

REVIEW OF THE NATIONAL SPATIAL STRATEGY: VIEWS OF EXPERT GROUP

Introduction

1. The Irish Government has decided to review the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) and has asked an Expert Group, comprising Sean Dorgan, Berna Grist and Jim Mackinnon CBE, to offer views on how the revised Strategy might be approached. This has involved drawing on the lessons from the first NSS but, even more importantly, considering how the Strategy might respond to the challenges facing Ireland in radically different circumstances to those in which the first NSS was drawn up. It was agreed the Group would consider a draft report by the end of 2013 with a final version agreed by mid-January 2014.

Approach

2. The Expert Group met on 4 occasions from September – December 2013. This included 3 meetings with Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (DECLG) officials and once with just the 3 members present. We were grateful to these officials for their input and support.

3. For the initial discussion, the DECLG produced a range of papers while, for the second meeting, the Group asked for short notes to be prepared on issues such as timelines, implementation levers and the possible content of the second NSS. At our third and final meeting with the Department, we discussed our draft report which was finalised shortly thereafter.

National Spatial Strategy – Background

4. The Government decided to prepare a National Spatial Strategy in 1999 as part of the process of preparing the (then) National Development Plan 2000 – 2006. The Strategy was approved by the Government and published in October 2002.

5. In February 2013, the Minister for the Environment told a Joint Oireachtas Committee that the success of the NSS had been limited and it was “no longer fit for purpose”, while the Minister for Housing and Planning indicated that Ireland’s spatial development needed to “address new and altered realities”. We agree strongly with both these statements which have provided a welcome direction to the work of the Expert Group.

National Spatial Strategy – What Went Well/Not So Well

6. The first NSS drew upon the European Spatial Development Perspective (1999), a document to which Ireland contributed, along with other EU Member States and the European Commission. The underlying philosophy of the ESDP was, arguably, much more influential than its content in that it encouraged governments to think spatially and to recognise that sectoral policies on issues such as transport and energy had significant spatial and territorial consequences.

7. The first NSS is well respected within the planning profession in Ireland and the UK; and the fact it was produced was, in itself, a significant achievement not least because of the energy and commitment a small team from the DECLG brought to the task. The NSS had a number of practical and positive benefits, including:-

- It introduced the concept of spatial development to the public policy agenda, for example, aspects of the relationship with Northern Ireland and the wider European Union as well as the balance of development between Dublin and the rest of Ireland and the implications arising therefrom.
- It encouraged sectoral policy and decision makers to consider Ireland's long term territorial development rather than just their own particular area of interest.
- It supported a range of all Ireland and specifically cross border initiatives.
- Although the €300 million Gateway Innovation Fund was postponed, the decision to allocate this funding to support the development of gateways in line with the NSS was a significant achievement.
- The NSS had a significant impact on the objectives and proposals in *Transport 21*, the Government's capital investment framework for the development of the national transport system from 2006 – 2015.

8. There were, however, a number of difficulties and disappointments. Principal among these were:-

- The document was in parts too theoretical and concepts built on it, for example the Atlantic Gateways Corridor and the linked gateways / hubs, lacked sufficient substance and clarity on the implications.
- The designation of settlements as hubs lacked justification.
- In a practical sense, the most significant undermining of the NSS came in December 2003 with the announcement of the decentralisation

programme. While some Government Departments and Agencies were moved to Gateway and Hub towns, others were relocated to lower tier urban centres such as Newbridge and Trim. The logic of the decentralisation programme reached its nadir with the proposed relocation of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs to a greenfield site at Knock Airport, a proposal that was refused planning permission following a third party appeal to An Bord Pleanála in 2007.

- A policy area that worked against the NSS was housing, both urban and rural. As a result of increasing affluence and easy access to credit, individuals and families located not in higher density developments in Gateway and Hub towns but in low density developments on the periphery of villages or in the open countryside within commuting distance of major settlements.
- If the principles in the NSS had been adopted and applied more consistently, the problems arising from excessive and inappropriate zoning, and the consequent unfinished housing estates, could have been, if not avoided, then significantly reduced.

In general the compromises on locations and the associated diffusion, indeed loss of focus, meant that many of the hoped for outcomes have not been as positive as envisaged.

9. Notwithstanding these problems, the significance and potential benefits of the NSS were recognised in the Mahon Report which recommended, inter alia, that the NSS be placed on a statutory footing. In its response to Mahon the Government accepted this and other recommendations in the report and a Bill to achieve this is to be taken forward in the course of 2014.

The NSS and New Realities

10. The first NSS was drawn up at a time of unprecedented economic growth and transformation while the second NSS will be drawn up in a wholly different economic and financial context. The optimism and confidence that underpinned the first NSS are virtually unrecognisable in the circumstances which many countries – not just Ireland – find themselves, while the harsher budgetary regime imposes a new discipline and rigour to addressing Ireland's spatial development challenges.

11. A further key difference is in relation to local government with 31 City and County Councils scheduled to replace the current 114 authorities. In addition 3 Regional Assemblies are to be created which will be empowered to draw up economic and spatial strategies. The implication of larger and stronger local government units is that the second NSS must be genuinely national in its scope

and content and not usurp policies and decisions which are more properly for the new councils.

12. The approach the Expert Group recommends to the second NSS reflects these new economic, fiscal and administrative parameters and challenges. It also recognises that transport connections in Ireland have improved significantly since the first NSS was drawn up, which is a very positive change and is reflected, for example, in locational decisions by major inward investors.

Why Prepare a Second NSS?

13. The recommendations in the Mahon Report and the subsequent decision to give the NSS a legal basis provide adequate justification for revising the NSS. We feel, however, that underpinning these matters of fact there are compelling reasons for drawing up a second NSS:-

- While Dublin is at the forefront of international competition for mobile, inward investment, the potential of other locations must be harnessed.
- As the expertise needed to compete successfully internationally, together with supporting services and the increasingly important cultural offering, tends to concentrate in major urban centres, each part of Ireland (however delineated) needs to provide the opportunity for focused development.
- Without this focus and concentration, the wider area may suffer potentially irreversible decline, and failure to optimise regional performance will result in unsustainable pressures on Dublin with national performance suffering as a result.
- The need for greater locational focus is matched by major resource constraints which means that priority must be given to investments which produce the greatest cultural, economic, environmental or social benefits.

NSS 2 - A Recommended Approach

14. The Expert Group welcomes the streamlining of local government, although it is less than ideal to be progressing NSS 2 while the legislation that would give the document its statutory underpinning is not yet in place. The legislation should not seek to be overly prescriptive on the process for drawing up a National Spatial Strategy or its content. Nor should the preparation, approval, monitoring and review of the NSS be reliant on secondary or subordinate legislation. The Bill should indicate the role of the NSS in public policy and decision making and the 2006 Planning Act in Scotland could provide

a useful reference point for placing the NSS on a statutory footing.¹ While the legislation should provide a statutory basis for monitoring and review of the NSS, that does not necessarily mean that a revised NSS should be prepared within a specified time period; instead the objective should be to ensure that the policies and proposals in the NSS are having the desired effect.

15. What is as important as providing a legislative basis for the NSS is for the document itself to be purposeful, avoiding self-evident generalisations on the one hand, or direction which restricts unnecessarily the scope for local initiative and action, on the other.

16. There are 3 underlying principles that must be observed and they come from the name – National Spatial Strategy. So, as indicated in para 11, the revised NSS must be **national** in scope; it is not a local plan for Ireland drawn up by the Government. It must be **spatial**, highlighting and seeking to capitalise on the potential of places. The revised NSS should seek to ensure that the spatial implications of key sectoral policies, particularly on infrastructure, are reflected in the revised document and equally the NSS should seek to influence emerging sectoral policies. Finally it must be a **strategy**, not a vehicle for promoting planning concepts with little, if any practical significance or become a wish list or shopping list of projects. A strategy must be internally coherent and its development inevitably involves hard choices. It is not a statement of bland and unobjectionable aims and objectives.

17. The drawing up of the NSS will be a challenging exercise and the Government needs to think about the resources it will devote to the project. What planning officials in the DECLG have achieved over the years is remarkable and, if the NSS is to achieve its potential in guiding effectively the spatial development of Ireland, resourcing of the project has to be considered at the outset. The objective of the NSS is to shape Ireland's spatial development; it must recognise that places have different, distinctive but unequal potential; and the necessary sharp focus on priorities will involve hard choices.

18. There are 4 main issues to cover:-

- Scope and format of the revised NSS
- Approach to preparation of the NSS
- Possible content
- Implementation, Monitoring and Review

Scope and Format

19. It is important to remember that the NSS is a document designed to shape Ireland's territorial development over the next 20/30 years. It is not a statement

¹ Planning etc. (Scotland) Act 2006

of land use planning policy, nor is it a compendium of policies - that would make the document unwieldy. The revised NSS cannot be so prescriptive that it cannot react to or accommodate new opportunities or changed circumstances but, equally, it cannot be so generalised or so flexible that it does not provide the direction and stability to guide key investment and policy decisions. The aim should be to have a short statement, very much on the “less is more” principle, rather than a treatise on spatial development. We are absolutely clear about the need for the NSS to focus on spatial development issues and choices which are genuinely national in scope and scale.

Approach to Preparation

20. A key strength in the development of NSS 2 will be the information and analysis with which to inform strategy, policy and decisions on spatial development. Much of the work done by a number of institutions is truly leading edge and puts Ireland well ahead of the UK in understanding the key trends and issues affecting the country’s spatial development.

21. Considerable effort went into stakeholder involvement with the first NSS and expectations will be high for the second version, not least because the potential implications of the document will be more widely understood. We recommend a statement be issued to explain how the NSS will be drawn up and how/when publicity and consultation, including the use of social media, will be handled.

22. Unlike the first NSS, the next version will be subject to Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), a set of statutory processes which has the potential to add considerable value if handled with rigour and proportion. If handled badly, it has the potential to cost a lot of money for limited benefit and leave the NSS open to legal challenge. The incorporation of SEA into the process of preparing the NSS should be addressed as a matter of urgency and we believe that there would be considerable merit in locating the necessary expertise within the DECLG. The Scottish Government set up a Strategic Environmental Assessment Team not just to support policy development on planning but as a source of advice and expertise across Government Departments. This has brought significant practical benefits as well as delivering very significant cost savings as work that was previously carried out by external consultants is now done in-house at much lower cost.

23. It is essential that the technical work involved in drawing up the NSS is integrated with the processes of stakeholder engagement and SEA.

24. The NSS should not be seen as a DECLG document but as a statement of the Government’s objectives for Ireland’s spatial development. That should be clarified at the outset with Ministers. At the same time, political guidance should

be sought on issues such as the focus of the document, potential tensions and sensitivities. These need to be aired early with Ministers so that they are understood across Government.

Possible Content – Some Suggestions

25. Three issues strike us as central to the debate on Ireland's spatial development. The first is the role of Dublin; the second is the continuing relevance of gateways and hubs; and the third is the future for those areas of Ireland beyond the gateways and hubs.

26. Dublin's economic and cultural significance, nationally and internationally, is well established and we accept the argument that if Dublin is not prospering, then Ireland is not prospering. But Dublin alone is not Ireland and a key objective for the NSS will be to ensure that the potential of other parts of the country are recognised and supported. Moreover, the contribution of spatial development is not simply to confirm and support market trends – the Celtic Tiger economy was built largely on this philosophy. The NSS should aspire to challenge some of these trends. That does not mean promoting development anywhere and everywhere, nor does it mean investing in infrastructure to promote development in areas of limited potential. What it does mean is that, through considered policies and investment decisions, opportunities can be spread more widely because improved regional performance does mean stronger national performance.

27. The first NSS introduced the concept of gateways and hubs. We believe the second NSS should focus on gateways. It is not clear to us that there is any sound justification for the previously selected hubs or that they should have a different status to many other county towns. We would argue that so many hubs were identified in NSS 1 that they limited the value of the designation and placed questions over those parts of the country that have no designation or specified status in the NSS.

28. We favour continuing with each of the National Gateways adopted in the first NSS with the exception of the linked Midlands Gateway. We propose instead that Athlone should be recognised as the Midlands Gateway, because the linked centres approach has not been sufficiently established, diffuses focus, and has proven to be of little substance or value in practice. To a great extent, the Gateways are self-selecting (and this is the case with Athlone) as they have the largest populations, the best transport connections, the highest levels of economic activity and the critical mass of key services such as education and health. They are the key to regional and national success.

29. The individual Gateway settlements are, however, very different and the NSS should clarify what designation as an International or National Gateway

means for each of these settlements in terms of policy and investment. A rigid, stratified, hierarchy should be avoided as it may tend to reinforce current divergences and project them into the future. In addition the NSS should make it clear that it expects the new regional assemblies, drawing on advice from their constituent authorities, to set out how settlements and rural areas can realise their potential. The diversity of Ireland's towns, villages and rural areas means that local government is far better placed to identify and co-ordinate the smaller scale, targeted policies and investments. The forthcoming Regional Indicators Report is an example of the type of information and analysis that will shape locally determined policies and decisions attuned to the needs and potential of areas outside the Gateways.

30. We recognise that rural housing – in terms of quantity, siting and design – remains a divisive and controversial issue in Ireland but it is an issue the DECLG needs to address in future planning guidance. There are 3 main situations where rural housing impacts on spatial development – the role of population and household growth in sustaining fragile rural communities; the extent to which a proliferation of housing can, if not foreclose, then certainly limit options for key infrastructure investment decisions, for example on transport networks and energy transmission; and the extent to which a key part of Ireland's identity and competitive edge – its greenness – can be compromised by excessive amounts of insensitively sited and designed housing, each draining to individual, on-site waste water disposal systems with cumulative implications for ground water contamination.

Implementation, Monitoring and Review

31. The second NSS should set out how the strategy is to be implemented, in particular the key policies and decisions it seeks to influence and how it will be kept under review. The NSS should provide a long term perspective on Ireland's spatial development but the assumptions on which it is based need to be monitored and policies and decisions which are impacting on Ireland's spatial development should be highlighted. An important element to keep under review are the parameters within which flexibility² is operating to ensure that mistakes which have undermined the current NSS are not repeated. The extent to which regional divergences and disparities are being maintained/reduced/increased will be a key test of the NSS. We suggest that a biennial update should be provided

² One of the four main objectives the 1963 Planning and Development Act was intended to achieve was 'the establishment of a flexible nationwide planning system'. In its review of the operation of the first 20 years of the planning system, An Foras Forbartha drew attention to the difference between flexibility as variations in the interpretation of adopted policies / 'the making of exceptions in too many individual cases' and flexibility as the freedom to adapt the planning process 'to ensure it is equally appropriate to the different parts of the country'. The former was identified as a factor in the poor public image of planning and its achievements. *Twenty Years of Planning – a review of the system since 1963*, Dublin: 1983, p. 8-10.

and every 5 years there should be a more formal review. That might not result in a decision to prepare a revised NSS, it is simply a stock take which may or may not lead to a revised NSS. Monitoring would also allow for the introduction of measures to prevent 'over-heating' and the development of further regional disparities at the earliest possible opportunity. We see a significant role for the Planning Regulator in these issues.

Marine Spatial Planning

32. Following the transposition of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive³ in 2011, the Government published *Harvesting our Ocean Wealth: an Integrated Marine Plan for Ireland* in July 2012, which sets out what it describes as a 'roadmap' to secure the sustainable development of Ireland's marine resources. A number of steps have been taken to implement *Harvesting our Ocean Wealth*, including a consultation by the DECLG on what form a new planning and consent system for the marine might take and a review of relevant national, international and EU legislation commissioned by the Marine Institute. While these have not yet been published, it would appear that the current involvement of a significant number of government departments and agencies in marine matters will be streamlined in the interest of efficiency. The 2011 Regulations transposing the Directive assigned responsibility for development of a marine strategy for Ireland's waters to the Minister for the Environment. The Expert Group considers it preferable to have separate terrestrial and marine spatial strategies, because of the different considerations applicable in the two environments. However, provisions for co-ordination between both will need to be integrated into the development and implementation of the next NSS.

³ Dir. 2008/56/EC was transposed into Irish law by the 2011 European Communities (Marine Strategy Framework) Regulations, S.I. 249 of 2011. The Directive imposes obligations on Member States to adopt and implement co-ordinated strategies to protect and restore Europe's marine ecosystems and, in particular, to achieve and maintain good environmental status of their marine waters by 2020.

Conclusions

33. The challenges facing Ireland require leadership, boldness and conviction. That is why we welcome the decisions to review the National Spatial Strategy and to give it a legal basis, as the NSS has the potential to provide that clarity of purpose and direction. The circumstances in which NSS 2 will be drawn up are very different from the period during which the first NSS was prepared and this is clearly recognised in a number of statements from Ministers. There will be difficult choices involved, particularly around spending on strategic infrastructure (both hard and soft), but these dilemmas are endemic to government and while many of the policy and investment choices will require a sharp focus on priorities, it is Ireland as a whole that should be the beneficiary.

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