

POLICY ON HOUSING IN RURAL AREAS

The IPI Submission to the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government ~ NOVEMBER 2003

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The purpose of this document is to set out the Irish Planning Institute's position in relation to planning policy on the development of housing in rural areas. The objective of the policy paper is to set out a way forward for addressing this controversial issue in a way which achieves a balance between the need for rural development and revitalisation and the need to ensure a sustainable pattern of development and the protection of important amenities and environmental resources, while ensuring the economic, social and cultural development of rural areas is maximised.

1.2 The Government has given a commitment to issuing planning policy guidelines on rural housing. This policy paper is designed to be a contribution on behalf of the Institute to the preparation of these guidelines.

Background

1.3 The issue of one-off housing in the countryside has received much media attention in the last year or two. It has been a central issue of concern to planners in Ireland for the past forty years.

1.4 There is still a lack of reliable data on the extent of one-off housing development in Ireland. There is a need for a much greater level of research into this issue which should be sponsored at Government level.

1.5 The background papers for the National Spatial Strategy identified that approximately 15,000 one-off houses were constructed in 1999, almost 1/3 of total housing output. Over the next generation, or the next thirty years, this would amount to over 450,000 new one-off houses being constructed in rural Ireland. Recent statistics on planning permissions granted confirm that this trend is continuing. This compares with an existing total national housing stock of approximately 1,300,000 units in all urban and rural areas. There is a need for a comprehensive and accurate data base on the numbers of houses constructed in rural areas. However it is clear that the issue of one-off rural housing development is of great significance for the future planning and sustainable development of the country.

1.6 There is no "ban" on one-off housing in rural areas in Ireland. On the contrary there is a largely laissez-faire approach, the evidence of which can be all too clearly seen throughout rural areas of Ireland. The extent of this phenomenon of extensive development of one-off housing in rural areas, much of it urban generated, has given rise to harmful impacts in environmental, economic, social and cultural terms, such as:

- the impact on important landscapes and rural amenities generally;
- the loss of distinctive rural cultural traditions and heritage in the built form;
- the impact of the proliferation of septic tanks and individual waste water treatment systems of ground water, the same ground water sources from which drinking water to serve these one-off houses, and nearby towns and villages, tends to be drawn;
- the resultant almost exclusive reliance on the car for all journeys;
- ribbon development and urban sprawl around the larger towns or cities and even small villages, often coincident with,
- dereliction and decline in the centre of smaller towns and villages, as urban based people take the cheaper and easier option of building on approach roads or in the rural area;
- increased difficulty in the provision of essential strategic national and local infrastructure, such as new roads, wind farms, waste facilities etc.;
- economic difficulties for farmers seeking to expand their holdings, as a result of inflated land prices, especially for smaller plots;
- increased costs in service delivery e.g. post, electricity, telephone, health, schools;
- One-offs will not re-generate an area, attract employment, or maximise service and facilities provision (whether private or public). Indeed, in general they will further exacerbate deficits in these regards.
- the loss of young people from the remoter rural areas will not be slowed by the development of one-offs. As dispersed development militates against the jobs and cultural facilities valued by young people, such development is probably on balance contributing to the problem.

- cities are the motors of the contemporary economy. The remoter rural areas have to find a new relationship to cities. Substantial industry cannot be sustainably attracted to these areas merely by financial inducements, or restrictions elsewhere.
- development of towns will have spin-off benefits for their rural hinterlands, but development of one-offs will not strengthen towns.
- there will be increasing competition for public resources for infrastructure and services. Area of dispersed development will be less able to compete in terms of cost and value for money.
- areas of dispersed development will be less able to compete on those terms.
- aside from any intrinsic value, an attractive environment is one of the few competitive economic assets many parts of the country have. It is important for both tourism and for attracting footloose businesses, entrepreneurs, and wealthy retirees.

1.6 The Irish Planning Institute has stated for some time that there is a need for very clear and firm Government Guidelines on this issue, having regard to the scale and significance of the phenomenon of one-off rural housing in Ireland today.

1.7 The IPI has been proactive in seeking to address the issues of one-off rural housing. Rural housing was a key topic of the Institute's National Planning Conference in May 2001, and through this conference the Institute contributed to commencing a national debate on the subject. The Institute highlighted the issue in the submission on the National Spatial Strategy in October 2001. Public statements by the Institute have received much media attention over the past two years.

1.8 In February 2002 the Institute embarked on a joint initiative with the RIAI (Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland) to further debate, understanding and policy formulation on this issue. This led to the holding of a colloquium of invited representatives of interest groups and bodies involved in the area in October 2002, attended by senior officials from the Department of Environment, and a joint IPI/RIAI conference on the issue of rural housing held in Galway in February 2003. Furthermore the Institute held a one day conference of its members in September 2002 to seek to develop the Institute's policy on this issue. These conferences, and meetings have been invaluable to assisting the Institute in the preparation of this policy paper and the Institute is grateful to all those who contributed.

2.0 EXISTING PLANNING POLICY FRAMEWORK

National

2.1 At present there is no clear Government policy or guidelines in respect of the issue of one-off rural housing.

2.2 Back in 1984 the Government had published a document, 'Advice and Guidelines for Planning Authorities', also known as the "yellow book", which included a number of statements relevant to rural housing, including a policy to restrict ribbon developments. However the general thrust of the policy document was to encourage a relatively permissive approach to development generally, including rural housing. This document is now very out of date and is under review.

2.3 The document "Sustainable Development – a Strategy for Ireland" published in 1997 includes a number of statements relevant to rural housing.

2.4 In November 2002 the Government published the National Spatial Strategy. This sets out for the first time a national framework for the spatial development of Ireland. This includes a section on housing development in rural areas. However, while it includes some analysis of the issue, it does not include a clear and explicit statement of policy in respect of rural housing development. The NSS does set out a commitment by the Government to the issuing of planning guidelines on a rural housing.

2.5 The NSS includes some helpful analysis of the issues relevant to rural housing in Ireland. Some of the statements set out in the National Spatial Strategy in respect of rural housing contradict the overall thrust of the Strategy, which is to achieve more balanced regional development in a framework of sustainable development. Furthermore statements contained in the NSS in respect of rural housing appear to contradict stated Government policy on sustainable development in the document "Sustainable Development - a Strategy for Ireland". The statements contain inherent conflicts which add further to the confusion in respect of Government policy on rural housing. This needs to be resolved by clear and firm policy guidelines.

Regional

2.6 The Strategic Planning Guidelines for the Greater Dublin Area set out a clear spatial framework for the development of the region which includes Counties Dublin, Kildare, Wicklow and Meath. The strategy sets out a policy based on growth corridors and defined growth centres, with the areas in between these corridors the hinterland of Dublin to function as green belts areas, with a restrictive approach to development including one off rural housing, wherein it is limited to local needs.

2.7 This regional policy however is reflected in very different ways in the Development Plans of each county.

Local

2.8 For decades, most County Development Plans have included specific policy statements on rural housing. In many cases they include designations which recognise areas of outstanding landscape importance, sometimes restricting housing in these areas to that which meets an identified local need only or which is tied in with the rural economy. However the extent of these designations, the criteria used in their assessment and the policy implications of the designations vary greatly, with some planning authorities adopting a minimalist approach to landscape protection.

2.9 In some cases, development plans also include restrictions in what are often termed as “pressure zones” around larger towns and cities on the development of one-off urban generated houses.

Inconsistency

2.10 Some of the public frustration with rural housing issues arises from a high degree of inconsistency in the application of planning policies throughout the country and even in specific local areas by local authorities.

2.11 It is commonplace for County Councillors to see their role as lobbyist for individual applicants for planning permission for one-off houses, even where the proposed house directly contravenes the policies of the Development Plan for the County. It is commonplace for recommendations of planning officers to be over turned as a result by lobbying of the County Manager by County Councils or alternatively by the use of ‘Section 4’ motions whereby County Councillors compel Managers to grant permission for specific developments. There is no doubt that applicants who are well connected politically or skilled in the art of lobbying have a much better chance of success in applying for a one-off house developments than applicants without these connections or skills. This leads to much frustration, anger, and confusion.

3.0 UNDERSTANDING RURAL HOUSING DEVELOPMENT IN IRELAND

3.1 In formulating the policy framework for rural housing development, it is important to gain a clear understanding of the reasons for the extent of one-off rural housing development and its benefits and disadvantages.

Types of Rural Housing

3.2 This assessment must start with a recognition of the variety of different types of demand for rural housing development.

3.3 Rural housing types include housing to meet the functional needs of the people living and working in rural areas. This includes not just agriculture, and other primary activities, but also a range of other economic activities which are now found in an increasingly diversified rural economy.

3.4 However, undoubtedly a significant part of rural housing development is sought to accommodate urban generated housing needs. This is housing to accommodate people who originate from either urban or rural areas but who work and lead most of their lives outside the home in urban areas and nearby towns. There is strong pressure for urban generated one-off housing around all the larger towns and cities and indeed around many smaller towns and villages. This often takes the form of development on approach roads to towns and villages resulting in ribbon development.

3.5 A further type of rural housing development is tourism related housing, in the form of second homes,

B&B accommodation, rental homes, and so on. This form of development is most common in the tourist pressure areas, and in particular along the western sea board from Donegal to West Cork, both also in the southeast and other high amenity areas. Different policy approaches are appropriate to each type of rural housing development.

Driving Forces

3.6 There are many reasons why urban dwellers opt for a one-off house in the countryside rather than live in an urban environment. These relate to freedom to design a house of ones choice, space, cost, and push factors such as the poor quality environments in new housing areas in towns. There is a need for policies in respect of rural housing which enable some of the benefits associated with this form of housing to be delivered in a more sustainable form of development and to make the option of living in towns and villages more attractive while at the same time putting in place appropriate restrictions on urban generated rural housing and tourist related development.

3.7 The policy framework for rural housing therefore must address first and foremost eligibility for the location of a house in rural areas. These relate to the identity and characteristics of the applicant, and whether such an applicant can demonstrate that he/she has a housing need that has to be accommodated in a rural area. This eligibility test should then be followed by an examination of the location issue, to see whether the particular rural location is suitable to accommodate such a housing need. In respect of proposals which comply with eligibility and locational policies on rural housing development they must then be assessed against other criteria including environmental impact, design, and siting.

4.0 ELIGIBILITY AND LOCATIONAL POLICIES

4.1 The Irish Planning Institute supports appropriate rural development, rural renewal and revitalisation, including rural housing development to meet the needs of rural communities.

4.2 Where rural housing developments are permitted to meet identified rural housing needs, it is important that a binding legal agreement be entered into by the applicant to ensure that the house is occupied by the person for the purposes stated in the application. There has been much abuse of the rural housing policies in the past where permissions have been granted on the stated basis of meeting a genuine rural need, only subsequently to be sold on the market. There is a need for a very clear and enforceable mechanism to prevent this occurring. This policy necessarily implies that in all cases, the planning application for a rural house has to be made by the intending future occupant. Hence the practice of landowners seeking planning permission for "houses or sites for sale" can no longer be countenanced.

Urban Generated Rural Housing

4.3 There is a need for a clear presumption against urban generated one-off housing development in rural areas. This often takes form of ribbon development or sprawl in a loosely concentric fashion around larger towns. There should be a clear division between urban areas and their surrounding rural context.

Need for Positive Planning

4.4 Planning policy should provide positively for those who wish to build their own house on their own site to individual designs. In this respect development plans, including Local Area Plans, for towns and villages, other than the five established cities of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford, should provide appropriate areas for the development of individual designed housing on serviced sites. This can take the form of infill development behind existing urban development, usually on the edge of existing urban area. Meeting the need and demand for this type of housing immediately on the edge of existing urban or built up areas has a number of important advantages, including:-

- the availability of mains services such as water supply and drainage,
- the reduction in journey times and distances to work places and schools,
- the opportunity for alternative modes of transport for basic household journeys such as to the local shops or school.
- a significant reduction in the visual or environmental impact on the landscape of scattered approached to one-off housing around towns and villages
- the elimination of ribbon development.

4.5 Clearly there will be costs involved in providing the services and infrastructure for this form of individual housing development. These costs should be met by making appropriate charges on development of each house, which in turn will have an impact on the land values. The principal costs will therefore be borne by the landowner, who will still make substantial profit by selling lands for this form of development. The costs should not, in most cases, impact on the price of houses and should not be a burden on the wider community. This approach can only succeed if it is accompanied by a very restrictive, and consistent, approach to one-off urban generated housing outside the designated zones.

4.6 The new system of financial contributions introduced by the Planning and Development Act 2000 provides an important opportunity to level the playing field in relation to the costs of services for one-off housing as against housing development in and around towns. This provides the opportunity for County Councils to impose a unified levy in the cost for all new housing developments whether one of houses or individual sited houses on the edge of town and villages or in higher density estates type development.

4.7 This system also provides an opportunity for the local authorities to impose a higher levy on one-off rural houses to ensure that full environmental and economic costs of development are more accurately reflected. It is the Institute's view that the inclusion of such contributions should be a mandatory element in all rural planning authority areas, so as to encourage more sustainable patterns of development.

4.8 The funds raised from this levy could be used to help provide water and drainage services in and around all towns and villages, so as to meet the demand for the individually sited and designed houses in a more sustainable manner.

4.9 These development areas in town and villages will have to meet the design standards set out in the policy guidelines. This includes high quality boundary treatment e.g. the use of more natural boundaries such as timber fencing or hedgerows, or stone walls where this is the characteristic of the area, should be encouraged reflecting the lower density semi-rural character of the areas.

Lobbying

4.10 To address the issue of political lobbying resulting in interventions of clearly established development plan or Government Policies on rural housing the Institute calls on the Government to introduce an amendment of the Planning and Development Act 2000 where by it is made ultra vires for a planning authority to grant permission for rural house development which contravenes the Development Plan for the area, takes into account the personal circumstances of applicants or is contrary to government policy. There is extensive case law which has established that County Managers cannot be forced by Section 4 motions to grant permission for development to contravene the Development Plan, This now needs to be reinforced by statute and made applicable to government policy as well. Clear and firm Government guidelines will reduce the scope for lobbying to overturn recommendations for refusal.

Tourism and Rural Housing Development

4.11 The Institute recognises that there is a need to promote and provide for an appropriate level of tourism accommodation throughout the country, including in rural areas. The pressure for tourism related rural housing is of course greatest in the very areas which have the most sensitive and attractive landscapes. The issue of tourism related rural housing therefore needs careful and detailed consideration in these pressure area in particular. The provision of such housing has the potential to damage or even destroy the very factors that make an area attractive to tourists in the first place.

4.12 The same principles of design, and siting should apply to tourism housing as for other rural housing where it is permitted. There is great scope in much of the country to meet the need for self-catering tourist accommodation by the reuse of redundant or abandoned rural buildings such old cottages or outbuildings. Sensitively restored or converted, such buildings can add to the attractiveness of an area and would provide a valuable tourism resource. Tax incentives or grants should be made available for self-catering tourism accommodation provided in this way.

4.13 Meeting the need for tourism accommodation can help bring about the renewal and regeneration of small towns and villages through appropriate infill development. This is a sustainable way of meeting tourism accommodation needs.

4.14 In exceptional circumstances, where new tourism related housing in rural areas is permitted it is essential that a legal agreement be entered into by the applicant under the planning acts to prevent the

accommodation being used as permanent residential accommodation, thus undermining the purpose of the permission.

5.0 DESIGN AND SITING

5.1 Where one-off housing is permitted in rural areas, it is essential that far greater consideration be given to design and sites than is common place at present. Every Local Authority should be required to prepare and implement a set of design guidelines. These should reflect the characteristic and vernacular building materials and style of the particular area. e.g. they may include policies such as the pitch of the roof, an emphasis on vertical rather than horizontal opening of windows, the use of timber rather than aluminium uPVC window frames, type of roofing material, external wall finishes, and of critical importance, boundary treatment.

5.2 In all cases the guidelines should prohibit the destruction or removal of existing road side boundaries, except to the limited extent necessary to create an entrance to the proposed new house. The existing boundary treatment whether it is a hedgerow, sod and stone, or a stone wall, usually provides a very important feature for the continuity of the rural landscape and its retention will help absorb appropriate new rural housing development into that landscape. On the contrary, the removal of an existing boundary and its subsequent replacement by a concrete wall, or other urban feature, severely interrupts the rural landscape in which new houses are set.

5.3 The set back of boundary lines along the frontage of new rural houses should generally be prohibited. This not only exacerbates the intrusive nature of the development, but also creates a potential traffic hazard by inviting parking directly on the roadside. All parking requirements should be met on site and off road.

5.4 As a principle, new housing in rural areas should not be situated in close proximity to existing roads and should not front existing roads. They should generally be situated well back from the road and screened by existing and proposed new planting. The new rural housing should be designed to fit within the landscape, similar in form to the more traditional farmstead in the past that was achieved with great success in Ireland.

5.5 A number of key principles, such as no houses on top of ridges, retention of existing site boundaries, pitch of roofs etc. should be incorporated into the National Guidelines and refined in each counties own guidelines.

5.6 Every Local Authority should be required to produce its design guidelines on rural housing within 18 months of the adoption of Government Policy, similar to the previous requirements for Local Authorities in respect of housing strategies and retail planning guidelines.

6.0 RURAL PLANNING AND LANDSCAPE PROTECTION

6.1 There is a need for comprehensive Local Area Plans for rural areas as well as urban areas. Rural areas are equally in need of well considered positive planning framework at a detailed level. Cork County Council, for example, is embarking on the preparation of LAP's for all 10 electoral areas in the county. This approach should be encouraged and facilitated nationally by the DOEHLG.

6.2 Although rural LAP's remain the exception, a number of Local Authorities have embarked on Landscape Character Assessment studies of the entire landscape of their county in recognition of the fact that landscape and resultant landscape policy has become an important backdrop for decision making on a multitude of land uses – rural housing, tourism related developments, wind farms. Landscape Assessment studies should feed directly into the preparation of County Development plans and the formulation of policies on rural housing.

6.3 Any policy on rural housing must relate directly to policies on landscape protection. Ireland is fortunate to have a wide variety of such special landscape areas throughout the country. These include coastal areas, mountain regions, and river valleys, etc. These areas are vulnerable from inappropriate development, including one-off housing, whether urban or rural generated. A strict approach to rural housing needs should apply in such areas. Where housing is clearly required to meet the local rural housing need, it should only be permitted where very strict design and the siting criteria are met. It is recognised that much of our landscape is man made and is therefore constantly evolving and changing over time, however the basic test should be that each new house should preserve or enhance the existing landscape character of the area.

6.4 Our outstanding landscapes are very important resource. They are part of our national heritage. They are important not just in terms of tourism or recreational amenity. They belong to all of us.

7.0 TOWNS AND VILLAGES

7.1 The Irish Planning Institute firmly supports the renewal of rural towns and villages and smaller settlements. There is a need for positive planning to ensure the appropriate development or revitalisation of smaller towns and villages. These include the identification of locations of infill housing and the provision of appropriate services in all towns and villages to facilitate appropriate scale of new housing development. This is an important counter balance to controls over an inappropriate rural housing. Furthermore the development of towns and villages will greatly assist the retention and enhancement of important rural facilities such as schools, local shop, sports clubs, churches etc. This approach will ensure a much higher proportion of the population of rural areas live within walking distance of these important local facilities and will help maintain strong and vibrant rural communities. This policy ties in directly with the policies stated above of meeting demand for one-off housing where possible on the edge of existing towns and villages.

7.2 The IPI endorses the statements in the NSS in relation to development in smaller towns and villages and in particular the need to prepare Local Area Plans settlements coming under development pressure and to ensure that development is appropriate in terms of design scale and character. There is also a need to prepare local area plans for rural areas encompassing smaller settlements.

7.3 The Irish Planning Institute recognises that in a very limited part of the country there is a more dispersed type of rural settlement, particularly the western seaboard. This type of settlement is often situated in areas of outstanding landscape importance, which are therefore particularly vulnerable to inappropriately designed and sited new development. The Irish Planning Institute supports the continued existence and revitalisation of these dispersed settlements provided all new development is carefully considered in terms of design and sites. This is rarely the case at present and will require a new approach. Urban-generated or tourism development in these areas should be the subject of the same controls as elsewhere.

7.4 It should be remembered that this form of settlement has proved unsustainable in the past, leading to very substantial population decline in many parts of the west of Ireland. The dispersed pattern of development is inherently unsustainable.

7.5 A dispersed settlement pattern and a laissez-faire approach to one-off rural housing for the past 30 years or more throughout much of the west of Ireland has helped to exacerbate the economic development differential between these areas and the more concentrated and urbanised east and south. The NSS seek to redress this balance by promoting more concentrated development in the BMW Region in particular through the development of Gateways and Hubs, i.e the by the promotion of a more concentrated settlement pattern in the BMW region. This is to try to establish the necessary critical mass in terms of population, infrastructure and economic activity at a limited number of concentrated locations to provide viable alternatives to Dublin in particular.

7.6 The DOEHLG published Draft Landscape Assessment Guidelines in 2000. It is essential that these guidelines are now finalised and that policy guidelines on rural housing are accompanied by landscape assessment guidelines.