



[Engineers Ireland (IEI); Irish Landscape Institute (ILI); Irish Planning Institute (IPI); Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (RIAI) and the Society of Chartered Surveyors (SCS)]

A BETTER QUALITY OF LIFE FOR ALL

Proposals for creating a more sustainable built environment

13 February 2007



Unparalleled Growth and Development

Fastest Growing Population

The population of the Republic of Ireland now stands at over 4.2 million – its highest level for well over a century. The country also has the fastest growing population in Europe, rising at a rate of 2.5% per annum, and it is estimated that our population is likely to increase to over 5 million by 2020 with anywhere between 70,000 to 100,000 immigrants arriving every year.

Increased Suburbanisation

Not surprisingly, there has been a boom in housing output to meet this burgeoning population as well as major changes in our social and family life. Almost half of all dwellings in Ireland have been planned and delivered by the private sector since 1990.

This population growth is accelerating the urbanisation of the country. However, this phenomenon is more complex than it might otherwise seem – our town and city centre populations are declining as our suburbs continue to sprawl and grow. Cork and Limerick cities declined by 3.2% and 2.7% respectively, while their county areas grew by 11.4% and 8.3% respectively. To highlight this problem even more starkly, Dublin will soon occupy the same surface area as Los Angeles, but with less than a quarter of its population.

Domination by Dublin

Another dimension of Ireland's new urbanisation is the extent to which this growth in population and development is being dominated by Dublin, with the province of Leinster now accounting for 54% of our population.

While decentralisation has been proposed as one means of addressing the *Dublinisation* of Ireland, the creation of so many new locations for these public service offices only tends to dilute the impact of this measure. The reality is that the creation of a new major urban centre – with a similar pulling power to Dublin – is needed on the country's west coast. The Government's Atlantic Gateway project should become a priority to achieve this objective.

One-Off Housing

In addition to the rapid growth of our outer suburbs, the explosion in the number of one-off houses in rural Ireland has been another phenomenon of Ireland's recent development. These now account for up to 40% of our new housing stock.

Serious Consequences

What are the consequences of these major population shifts and the nature of our recent development pattern?

Pressure on Infrastructure

One of them is that schools and other facilities in our cities and inner suburbs are struggling to remain open while the demand for school places in outlying areas is booming. This pressure on infrastructure in the outer suburbs is reflected in increasing pressure on our water and sewerage systems and a distinct lack of social facilities.

There is also increased pressure on urban landscapes. Insecure public ownership, reduction in park lands and sporting facilities for new development and infrastructure as well as underdeveloped park resources contribute to a poorer urban quality of life.

Increasing Oil-Dependency

One of the consequences of Ireland's 'suburbanisation' is the reality that for many 'city' dwellers, they are as car dependent as their rural neighbours. The average car in Ireland travels, on an annual basis, 24,400km per year – 70% more than France or Germany, 50% more than Britain – and even 30% more than the USA.

The price of this rapid economic success and our fast increasing use of cars is that Ireland has become the fifth most oil-dependent country in the EU and the ninth in the world. This is taking place at a time when oil is becoming an ever-scarcer resource.

Imbalance in Transport Development

At the same time as we are becoming more oil-dependent, we are investing more in roads than in rail. Under Transport 21, the Government is proposing to spend almost five times more on road than on rail. This is despite the fact that Ireland has 3,312km of railway compared to 95,736km of roads. Interestingly, a train carrying over 100 passengers would use the same amount of fuel as ten cars – carrying, on average, up to 20 people. In addition, priority needs to be given to buses on quality bus corridors (QBCs) which are also more efficient than cars.

Serious Health Effects

A recent report published by the Institute of Public Health in Ireland shows that the type of development pattern Ireland is following causes serious health problems for many people.

The report, *Health Impacts of the Built Environment* found that:

- There is substantial evidence to suggest that urban sprawl could contribute to an increase in obesity levels, as increased car dependency, longer commuting times and fewer opportunities for physical exercise become a feature of life for many people;
- Car dependent communities are characterised by poor neighbour networking and social relationships, and this can contribute to increased rates of social isolation;
- More sustainable communities, that are planned and developed with regard to the health impact of the built environment, could enjoy lower levels of obesity, cardiovascular disease, asthma and psychological stress.

There is a lot of research to show that we in Ireland could be facing epidemics of chronic illnesses such as diabetes, obesity, depression, osteoporosis and cancer, which are devastating to people's quality of life as well as their life expectancy. Fundamental changes to our built environment are necessary to help combat these new epidemics.

Change is Needed

Based on all of this evidence, the Urban Forum – which is made up of the five bodies representing the professionals in the Irish construction industry: Engineers Ireland (IEI); Irish Landscape Institute (ILI); Irish Planning Institute (IPI); Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (RIAI) and the Society of Chartered Surveyors (SCS) – has developed this policy paper to set out a clear agenda for tackling these serious issues during the lifetime of the next Government.

The Urban Forum recognises that the recently published National Development Plan (NDP) will help to address some of the issues we mention below such as the provision of social housing and schools. We also welcome the commitment to developing the Atlantic Corridor.

However, the very fact that the NDP is increasing investment in infrastructure provision gives even greater urgency to some of our proposals, particularly those designed to address some of the systemic problems which beset the way our built environment is developing. For example the review of the National Spatial Strategy, the proper resourcing of our planning system and construction research will all be vital in order for Ireland to be in a position to deliver this vital infrastructure more effectively.

Update of the National Spatial Strategy

The Urban Form calls for the preparation of an updated National Spatial Strategy (NSS) and of the Regional planning Guidelines. The most recent Census shows that our population is growing at a much higher rate than was

projected at the time when the NSS was prepared, so a new Spatial Strategy is required in order to create a more sustainable urban structure within a generation.

This updated NSS should have as a central objective support for the growth of a second major conurbation of international significance centred on Cork, Limerick and Galway as a counter balance to the growth of Dublin. The Atlantic Gateway Initiative is welcomed in this regard.

There is an urgent need to update population and housing projections in the Regional Planning Guidelines in the light of the 2006 census.

Integrated Land Use and Transport Bodies for our Cities

The Urban Forum believes that there is a need to create the Greater Dublin Land Use and Transport Authority promised in an earlier government manifesto and to consider the creation of similar bodies for other larger cities.

There is a need to take action on the Local Government Act 2001 by establishing the permanent Local Government Commission to examine the cases for the extension of the boundaries of our main cities and towns where administrative areas of counties and cities are overlapping.

Government Guidelines

While the Urban Forum welcomes the Department of the Environment Heritage and Local Government's (DoEHLG) intention to publish new guidelines on development plans and residential densities, we feel that a number of the recommendations in the guideline documents should be mandatory, as they are currently ignored by many authorities.

A stronger commitment to follow up non-compliance in relation to the planning hierarchy of national, regional and county plans is also needed.

Staffing of Planning Authorities

The Urban Forum considers that it should be the duty of the DoEHLG to monitor the performance of the local authorities and to ensure that each planning authority is adequately staffed with professional staffing levels appropriate to its current growth of population and infrastructural needs.

The Government's embargo on public service recruitment in the planning area is unhelpful given the rapid increase in population and the demands of the NSS, the NESC Report of December 2004 and other key elements of policy development. Professional staffing should include conservation and landscape architecture disciplines in addition to planning, architecture and engineering staff.

Delivery of Social and Affordable Housing

In implementing Part V (social and affordable housing) of the Planning and Development Act, there is an urgent need for transparency and a more consistent methodology and approach between local authorities throughout the country. While some local authorities are proactive in creating substantial new social, and particularly affordable, housing in balanced communities, others take little action themselves and do not fully enforce Part V conditions.

In tackling these inconsistencies a number of measures need to be taken.

Firstly, the provision of dwelling units or land should be used in preference to the payment of financial contributions where this is feasible.

Secondly, the current exemption of one-off houses and small sites or developments on un-zoned land is inequitable and increases the bias towards urban sprawl. The Act should be changed to make planning permissions for residential development on all (zoned and unzoned) land subject to Part V. For single houses and small schemes financial contributions could be set at predetermined levels. This would simplify the administration of the Act by eliminating exemption certificates.

Land Values and House Prices

The Urban Forum welcomes the commitment of An Taoiseach and the Government to enacting the recommendations contained in the Ninth Progress Report (on Private Property) of the All Party Committee on the Constitution in relation to enabling local authorities to acquire land they rezone at existing use value plus an agreed percentage – even if this requires a referendum.

We hope all other parties would support this move, as it will have a major impact on the provision of affordable housing and community facilities. In this context, it's worth bearing in mind that such legislative change would save a substantial proportion of the €21 billion set aside for social and affordable housing under the National Development Plan – monies that could then be applied to other beneficial purposes.

Plan Led Development

Local authorities should be encouraged to consider the full implications of re-zoning land, and to prepare comprehensive local plans with coordinated infrastructure provision (including school and other community infrastructure) where lands are zoned for development. Such plans can include Strategic Development Zones (SDZs) like Adamstown, or Local Area Plans, Framework or Masterplans. This may also require new structures for the delivery of infrastructure in particular water services.

Protect and Enhance Urban Landscapes

Protection of our current stock of urban parks is required by securing public ownership or revision of the open space zoning parameters. Our urban parks should be enhanced through specific and adequate funding for new recreational facilities to counteract, for example, our growing trend towards childhood obesity and reinforce this through the establishment of national recreational guidelines. In addition, enhancement of urban greening initiatives is necessary, especially for inner city locations to balance the negative environmental issues of increased urban development.

Fiscal Measures

Through inbuilt mechanisms that deter people from moving in to smaller houses or to purchase older instead of new houses, existing fiscal measures (including stamp duty rates) can contribute to unnecessary sprawl and decline of population in established housing areas.

It is recommended that other fiscal measures should be considered in order to avoid such disadvantages. The introduction of such measures requires careful consideration and debate.

Research

Independent research is needed in the areas of construction, development, architecture and planning and green space. A national body with responsibility to coordinate existing research, appraise it and to stimulate further research should be established to replace An Foras Forbartha, which was abolished in the 1980s.

Community Involvement

Full input from local communities in decision making in relation to the built environment is essential to achieve the objective of creating sustainable communities. The Urban Forum also believes that such participation is one of

the key steps in creating a more active citizenry and in developing the country's social capital.

While some local authorities have adopted the Local Area Plan planning mechanism in a creative and effective manner, others have failed because such plans are used primarily to achieve rezoning of individual landholdings with little community involvement.

Rail Based Transport Infrastructure

A greater emphasis on efficient 'high speed' railways connected with local suburban rail and light rail services are essential to achieve the urban development patterns that are envisaged in national and regional planning strategies.

Delivery

In order to deliver the proposals made in this manifesto, it is the view of the Urban Forum that a dedicated Department of Urbanism or a specific high level Cabinet Committee should be established to coordinate the activities, and plans, of all various state bodies responsible for the built environment.

Conclusion

As we stated at the outset of this document, Ireland is experiencing an unprecedented period of growth and development, with much of the building stock which will be around for the next century being put in place right now. Clearly then the decisions and actions we take at this moment will have a massive impact on the country's landscape and cityscapes as well as on the lives of at least the next five or six generations.

The Urban Forum believes that it is time to take stock so that we can continue doing those things that we are doing well and correct those elements that are not so good. We believe it is critical that the built environment features in the public and political debate that takes place in the lead up to and during the next election.

We hope this manifesto contributes to this debate and we very much look forward to playing our part and engaging with all parties and candidates in this regard.