

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing Planning and Local Government

Committee Room 1 Wednesday 28th November 2018

Update on Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies

Statement by Department of Housing Planning and Local Government

Introduction

Chair, the Department welcomes this opportunity to engage with this Committee on the subject of Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies as they enter a critical phase of development, continuing to build out the strategic planning policy approach of the National Planning Framework as part of Project Ireland 2040.

Background to Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies

The Action Programme for Local Government Reform “Putting People First” led to the Local Government Act 2014, which reshaped the regional dimension to local government in Ireland, including a move from 2 Regional Assemblies and 8 Regional Authorities, to 3 Regional Assemblies.

Furthermore, the 2014 Act committed to the development of new Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSEs), intended as a more broadly based policy

co-ordination mechanism for the local government sector's widened planning, economic and community development roles, also provided for under the Act. The RSEs will also replace the previous 2010 Regional Planning Guidelines.

The RSEs take their lead from the new National Planning Framework (NPF), replacing the previous National Spatial Strategy, which together with the National Development Plan (NDP) was published earlier this year as part of Project Ireland 2040.

The NPF/NDP provide a strategic context for future planning and investment for Government Departments, State agencies, State-owned enterprises, regional and local authorities together with the wider private sector and communities in realising the development potential of all parts of Ireland.

As a strategic document, the NPF is now being given further and more detailed expression at regional level through preparation, by the Regional Assemblies, of statutory Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSEs) for the three Regional Assembly areas.

Current Status of Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies

The RSE process commenced earlier this year. The draft Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly RSE is now on public display for consultation until Wednesday 23 January 2019 and the draft RSE for the Northern and Western Regional Assembly consultation period runs until Friday 8 February 2019. It is expected that the draft RSE for the Southern Regional Assembly will be put on public display this week until mid-February 2019.

The finalisation of these regional strategies in the first half of 2019 will in turn initiate reviews and updates of individual county and city development plans and will ensure strategic co-ordination and consistency between planning and investment at national, regional and local levels.

Policy Interaction between NPF and RSEs

The NPF and RSEs signal new policy objectives for the planning processes at national, regional and local levels to work together to:

- Deliver more compact, more sustainable urban development by securing more infill and brownfield development with a target of 50% in the cities and 30% across the wider network of towns and villages;
- Effectively co-ordinate development plan objectives and zoning and prioritisation of land for future development purposes, with an emphasis on targeting locations that both deliver compact growth and match the availability of infrastructure and services; and
- Play a greater role in active land management, monitoring development patterns, focusing on real as opposed to theoretical delivery targets, moving away from fixed allocations of development land, while at the same time working to secure national policy objectives.

As with all strategic planning exercises, a single set of broad operational parameters is required; without these, overall planning and coherence is very hard to achieve.

Measuring Delivery through Active Land Management

The population projections in the NPF Roadmap are the current benchmark against which delivery may be measured. Planning authorities at regional and city/county level are expected to set out both the distribution and prioritisation of planning measures, including land zoning, required to deliver population growth.

It is expected that distribution will be at the scale of the regional or local authority area, having regard to the NPF and RSES, and priority will be related to timescales, initially to 2021 and then to 2026, 2031 or beyond.

Performance may be measured by the extent to which growth is delivered in accordance with targets and identified priorities. Good performance will enable optimal delivery of services and infrastructure to support development and, critically, will also inform future reviews. It is likely that achieving good performance will require a range of more active land management measures, beyond just zoning land.

This will include analysis of service capacity, needs and overall cost, infill/brownfield potential and patterns of housing delivery and output, including the take-up and completion of planning permissions. It will be necessary for planning authorities, in both their forward planning and development management functions, to act to encourage greater competition in the delivery of output, particularly at priority locations.

Subject to the RSESs being finalised, it will be a matter for individual local authorities to see that the necessary development required to meet projected population through the various development plans and local area plans, can be

delivered. There will also be a number of locations where it will be necessary for local authorities to co-ordinate across administrative boundaries.

Transitional Matters

It is possible that because of the expiry of the legislative effect of the previous 2010 Regional Planning Guidelines (in 2016) and the passage of time since the NSS in 2002, there may not be an ideal fit between some current local authority development plans and local area plans and the more up-to-date national and regional future development parameters set out under the NPF and RSEs.

Transitional arrangements are therefore appropriate. For example, the consideration of development land prioritisation measures by local authorities rather than 'de-zoning' of land, where there may be a surplus is one option.

To this end, the Department will provide updated planning guidelines to planning authorities on their development plan functions as a matter of urgency, to coincide with the significant expected levels of development plan review activity anticipated from late 2019 into 2020 and beyond.

It is important to stress that at this juncture and given the wider pressures in the housing sector and development land supply, the NPF or the NPF Implementation Roadmap document do not seek the dezoning of land.

Population Growth, Providing for Housing and Active Land Management

Furthermore, the zoning of land and the granting of planning permission alone do not necessarily guarantee delivery and population growth in accordance with projected, targeted timeframes. Therefore, in planning for future growth, it will be important for planning authorities to set out and monitor the service capacity and likely rate of completion of development on zoned lands, both brownfield and greenfield as well as elsewhere, having regard to local conditions and trends.

Much closer attention must be paid to actual delivery, taking the steps that may be necessary to implement strategic planning aims, securing housing delivery in the immediate term and above all, avoiding the hoarding of land and/or planning permissions. Effective ways to tackle any tendencies towards land and/or planning permission hoarding or excessively slow delivery include measures such as the Vacant Site Levy and the release of alternate lands where permitted development, without any wider delivery constraints, is not being brought forward.

Accordingly, sites with long-term development potential at priority locations should not be 'reserved' at the land allocation stages of the plan-making and implementation processes in such a way as would create an unreasonable dependency on such sites being brought forward or that would impede the bringing forward of other suitable lands with better prospects for delivery in the short term, if the strategic sites are not being brought forward by their owners.

Proactive land management therefore requires realistic prioritisation, proper monitoring and effective co-ordination across regional, metropolitan, city and county levels.

Headroom

Practice in relation to previous Regional Planning Guidelines (RPGs) and core strategies, has generally been to match future population targets to the physical extent of land being zoned for development, based on assumptions related to density and household occupancy. A further factor of 50% of the identified land requirement has also been universally applicable as 'headroom'.

The concept of headroom based solely on zoned land provision does not account for housing yield arising from the re-use of existing housing stock, mixed-use development, urban intensification or infill or brownfield development.

NPF Roadmap population projections already incorporate 25% headroom figures for all parts of the country. This may be supplemented by an additional 25% headroom, applicable in the local authority areas that are projected to grow at or above the national average growth figure. This further headroom may be applied regionally and locally, at RSES and City and County Development Plan stages.

Application of headroom is particularly relevant to urban areas, particularly the five cities, where the aim is to target at least half of future housing delivery within existing built-up areas.

However, the scale of projected population for cities means some transfer of projected growth to their wider metropolitan areas is appropriate, particularly during the transition period to 2026. The level of transfer may be determined at the regional or metropolitan levels

All of this will require a suitable 'pipeline' of development opportunities, prioritised on the basis of likelihood of meeting targets and kept under review through monitoring and reporting.

Conclusion

The post-NPF process of transition and change is underway. To reflect and support the broad land management policy approach above, the Department will update the existing statutory guidelines for Planning Authorities on preparation of development plans, including core strategies, in early 2019 and work with the regional assemblies and local authorities in establishing an effective system of monitoring of development land supply and associated development patterns with regard to the broad policy objectives of the NPF.

At the core of the approach set out above is the policy objective of moving our planning policy and implementation towards delivery of projected targets to meet future development needs, based on a dynamic, evidence-based system of active land management, rather than a focus on zoning land alone and then waiting for planning applications to come forward, which tends to both encourage sprawl as well as hoarding of land and permissions.