Commentary on the paper:

Spatial Planning in the Republic of Ireland

by

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Introduction
Dr Berna Grist’s paper has set out a comprehensive overview of the historical and institutional context for spatial planning in Ireland, as well as outlining the emergence of Ireland’s National Spatial Strategy and experience in its implementation since 2002.

This paper outlines a number of additional points with the benefit of the writers involvement in the lead-up to the preparation of the NSS, the preparation process itself and implementation over the past decade or so as a Senior Planning Adviser within the now titled Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government.

While Dr Grist’s paper identifies a number of key challenges the NSS has had to face, it is probably reasonable to say at this point that the Republic of Ireland, as with other countries in Europe, has been making progress over the past decade in adapting its planning systems towards the broader and more strategic purpose of spatial planning over a traditional focus on physical or land use planning.

Background to the NSS
The publication, by Government, of the NSS in 2002 represented the culmination of a very significant resurgence in institutional and political interest in spatial planning and regional development that occurred during the 1990’s.

A resurgent economy and growing political sensitivity towards a sense that different parts of Ireland were benefiting unevenly from that resurgence was a significant factor in this regard. So too were the analyses carried out by leading academics and a number of important organisations in the economic development area, including Shannon Development, a pioneer of an innovative regional development model centred around an airport on the west coast of Ireland and the nearby city of Limerick, and Forfás, the Government’s economic research body.

In the context of the more low key performance of the Irish economy during the late 1970’s, 1980’s and early 1990’s and when levels of development were quite low, co-ordination between 88 planning authorities and more importantly 34 city and county councils was perhaps not seen by Government as a key issue. But by the time the so called celtic tiger economy began to awaken in the late 1990’s, it was becoming very clear that a bigger picture plan or framework would be very useful and even desirable.

It is important to recall at this point that as this national consensus was developing about the need for a national spatial plan, territorial or spatial planning was only really conducted at the level of the city and county councils (34 entities) for a population of around 4.4 million people and there was increasing concern in Government about the effectiveness of this approach as evidenced by interventions by the Department of the Environment in both county level planning in Kildare in the mid 1990’s and in the establishment of a process to prepare “Strategic Planning Guidelines”
for the Greater Dublin Area in 1998. There was, therefore, much work to do in establishing an effective framework for spatial planning.

The primary legislative framework for spatial planning in Ireland, the Planning and Development Act 1963, was also due for overhaul. Reform and consolidation of Irish planning legislation under the direction of the then Minister for the Environment Mr Noel Dempsey T.D. went on to produce the Planning and Development Act (2000), which introduced the concept of Regional Planning Guidelines and offered retrospective legal recognition for the Strategic Planning Guidelines document referred to above that had been agreed between the 7 planning authorities responsible for planning in and adjacent to Dublin.

The above 1999 document had been a collective effort between the Department of the Environment, the relevant local authorities¹ and the two regional authorities² for the Greater Dublin Area and was part of a range of initiatives emerging at the time to deal with the rapid development of Dublin and emerging concerns regarding the availability and affordability of housing and the rise of commuter type development in and around the capital and its improving radial road and rail infrastructure. Experience in relation to planning for Dublin had heightened the role of a more strategic level of spatial planning in the minds of Ministers and civil servants in the Department during 1999.

Eventually, with work completed on the NSS and an election out of the way, the NSS was finally published in late 2002 and with it the word “where” would be added to the lexicon of Irish Government policy.

¹ Dublin City Council, Fingal County Council, South Dublin County Council, Dunlaoighaire Rathdown County Council, Meath County Council, Kildare County Council, Wicklow County Council.
² Dublin Regional Authority (responsible for co-ordination matters between the first four local authorities above) and Mid East Regional Authority (responsible for co-ordination matters between the latter three local authorities above)
The factors that led to the decision by Government to go down the route of a national spatial plan were many, but in my view, the critical ones were as follows:

**Political:** The extra-ordinary progress being made by the Irish economy in the late 1990’s and which continued into the middle of the following decade but which raised political concerns regarding the performance in economic and physical development terms between different parts of Ireland, principally the very rapid development of the capital Dublin and its environs and more underdeveloped areas to the west;

**Economic:** The views of the key economic development agencies and certain government think-tanks, including principally the Industrial Development Agency (IDA), Shannon Development, Forfás and the Economic Social Research Institute (ESRI), that in order to position itself in an increasingly globalised and competitive economic context, Ireland needed a longer term spatial plan to organise strategic investment in infrastructure and local planning, creating the conditions conducive to long-term sustainable economic development and investment, especially foreign direct investment (FDI);

**Sustainability:** A national strategy for sustainable development had been published by Government in 1997. The then Department of the Environment and Local Government had prepared the strategy above and was also responsible for planning, local government and many of the key infrastructural investment areas central to planning including all road investment, water services and housing.

**Investment:** The burgeoning performance of the Irish economy had, by the late 1990’s created both the imperative for and the means for sustained investment in essential physical and social infrastructure. As the celtic tiger economy continued to develop, significant deficiencies in Ireland’s stock of
infrastructure were beginning to emerge, especially in areas such as transport, housing, water services, energy supply, communications and education. The Irish Department of Finance, by then moving towards multi-annual capital investment plans that were also partly driven by EU structural funding measures and co-funding requirements, could see the merit of a longer term 20 year spatial framework. Initial discussions between the Departments of Finance and Environment in the context of the preparation of the National Development Plan 2000-2006 led to an agreement that the plan would contain a commitment to prepare a National Spatial Strategy by 2002, which would feed into both a mid term evaluation of the plan in 2003 and set the context for its successor. The scene was set for a resurgence of strategic planning in Ireland.

**Highlights of the National Spatial Strategy**

With the NSS in place, Government had for the first time established an overall strategic planning framework for the country for the period to 2020 within which every part of Ireland would contribute to the optimal performance of the country as a whole in economic, social and environmental terms.

In other words, the NSS was not a redistributive strategy, but one based on the then emergent European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) document concept of “potential” or the optimal development of different territorial areas recognising that potential will differ between those territorial units, whether urban or rural.

The NSS was also highly significant in that it was and remains closely associated with investment in infrastructure under the National Development Plans, firstly the 2000-2006 plan and then the 2007-2013 plan.
The NSS also set Ireland, for the first time, in a wider spatial planning context including Northern Ireland and its Regional Development Strategy, (which was published in 1999 and was quite influential on the process of developing the NSS) and the wider EU and global context as well.

Comprehensive arrangements were also put in place to support implementation of the strategy. For the Department, this was new territory in that while it had been for many years responsible for the planning process, this was the first time that the Department itself had prepared, on behalf of the Government, a spatial plan and would now be responsible for implementation.

Under arrangements approved by Government, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government would be responsible for driving the implementation of the NSS supported by reciprocal responsibilities for follow through on the strategy by regional and local authorities, overseen by an interdepartmental steering group with representatives from all the key spending departments and certain agencies, notably the enterprise promotion agencies.

In spatial planning terms, the NSS envisaged Ireland’s strategic development being organised around an integrated set of interrelated and interdependent spatial components including:

- Nine differently sized Gateway cities and towns, some with links to Northern Ireland, that are envisaged as strategic economic motors for their wider regions of influence;
- Nine differently sized Hub towns located strategically between the Gateways and extending their influence to wider areas;
- County Towns working in support of the role of Gateways and Hub towns;
- Other smaller towns focusing on their own individual potential for development and identity;
• Villages and wider rural areas that would be supported in their ongoing economic transformation towards a more broadly based rural economy by capitalising on and conserving their unique environmental and heritage qualities.

A key concept additional to the one of potential was critical mass and the need to grow certain locations, most notably the Gateway cities and towns and Hub towns to create both the basis for sustained investment in infrastructure and the regional conditions essential to sustained private sector investment and innovation in economic activity.

Since the launch of the NSS, there has been analysis and comment that the strategy sought to designate too many centres and that it would have been better to simply focus development on one or a small number of cities for Ireland to compete and thrive in the longer term. However, careful analysis of the actual document will confirm to the reader that Government strongly acknowledged the key role played by Dublin and the key cities and the need for responding investment and that the NSS was to be seen as a spatial plan for the country as a whole, not just the key cities.

**The Implementation Process**

Ireland’s development since the NSS was launched in late 2002 has swung from strong sustainable economic progress to rampant then unsustainable economic growth to unprecedented challenges to economic recession, then part stabilisation in line with wider EU and global economic challenges.

So too with the NSS, there have been good steps forward and difficulties to contend with and the challenge now as the mid term point of the NSS approaches, is that lessons are learned from experience to date and that those lessons are put to good use in the new economic context Ireland will find itself in as the current difficulties are managed and resolved.
In terms of progress, highlights since 2002 have included:

- Investment support by key Departments and agencies who have in the main co-ordinated their high level investment programmes around the spatial framework of the NSS resulting in sustained transformation of the country’s stock of physical and social infrastructure; including, inter alia
  - The completion (by end 2010) of over 1000 km of inter-urban motorways/dual carriageways between all the key cities;
  - Total renewal of the intercity rail infrastructure, including track, signalling, rolling stock and many stations;
  - Provision of proper waster services infrastructure in most centres of population in compliance with EU requirements and targets to deal with any outstanding issues over the short-term;
  - Substantial urban renewal and regeneration of existing urban and housing areas, in Dublin and other regional locations.
- The National Development Plan 2007-2013 which was heavily influenced by the NSS and which as a result of the strategy, proposed a €300million measure to stimulate development of key areas in Gateway locations through a bid based Gateway Innovation Fund, although the GIF was ultimately postponed due to the dramatic downturn in exchequer conditions in 2008;
- The emergence of innovative models of strategic plan led and place making focused development, of the type called for in the NSS and that are in the process of creating new communities in both brownfield (Dublin Docklands) and greenfield locations (Adamstown Strategic Development Zone in west Dublin) and in other Gateways (Cork Area Strategic Plan and re-instatement of Midleton rail line to facilitate new housing development);
- The establishment of regional planning through the publication of Regional Planning Guidelines by Regional Authorities in 2004 (reviewed in 2010) to extend the approach of the NSS and completing an integrated plan hierarchy of national, regional and local plans;
• Progress in working with Northern Ireland on co-ordinated approaches to spatial planning in an island of Ireland context; and
• Further reform of the planning system, including the introduction of a one stop shop for major strategic infrastructure type development, the assessment criteria for which includes supporting developments seen as critical to the implementation of the NSS.

Nonetheless, as Dr Grist has pointed out, implementation of the NSS has faced challenges as well notably:

• The fact that the 2006 and 2011 census results indicated that population growth was tending to happen in locations at a remove from but under the influence of the Gateways, which in some cases were declining in population and leading to concerns about so called doughnut cities, urbanisation of the countryside and previously small characterful villages and small towns, car based commuting and a dependence on fossil fuels;
• Rapid increase in the zoning of land (44,000 hectares by 2009 as opposed to an indentified requirement for around 12,000 hectares) at locations outside the main centres and creating the potential for unsustainable demands for the provision of essential physical and social infrastructure to meet the needs of rapidly growing areas driven by cheap credit and high levels of housing demand and which resulted in a series of interventions in local plan making by successive Ministers for the Environment;
• Significant increases in CO2 emissions from the transport sector with rising car ownership, rising car usage and small increases in the usage of sustainable travel modes driven by settlement patterns that, outside the main cities and towns and in some of those centres as well, were making the provision of public transport difficult;
• Increasing concern by the EU regarding Irelands efforts to ensure that development took on board and worked to conserve and improve
environmental qualities including the integrity of sensitive habitats, the quality of ground and surface waters, both inland and around coasts;

- The postponement of the Gateway Innovation Fund (GIF) and general pressure on the availability of resources for capital investment as a result of the very challenging budgetary and economic context faced in 2009 and into 2010.

Many of these implementation challenges above were highlighted in a 2010 National Spatial Strategy Update and Outlook Report published by the then Department of the Environment Heritage and Local Government to mark a mid phase in the implementation of the NSS.

However, for many, the decision by Government to decentralise a range of Government Departments and agencies to 53 locations around the country was a major blow to the NSS and the degree to which it was seen to be at the heart of the political process. The decentralisation decision undoubtedly badly damaged institutional and public confidence in the NSS.

However, on balance, the NSS has had a wide ranging and positive influence on Government policy in a range of other areas including investment, enterprise policy, transport, planning, housing and in the context of the timescales involved in implementing a 20 year strategy and influencing spatial development patterns that evolve over decades, centuries even and I believe it can be said that a very good start has been made.

Moreover, practical implementation of the NSS at regional and local planning levels highlighted that notwithstanding the development of a hierarchy of plans, the legal framework that governed the relationship between the various layers needed much strengthening to ensure consistency in implementation.
Specifically, the succession of Ministerial Directives to local authorities on their development plans (under Section 31 of the Planning Act) in 2005-2009, which generally aimed to remove or adjust land use zoning objectives, coupled to the McEvoy legal judgement referred to in Dr Grist’s paper had pointed to the need for a more precise linkage between the high level objectives of national and regional plans and the strategies and objectives, including zoning objectives, of city and county development plans.

That linkage found expression in the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2010 and whereas the decentralisation decision was a significant setback to implementation of the NSS, the publication of that reforming legislation was a significant step forward in very significantly strengthening the bonds between national, regional and local plans in Ireland.

Most prominently, the Act above introduced a requirement for city and county plans to include a Core Strategy which, coupled to revised Regional Planning Guidelines, was to contain an evidence and quantitatively based approach to local plans, particularly land use objectives and to ensure overall consistency between the different layers of plans.

The 2010 Act was a visible demonstration that the NSS was now having a profound effect on national planning legislation. Some might say that the 2010 legislation was too little too late, closing the proverbial stable door after the horse had bolted. However, taking on board the timescales that spatial strategies deal with, 20-40 years typically, it might be argued in converse that experience in implementing the NSS had to unfold in order to inform the evolution of the implementation of the strategy and now the legislation has been amended and strengthened, a good framework has been established and will be ready to meet the needs of the country as its economic prospects continue to stabilise and recover.
While Ireland grapples with its current economic challenges, extensive work has been progressing in responding to the difficulties with the planning system at national, regional and local levels since 2010. In particular:

- New Regional Planning Guidelines were adopted in 2010 around a much clearer framework derived from the NSS as to national and regional population forecasts and their cascading to local level;
- Almost all of the 34 city and county councils have now adopted Core Strategies as required by the 2010 Act resulting in dramatic adjustments in the quantum and location of lands identified for future development (around 11,000 hectares de-zoned) and much better alignment with the locations identified for strategic development in the RPG’s and the NSS;
- A national planning information system has been introduced www.myplan.ie which integrates all of the 400+ city and county plans and their development and zoning objectives with a range of other relevant spatial planning datasets;
- Comprehensive action is being taken to address some of the more visible side effects of the country’s economic downturn, including dealing with unfinished housing developments and work with the state’s National Asset Management Agency (NAMA), set up to receive a large number of distressed land and property assets that banks had disastrously lended money towards at the height of the celtic tiger era.

**Where to Now?**

Despite the challenges facing Ireland, which is in receipt of EU/IMF funding to temporarily make up a large funding gap that arose because of the collapse in the economy in 2008 and failed pro-cyclical property dependent economic policies of the past, few would seriously suggest we discard spatial planning. Indeed, most informed observers would seem to be calling
for more effective, community centred as opposed to developer led spatial planning.

Indeed, as Dr Grist’s paper points out, the work of an independent tribunal (Mahon Tribunal), established by the national parliament to examine allegations of abuses of planning, primarily in Dublin in the early 1990’s and therefore prior to the 2000 Act, the NSS, regional plans, finally led to a report in 2012.

The report made many recommendations, 10 of which related to the planning arena, for example calling for the NSS to be put on a statutory footing and for a Planning Regulator to be appointed with powers to oversee the planning process, primarily in relation to taking over the powers held by the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government in relation to intervening on city and county development plans and local area plans.

Government will, later on this year, set out a comprehensive response to the report of the Mahon Tribunal and perhaps it will be in the context of that response that a definitive judgement can be made as to the degree to which our experience as a country since 2008 will finally ensure that the concept of “proper planning and sustainable development” as is referred to in the preamble to the Planning and Development Act, permeates the institutions of the state.

However, at a higher level, there is a re-assuring sense that far from national spatial planning being seen as associated with a period in Ireland’s history that some have regarded as an “irrational exuberance” and therefore irrelevant in moving through and out of a recession, there is sustained support for spatial planning and mounting interest in revisiting Ireland’s approach as well as the institutional structures essential to its implementation.
Notably, while national planning legislation has been comprehensively amended in 2010 (and will likely see further amendment to take account of the Mahon Tribunal recommendations), the current Programme for Government is committed to a substantial reform of local government structures, including the establishment of a sustainable funding framework (including a broadly based property tax and water charges) that may benefit the planning process by reducing reliance on planning and development charges and commercial rates, which tended in the celtic tiger era to be, at times, an unhelpful influence on implementation of planning policies.

In addition, as the nature of local government itself changes, moving away from being a direct provider or infrastructure and more of a force for enablement and integration of local economic and social development, it might be expected that the planning process too will have to adapt more of a function in exploring and delivering on models for sustainable economic development on top of its regulatory functions.

The local authority reforms above are still awaited at the time of writing this paper but at an advanced stage of preparation.

Finally, with extensive overhaul of Ireland’s structures for planning as well as regional and local government either in hand or approaching, attention is now turning to setting the scene for development of a successor to the National Spatial Strategy.

**Towards the Next National Spatial Strategy**

It is far too early to therefore predict what the next NSS will look like but it is safe to assume the following:

1. First of all, there will be a need to establish a legislative framework to define the purpose of the NSS, to oversee the process of its
preparation and implementation, involving political oversight, public consultation and integration of primarily environmental requirements of various EU Directives that affect the planning process and have been adopted since 2002;

(2) Secondly, there will be a requirement to build on what has been achieved since 2002, certainly in the territory of the hierarchy of spatial planning and ensuring effective translation vertically and horizontally in the way that plans take on board the requirements of higher order plans;

(3) Thirdly, proper account will have to be taken account of both new economic realities and environmental challenges that Ireland and the wider EU and global economy will be grappling with for some years to come, primarily affecting the scope for public investment and demanding smart growth type policies that fully harness existing assets and capital;

(4) Fourthly, the next NSS will continue to take account of Ireland’s wider territorial context, not just in a terrestrial sense and our maturing relationship with Northern Ireland and EU/global linkages, but our marine setting through the developing area of Marine Spatial Planning; and

(5) Finally, it is likely that taking account of the above, the next NSS must again be a strongly evidence based policy, drawing upon research and technological advances since 2002 such as the ESPON research programme at EU level and the work of national centres of expertise, while at the same time aiming to become a more strategic and concise document recognising the strengthening role of the regional tier and its influence over and co-ordination of local planning but one that enables effective measurement as to whether desirable outcomes are being achieved.

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3 For example the work of the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA) and International Centre for Regional and Local Development (ICLRD), the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and www.myplan.ie.
Preparatory work to enable progress on the matters above will proceed later this year and into 2013, spurred on by wider progress on planning and local government reform and as informed by overall progress on the Programme for Government.

**Conclusion**

The process of preparing and implementing the National Spatial Strategy continues to be a fascinating process to observe, even more so to participate in!

As we currently wrestle with getting the message across about the value of planning, even more so in a time of economic challenge, at national and EU levels, there is an enduring sense of the contribution that spatial planning can and does make to enabling the achievement of economic, social and environmental conditions that are both sustainable and optimal. The journey will continue.