

Submission by Liam Heaphy, post-doctoral researcher at the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis at Maynooth University (W23 F2H6) in relation to dispersed rural settlement

The Issues and Choices Paper provides an excellent analytical overview of key concerns with respect to the spatial development of the island of Ireland. My comments below reflect my own personal interests in the issue of dispersed rural settlement and expand on the attention given to the phenomenon in the Paper.

1. Climate goals and sustainability

It is well understood in these early discussions on the NPF that Ireland will need to meet its global climate change obligations and reconcile this with the costs attached to providing essential and basic services to a dispersed rural and rural-urban population, as well as to sprawling suburbs and generally low-density urban development.

Similarly, a commitment to ensuring a more sustainable path for Ireland's development requires a statutory approach backed by decision-makers including planners and councillors at local urban and rural scales. As this will be a culturally sensitive process, you have used the worthy term "place-based cultural inheritance" (4.3.17) to help frame discourse on issues such as re-concentrating growth in towns and villages and reinvigorating both urban centres and their rural hinterlands.

2. Attachments to dispersed settlement patterns

Following from the above, a place-based approach may benefit from a consultation of the published work by (other) scholars on historical settlement patterns, which may enlighten discourse on rural development in such cases where historical grievances are brought to the fore in relation to the justification for dispersed housing.

A strategic NPF may help frame planning consultation and individual planning decisions through a shared understanding of local settlement patterns and their regional variations. This can be occasioned through regular public engagement such as is presently conducted by the Tipperary Studies People and Places Lecture series, as well as through attention to architectural solutions that are both sensitive to local history yet also commensurate with our sustainability goals.

3. Emotional and spiritual conceptions of landscape

Dispersed settlement patterns and scattered housing are naturally intertwined with our understanding of landscape, whether based on empirical spatial analysis or on local lore in the tradition of local scholarship such as that of Mainchín Seoighe on Kilmallock.

Therefore, I consider that it will be useful to integrate closely with our Landscape Strategy in relation to rural land-use to develop and articulate a shared appreciation of our landscape inasmuch as this is possible. This articulation will benefit from a keen awareness of how our landscape is encoded into story, poetry and song as much as it is into the spatial distribution of people and activities.

4. Language and landscape

Lastly, our historical interpretation of landscape is, of course, largely encoded into the Irish language and now, for the greater part of the population, translated into the English language and inevitably losing a degree of its vigour – a situation compounded by the rapidity of its decline in past centuries.

Therefore, in light of the close relationship between cultural vitality and the analytical and aesthetic appreciation of our natural assets, I consider that an important part of this place-based approach could be on how sense of place has altered in relation to the vitality of the Irish language in a globalised world.