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development principles

5. DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLES

The Irish Government has embraced the principles of sustainable development in the adoption of the National Sustainable Development Strategy. The Guidelines must be based on these principles. In particular, the Guidelines must seek to reduce growth in demand for transport, achieve a clearer distinction between urban and rural areas and place increased emphasis on transportation modes alternative to the private car.

Similar principles are emerging from the European Spatial Development Perspective and these, too, must inform the Strategic Planning Guidelines.

The Guidelines must also seek to accommodate the scale of predicted growth, whilst being sufficiently flexible to allow for variations in the levels of growth anticipated. The Guidelines should not have an adverse impact on the supply of housing in the immediate future, should facilitate higher development densities and ensure the conservation of heritage and the environment.

PRINCIPLES OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the need to seek for environmental sustainability, to share the world's resources and to ensure that these are available for the use of future generations.

The most commonly quoted definition of 'sustainable development' is that from the Brundtland Report:

'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

The concept of sustainability recognises the necessity for development to meet human needs and aspirations and combines with it the idea of environmental limitations, some of them absolute but others imposed by technology and social organisation.

Sustainability does not imply the cessation of development. On the contrary, development is necessary to meet the needs of society and to overcome problems such as poverty and inequity. However, in meeting essential human needs, development must seek to conserve and enhance the resource base in order to protect the endowment of future generations.

In considering sustainability, it is useful to distinguish 'needs' from 'wants'. In addition to the basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, etc., there is a range of personal needs taken for granted in modern economies, and there are also national needs required to sustain the economy (such as good education, good communications for commerce and trade, etc.). Wants are less essential, but under some circumstances can become needs. For example, the highly flexible, comfortable and rapid transport offered by the private car is not an essential need, but can become one if there are no adequate alternative means of meeting the need for transportation (as for many rural dwellers). Similarly, if demand for motorways to facilitate the private car grows sufficiently high, a political need to provide the infrastructure may develop.



It is also important to distinguish between 'sustainability' and 'environmental quality'. It is possible to establish sustainability at different levels of environmental quality. For example, a large industrial process plant could be sustainable in terms of resource use, energy, discharges to the environment, etc., but could be visually ugly and possibly give rise to odour problems.

Within the developed countries of the world, including the European Union, there is now a serious commitment to the implementation of the principles of sustainability, alongside considerations such as cost and environmental impact, in decision making.

The Irish Government Position

In 1995, the Irish Government, as part of its response to the principles and agenda established at the 'Earth Summit' held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, published 'Local Authorities and Sustainable Development - Guidelines on Local Agenda 21'. These guidelines suggest that each local authority revisit its own policies and practices to assess their sustainability. Many local authorities have already responded to this invitation and others are actively engaged in the re-appraisal of policies and programmes.

The commitment of central government was further strengthened by the adoption of a National Sustainable Development Strategy in 1997. This strategy is set out in the document 'Sustainable Development - A Strategy for Ireland'. The overall aim of the strategy is:

'to ensure that economy and society in Ireland can develop to their full potential within a well protected environment, without compromising the quality of that environment, and with responsibility towards present and future generations and the wider international community'.

Sustainability is seen as a dynamic, inclusive and quality concept that requires a continuing adaptation and review of policies, actions and lifestyles. The strategy addresses all areas of Government policy and the economic, physical and social activities that impact on the environment. It also sets out a range of specific initiatives.

It is evident that there is a strong commitment to the principles of sustainable development at national, regional and local level in Ireland. However, the effects of this commitment are only beginning to impact on the day-to-day activities of the population, and on the development process. As the policy base is formulated, developed and adopted, the impacts on all aspects of life will become increasingly apparent.

Implications for the Greater Dublin Area

The principles of sustainability have been adopted by the Irish Government and by Local Government within the Greater Dublin Area, and have been endorsed as the basis for future planning and development. Against this background of national and local government commitment, it is an absolute requirement that the future planning and development of the Greater Dublin Area be based on the principles of sustainability and that the criteria selected for the assessment of options also incorporate these principles. Any other approach would contravene both government policy and the essential need to maintain and protect the environment and would not be a responsible course of action.

Key policy statements, actions and measures, relevant to the Strategic Planning Guidelines for the Greater Dublin Area, taken from 'Sustainable Development - A Strategy for Ireland', are summarised in Appendix 4.

It is clear from a review of the National Sustainable Development Strategy that the preparation of Strategic Planning Guidelines is seen as a sustainable development initiative in itself, and that local authorities will be required to incorporate sustainable development considerations in development plans. Of particular significance to the Strategic Planning Guidelines are the following points:

- Land-use and transportation planning are to be more closely co-ordinated.
- The zoning of land will not necessarily imply the servicing of these lands.
- Planning strategies and policies will be expected to achieve a reduction in the growth in demand for transport.
- Planning strategies and policies will be expected to achieve a clearer demarcation between urban and rural land uses than at present.
- There will be increasing emphasis in the future on transportation alternatives to the private car, with particular attention given to the rail network.

OTHER DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLES

European Spatial Development Perspective

This European Union initiative has been summarised in Chapter 1. The Strategic Planning Guidelines should seek to incorporate, as appropriate, the principal policy directions emerging from the European Spatial Development Perspective. In particular, the Guidelines should:

- seek for the sustainable development of the Greater Dublin Area, with a strong, complementary relationship between urban areas and the countryside;
- seek to strengthen Dublin and the principal towns as attractive and competitive, but complementary, urban areas;
- allow for the diversification of rural areas;
- achieve better accessibility and the more efficient and sustainable use of infrastructure; and
- enhance the conservation and management of the natural and cultural heritage.

Need for Flexibility

The growth in the Irish economy over the past few years has been remarkable. It is also remarkable that economic predictions and forecasts all indicate that this economic buoyancy will continue well into the next century and that the Greater Dublin Area will be at the forefront of this growth.

Clearly, no guarantee can be given that the economic boom will continue as predicted. However, the most prudent course is to plan for the levels of predicted growth and to



seek to accommodate the development requirements of such an economy, whilst retaining sufficient flexibility in the approach to allow for adjustments if growth is not so rapid as expected.

Therefore, principles of the Guidelines should be:

- to plan for the greatest level of reasonable predicted growth; and
- to include sufficient flexibility in the strategy to permit adjustment to lower levels of growth if the need arises.

An impact of adopting these principles will be to eliminate strategic options that are critically dependent on achieving the predicted levels of growth to succeed. An example might be a major new town designed to accommodate a very large part of the predicted growth in population, and which would require vast capital investment. If the level of predicted growth were not achieved, the benefit of that investment could be lost, or at least significantly delayed.

The Bacon Report

The urgent need to address the existing supply and cost of housing was addressed in the Bacon Report and a number of recommendations made to improve the supply. Some of the findings of the Bacon Report with particular significance for the Greater Dublin Area include:

- The share of house completions in the Dublin Region (but not the Greater Dublin Area) has not increased significantly as a proportion of national house completions (in 1997 the share actually dropped to 24.3%) and this has contributed to the relatively high cost of housing in that region.
- In the Dublin region, apartments and semi-detached houses accounted for 86% of house completions in 1997, as compared to 40% in the rest of the country, where detached houses and bungalows were more significant.
- *"Economic growth, demography, cost of finance and the speed of the supply response of house completions are the key determinants of house price determination and housing supply. In Dublin it has been estimated that this supply response is only half what it is in the rest of the country, pointing to special limiting influences such as land availability (with consequential effects on site costs) and other non-economic influences such as planning, playing an important role in Dublin."*
- *"The demand factors at work in Dublin are much the same as in the country as a whole. However, the force of some of these is greater, notably income growth - probably as a result of greater concentration of high value employment in the Dublin region and demographic influences, notably through a concentration of in-migration in household formation ages."*
- The price elasticity of supply in Dublin is half what it is for the country as a whole and *"relates to shortages of serviced land in Dublin (with attendant impact on site cost); a longer planning process in Dublin.....and other economic influences which can lead to a more protracted completions process"* and, in a small number of cases, the phased releasing of new developments.

To improve the potential supply of housing, the Bacon Report recommended that planning authorities be directed *"to adopt a more pro-active approach towards increased density developments which, because of their location, would contribute to the principles of sustainability."* As a response to this, the Minister for the Environment and Local Government issued Circular Letter PD 4/98 (see below) and commissioned the preparation of Planning Guidelines on density.

The report also supported the priority development of settlements with existing or proposed high quality public transport links and identified the need for *"considerable investment . . . in the improvement and development of infrastructure"* to realise the potential of housing land.

The Bacon Report identified the *"significant areas of available residentially zoned land in the Mid East Region"*, but also recognised that these had poor accessibility to the city and significant infrastructure shortcomings. Whilst the report considered that *"unanticipated take-up rates are eroding the land bank in the Dublin Region faster than anticipated"*, it did not make specific recommendations for additional zoning of residential land. Instead, it recommended that this should await the Strategic Planning Guidelines. In the meantime, any variations or material contraventions of development plans should be guided by the principles of sustainability.

It is clear that the need for the zoning of additional residential lands is becoming more acute. Consequently, whatever strategy forms the basis for the Strategic Planning Guidelines, it will have to:

- Ensure that an adequate supply of land for new housing is facilitated in the short term (next three years). At the very least, the Guidelines must not reduce the amount of available land, or slow down its release.

Residential Density

Higher residential densities are identified in the National Sustainable Development Strategy as contributing to the achievement of sustainability. Current Government policy in this regard is set out in Circular Letter PD 4/98 of the Department of the Environment and Local Government.

The benefits of increased residential density are identified in the Circular Letter as:

- more economic use of existing infrastructure and serviced land;
- a reduced need for the development of greenfield sites, urban sprawl and ribbon development;
- reduced need for investment in new infrastructure;
- better access to existing services and facilities; and
- more sustainable commuting patterns.

It is the intention of Government to publish Planning Guidelines in relation to residential densities. In the meantime, local authorities are to be guided by the advice contained in the Circular Letter, which includes:



- The recognition that *"demand for accommodation in urban areas is in the process of diversifying from the traditional suburban development.....to one of greater choice of type and location linked to individual households' circumstances"*;
- *"Market indications are that higher residential densities are attainable in certain circumstances"*;
- Planning authorities should *"promote increased residential density."*;
- Development plans should *"give specific recognition to the importance of achieving higher residential density in appropriate areas such as:*
 - *brownfield sites;*
 - *sites in proximity to town centres;*
 - *public transport nodes and access points."*;
- *"Local authorities should also review their policies in relation to densities permitted in greenfield developments."*;
- Specific measures to be considered by planning authorities include:
 - Avoidance of maximum density standards;
 - Specification of minimum density standards at suitable locations;
 - Permitting densities higher than adjoining areas in infill developments;
 - Requiring an appropriate mix of dwelling types in suburban areas;
 - Greater flexibility in the application of planning standards.

The Circular Letter identifies the need for a high quality of layout and design and a good quality living environment if increased residential densities are to be acceptable and that these, in turn, may require the preparation and implementation of action area plans.

The Guidelines must reflect the direction of current policy towards higher development densities and seek to facilitate higher densities at appropriate locations.

Conservation

The National Sustainable Development Strategy includes a number of measures and actions relating to the conservation of the natural environment and the protection of air and water quality. The Guidelines must have full regard to these policies and facilitate the on-going conservation of the natural and built environment.

