

## **Comhar Working Group on Spatial Planning**

### **Further Submission on National Spatial Strategy Process**

#### **Input to Stage 3 of the Process**

The National Spatial Strategy Scope and Delivery document identified Comhar as a key contributor to the consultation process concerned with sustainable development. In addition to a presentation to the Comhar Plenary meeting of December 2000, members of the Spatial Planning Unit met on two occasions with Comhar's working group on Spatial Planning. At these meetings, Comhar members raised some of the key issues concerning proposed areas of research, and the integration into the proposed policy of the three aspects of sustainable development – environmental, economic and social.

The preparation of the plan is moving into stage 3: the preparation of Policy Papers (the stage where the results of the research and data gathering are to be integrated). When we reviewed the research tasks set out in the scoping document, we noted that some social and environmental aspects were not fully covered. These aspects will need to be considered during the forthcoming integration process.

We have set out five policy themes (and questions):

#### **1. Protecting resources while developing economic and social potential.**

##### ***How does this translate into a strategic policy framework?***

This is one of the fundamental issues for a sustainable national spatial strategy. All resources in a region or an area, including social, cultural, ecological and physical resources, need to be taken into account in the devising of a spatial policy framework. In devising a strategic spatial framework, the sensitivities of coastal

zones, upland areas and other areas vulnerable to depletion of resources, need particular consideration. The following issues should be taken into account:

- Social, economic and cultural cohesion within rural communities

- Heritage – both cultural and physical

- Conservation of built and natural heritage

- Biodiversity

- Ecological networks including habitat corridors linking SACs

Note: we take heritage to include all aspects of the interaction of a civilisation and its environment, including cultural heritage, built heritage and natural heritage. Conservation refers to the policies and resultant actions taken to protect important aspects of our built and natural heritage.

## **2. Sustainable settlements**

### ***Is there an optimal size for a town or city?***

In formulating policy around this issue, we must consider the integration of social, cultural and economic issues with environmental and quality of life factors. Some relevant issues are:

- Social inclusion

- Functional zones or catchment areas

- Transport

- Energy

- Waste

- Broad Band telecoms

- Conservation

- Social/cultural cohesion implications for functional areas

***What form of rural housing or new settlement clusters could be sustainable?***

One-off houses in rural areas for people who commute to work in the town or city are perceived as not a sustainable pattern of settlement in the long term. However this issue needs to be addressed as part of a broader strategic framework which would look at positive incentives (i.e. tax/grant system) that encourage settlement clusters based around existing villages and schools. Some relevant issues are:

Rural transport

Conservation

Social cohesion

**3. Creating networks of towns (and villages)**

***How can these work in practice?***

A simulation exercise may be required to test out this approach. The gateway concept can also be formulated as a cluster of towns rather than a single town. Some relevant issues are:

**Transport:**

Intra-regional links

Public transport services

Accessible transport

Infrastructure led communications network

**Quality of life:**

Social inclusion

Socio-economic development

Social/cultural cohesion

Conservation

Where clustering translates into different adjacent towns being assigned different functions, there may be a de facto “no man’s land” in the outer zone. Residential development may be attracted to one of the towns in preference to the others.

#### **4. County/regional/ national framework co-ordination**

##### ***To what level can the National Spatial Strategy go in setting out policy?***

There are some “cross boundary” issues to be identified, concerning the point at which the national strategy is to be incorporated at the levels of regional planning, development plans and county strategies. It should be noted that the sum of the county strategies (currently in preparation) by the County and City Development Boards may not add up to a sustainable national framework.

#### **5. Sustainable Regional Development**

##### ***How can all the issues arising above be integrated into the national spatial policy so that the aim of sustainable regional development is realised?***

The consideration of the first four policy themes/questions brings out the key issues to be integrated into the final formulation of the strategy. The strategy must be informed by an overarching understanding of sustainable development principles and practices. It will be essential to develop indicators to assess progress and conformity with sustainability principles.

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