

"Planning for the 21st century using 19th century institutions"-A time to take this seriously?

Dr. Seán Ó'Riordáin, Chairman, Public Policy Advisors Network

The Republic of Ireland has grown from a population of 3.2million in 1981 to 4.7 million this year and could conceivably grow to 6.5 million by 2050. The island could be around 8.5 million by this date so over the next 35 years or so the island is going to broadly see the equivalent of a Limerick City and environs being built each year for the next 35 years. Overseeing this process is a public management policy framework and structures which are largely rural orientated. Ireland has moved from being a rural country into a largely suburban country and this is likely to become an even greater feature of the State unless urban densities and supporting infrastructure are put in place to meet this new reality. The question is whether using public management approaches largely reflective of a rural perspective will be sufficient or whether some very real changes to policy development and delivery can be put in place bringing with it a huge challenge to how we plan ourselves to meet such demands.

In a critical initiative the current National Spatial Strategy (NSS), which was due to run until 2020, is to be replaced in the coming year with a new National Planning Framework (NPF). It will address spatial direction of the State into the 2030's and indeed, arguably, well into the latter half of the current century given the potential long-term development impact. It is one of the most important policy developments of the current government, certainly in terms of determining where people will live, work and recreate over the next several decades.

Despite this important likely role it would be fair to acknowledge that it is an initiative that is relatively poorly highlighted in the Programme for Government and indeed in the limited reform proposals for the public service. So, given the import of the policy initiative and the fact that it seems to have relatively limited political priority, if one is to take the Programme for Government as an indication of political priority, can it be reasonably be expected that the NPF will be any more impacting than the out-going National Spatial Strategy?

This paper seeks to address these issues and to reflect upon the successes and failures of the National Spatial Strategy and the lessons learned arising from the failure to fully address the need

for institutional re-configuration and political prioritisation of the forthcoming NPF. It will examine the potential to avoid the potential to have a spatial direction operating in isolation from public service transition and change and suggests how our political process might more ideally cope with the concept of planning the state and its services to complement where it is we propose to put the population over the coming decades