scaling up the target delivery population for many services. So there is no simple solution to what local government might look like.

It is not just about structures...internal change is needed

Putting in place a national planning framework which is underpinned by a newly configured local government system may not be enough. It is arguable that expecting an under resourced system to develop the necessary human competency, focus, strategic oversight and delivery mechanisms for such a wide brief on a county basis is a reasonable policy. When other institutional weaknesses are considered (such as an under developed regional mandate, poor linkages to the various arms of central government, a local service delivery framework still requiring re-configuration in several areas of its mandate, lack of financial autonomy in spite of recent reforms (property tax replacing

other central funding schemes), etc.,) it is clear that significant strategic planning and change implementation within the local government and the local to national policy system will be necessary during the next decade.

Whereas it is not the purpose of this paper to analyse the details of such change a number of new strategic priorities are emerging from the current reform processes. Each of these will require enhanced/newly focussed human competencies, adoption of relevant trends in and learning from other sectors and an ability not just to work competently across boundaries but to influence the creation of the required flexible delivery mechanisms required in a rapidly changing macro environment. As Darwin put it *“It is not the strongest of the species that will survive, or the smartest but those able to adopt to change”*

Central to this will be the development of leadership capacity at all levels in the public sector but particularly at senior management level in local government. In the past key qualities included program delivery, administrative capacity and micro efficiency. Admirable though those abilities are, they can readily be accessed at other management levels and in other parts of the public sector and indeed through the private sector. There has been an uneven performance across the local government system in areas such as innovation, economic development, citizen engagement, social and cultural thinking delivery. The recent focus on competencies such as strategic capacity, communication etc. is a step in the right direction but this needs to be re-examined and advanced in a dynamic performance management framework.

The broad range of expertise referred to above requires senior managers who can manage resources across boundaries. This includes partnering with other agencies and sectors. Their ability to network and form associations with the complex web of local delivery agents while maintaining a strategic leadership perspective requires renewed skills and competences. Their positive contribution through inputting into the creation of coherent institutional frameworks with central and regional government and an ability to create commitment rather than compliance by such players is now a necessary feature in their managerial role. The lessons from the partial failure of both the NSS and the County Development Board/Better Local Government processes include lack of internal local government alignment and the consequently poor development of networks by local government leaders.

The development of shared services has become a feature of the recent reform process, local government has led and even excelled in the creation of new arrangements such as shared payroll, superannuation services and 20 plus other areas. It created a central project management (PMO) office to analyse business cases and coordinate implementation. The process was almost totally underpinned by the understandable need to deliver cost savings. Are cost savings the sole indicator of best practice and performance? There is an argument for enhanced performance management, underpinned by people with skills in the specialist areas defined as priorities through national and local strategic planning processes. While these will vary across the system they are likely to include legal, governance, innovation, strategic thinking, economic development, internal business creation, process improvement, enhanced communication, non-traditional funding access and many other diverse areas. A recent example is the nurturing of local food production involving knowledge of the industry and networking with other agencies including Bord Bia, farming bodies, Enterprise Ireland, sponsors, local educational managers, other authorities with relevant experience, local and national media and other partners. There are two obvious implications from this. Firstly, the necessity for robust and informed strategic planning processes to make definite choices as to which areas are to be focussed upon.

Secondly, the need to carefully examine whether such competencies are more effectively delivered at mini- regional level thus obviating the unobtainable requirement to provide all skills within each local authority. Sharing of expertise across boundaries needs to be accelerated.

The period since 2009 has seen a series of severe cutbacks being implemented leading to a fraught industrial relations climate in many organisations. This has resulted in a diminished emphasis on good human resource practices and this issue now needs renewed focus. The need to nourish good practice across organisations requires renewed regional and local HR strategic planning, redevelopment of partnership approaches, if not structures, and further delegation of HR functions to line manager level. This goes beyond the successful implementation of the current PMDS framework in local government, where progress has been uneven across the system. There is considerable capacity available in this regard through organisations such as the Local Government Management Agency, but new energy and focus is required. A renewed emphasis on the nurturing of learning organisations linked by formal and informal networks will underpin this and other areas of changing priority.

The development of the capacity and knowledge of citizens underpins the democratic system. However recent years has seen an erosion of trust by individuals and communities in the political process and our planning processes. This manifests itself in many ways and poses unprecedented challenges in Ireland and further afield. Local government has considerable, and at times, negative experience in this area and it needs to refocus on issues of social exclusion, involvement of citizens in decision-making and the coalescing of representative and participative democracy that reflects the diversity in modern Irish society. In particular the potential of policy integration processes such as the establishment of the local community development committees needs to be realised through enhanced support mechanisms at central level and local implementation mechanisms that are standard yet capable of local variation. The creation of effective institutional mechanisms to support and drive the process is nowhere more important than here. After all if these local manifestations of policy integration are not allowed to work there is not much hope for a national planning framework working, and vice versa.

Many modern strategic thinkers suggest that it is impossible to use traditional corporate planning frameworks based on previous experience as the basis for strategic planning in an increasingly changing macro environment. They call for institutional ability to cater with “black swan “ or totally unpredicted events. Recent examples include the 2008 economic crash. A more local example is the renewed focus for local authorities to provide social housing units and address homelessness of a scale unprecedented in recent decades. This requires flexibility and enhanced capabilities. It recognises that an organisation’s internal strengths can often be its greatest weakness. Local government needs to compete on relevant policy platforms and not just delivery of services. It needs to reverse the standard process of information flow and link key activities to stimuli from both external and internal change.

Central to the future is the nourishing of innovative capacity at a local level. Many examples exist ranging from tourism to community development, enterprise creation to citizen engagement as authorities innovate to create value for their communities. However, the traditional culture of local government did not always accept the degree of risk and uncertainty about outcomes which is fundamental in innovative organisations. The incorporation of business model innovation processes is a key requisite. Ireland needs to tap more fully into the unique potential of local government as a source of innovation which can deliver competitive advantage to the country as it taps into the potential of an expanding world economy.

Conclusions and recommendations for an incoming government

The next National Planning Framework, unlike the NSS, will be subject to strategic environmental assessment under the EU Directive. This means that a draft Framework must be issued for public consultation. Such an approach could provide the opportunity to open up debate on the nature of the local democratic voice in the sustainable planning and development of the State but also what is appropriate at local level. This alongside a process of research and pre-draft consultation would be beneficial in terms of enhancing the robustness and acceptability of any new spatial strategy as well as helping to inform the incoming government on just what the priorities for local, regional and national government should be. As indicated across this paper, there are many lessons which could be learnt from implementing the NSS and the recent reform of local government, among them the need for clearer definition of policy aims and implementation tools.

Secondly, effective implementation cannot rely solely on the local planning or policy system or indeed on the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government. Other Government Departments with major capital programmes need to be closely involved in debating the nature of the national planning framework and how local government is to play its role within their planning processes and the form this might take, institutionally and structurally. Equally the nature of the local to national policy process needs consideration. If local government is to have a purpose then give it one otherwise it will continue to fade away, as it has in many respects since the foundation of the State.

Thirdly, while the role of city regions is of critical importance, the interrelationships between urban and rural areas must also be addressed. The 2013 report of the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas highlighted the increasingly diverse nature of rural areas, and advocated an approach based on locally-led, place-based development^{xiv}. If we look to successful models for local policy development across the globe there are three key platforms, those specifically addressing rural communities, those addressing urban needs and those which characterise the rural/urban interface. Such interfaces are often at the heart of the regional planning process across the OECD. What is clear is that functionality is central to such developments and this often requires new institutional models radically different from traditional local government structures.

Suggested key messages:

- 1) A robust and substantive debate about what Ireland is to look like in 2035 is now required. This means tackling very controversial issues such as where people should live and recreate, be educated and employed and it might require a far more focused effort on how our major urban areas are to develop and how this might impact on a policy framework which historically failed to delineate between the needs of rural counties and those of our major city areas.
- 2) If cities are to become more effective drivers of regional economies, more collaborative governance structures under the leadership of local government are needed and should conceivably be underpinned by an appropriate statutory framework.
- 3) Gateway cities also need more financial autonomy. To cite an example from the Cork Area Strategic Plan, there have been frustrations in not being able to persuade the National Roads Authority until very recently to fund the much needed upgrade to the N28 between Cork and Ringaskiddy, which would not only have facilitated the development of the deep-water port but also opened up the huge IDA land bank for development.
- 4) There is, however, with greater discretionary funding, the need for local government, particularly the city authorities, to have the skills and competence to develop rigorous business case processes to ensure value for money.
- 5) There will be a need to fundamentally address the shape of our local government system. If the National Planning Framework and other national and international policy developments are to be given effect where is the role of the system in the national policy arena? Are our current structures fit for purpose, particularly as our society becomes more urbanised with the expectations that come with such urbanisation.
- 6) What of the role of local democracy? Following the recent reforms it could be argued that the establishment of the municipal districts could provide the basis for greater autonomy and decentralisation of citizen based services but does this fit comfortably with the need to ensure effectiveness and efficiency?
- 7) It is widely accepted that there is a symbiotic relationship between a city and its surrounding region, but not enough attention has been focused on practical measures which could help revitalise dispersed communities in the catchment area. While better broadband is one such practical measure is it possible to ensure the sustainable development of our rural communities whilst also witnessing a significant growth of our urban communities?
- 8) As is clear there are many questions waiting to be resolved so arguably the most important recommendation to be made is the need to start a full and frank debate on how the local

government system is to be re-configured and where its mandate properly rests. Such debate was largely absent in the last round of reforms making it all the more necessary that it be applied in the next round and that, in that context, the National Planning Framework provides an incoming government with the space in which to facilitate such debate. Failing to do so and indeed using tools such as SEA, among others, would arguably undermine much of what should be reflected in a NPF for a growing and increasingly urbanised State.

References:

ⁱ See for example Forfás, 'Enterprise 2010: A New Strategy for the Promotion of Enterprise in Ireland in the 21st Century' (2000); Government of Ireland, 'White Paper on rural development: Ensuring the future' (1999), chapter 4; Fitzgerald, J., Kearney, I., Morgenroth, E., and Smyth, D. 'National investment priorities for the period 2000-2006' (ESRI, 1999)

ⁱⁱ Government of Ireland, 'National Development Plan 2000-2006' (1999), pp. 43-44

ⁱⁱⁱ See Walsh, J.A. 'The National Spatial Strategy: Rationale, process, performance and prospects', in *Administration* (Institute of Public Administration of Ireland), vol. 60, no. 3. 2013, pp. 20-28

^{iv} Government of Ireland, 'The National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020: People, places and potential' (2002), p.12

^v But see (a) Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 'Implementing the National Spatial Strategy: 2010 Update and Outlook' (2010); and (b) Meredith, D. and van Egeraat, C. 'Revisiting the National Spatial Strategy ten years on', in *Administration* (Institute of Public Administration of Ireland), vol. 60, no. 3. 2013, pp. 3-9

^{vi} See National Competitiveness Council, *Our cities: Drivers of national competitiveness* (2009)

^{vii} DECLG, 'Putting People First: Action Programme for Effective Local Government' (2012), appendix 8

^{viii} CSO statistical release, 20 March 2015, County Incomes and Regional GDP 2012

^{ix} Presentation by Niall Cussen, Principal Planning Adviser, at the National Planning Conference, Cork, April 2015

^x Ireland will have to implement marine spatial plans by 2021 under EU Directive 2014/89; see Martin, J. 'Directive on marine spatial planning: implications for Ireland', in *Pleanáil*, issue 20, 2014, pp. 42-52

^{xi} Central Statistics Office, 'Regional Population Projections 2016-2031' [CSO Dec. 2013], Table 1 Actual and projected population of Regional Authority areas, 2011 and 2031 (M2F2 Traditional)

^{xii} Wind Energy in Ireland: Building Community Engagement and Social Support No. 139 July 2014, p.40

^{xiii} *Ibid*, p.43

^{xiv} Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas, *Energising Ireland's rural economy* (2013), p.38