

Address by

Mr. Ciarán Cuffe, T.D.,

Minister of State with special responsibilities for Horticulture,  
Sustainable Travel and Planning and Heritage,

at the

Irish Planning Institute, National Planning Conference

Tullamore Court Hotel, Tullamore, Co Offaly.

15 April 2010.

Mr. President,  
Members of the Irish Planning Institute,  
Ladies and Gentlemen.

It gives me great pleasure to open the IPIs National Planning conference and I am particularly delighted that my first public engagement as Minister of State with special responsibility for Planning is to address you on a subject with which I am well acquainted.

I have long been associated with the planning profession and am a signed-up member of the Institute. Prior to my election to Dáil Éireann, I lectured in urban planning.

My recent appointment as Minister of State with special responsibility for Horticulture, Sustainable Travel and Planning and Heritage affords me an exciting opportunity to improve and enhance our planning system from within.

The central theme of this year's conference is the role that planning has in shaping our society and how planning can help society move towards a more sustainable future.

Seven years ago I addressed the annual conference of the Institute on the theme of consultation, politics and place. In my paper I argued for improvements in consultation as part of the making of plans. I also called for an increase in densities in new developments and existing communities, and a much higher quality of design in the making of places. Much remains to be done to achieve this goal.

I know I don't need to preach to the converted in relation to the importance of sustainable planning. All of you understand how planning affects many aspects of our lives – our modes of travel, the way we power our homes and places of work, the provision and treatment of clean water and the delivery of high quality and environmentally sustainable

economic and social infrastructure.

Unfortunately, there are far too many examples of the often-disastrous effect that past unsustainable planning has had. Towns where house upon house was built and field upon field re-zoned, but little or nothing provided by way of community facilities or amenities. Estates scattered about the country, poorly linked by transport, distant from schools, dependant on transport by car – these must become a feature of our past and have no place in our future.

Sustainable, high quality living communities are what this country needs – it's the only way that we can ensure that development enhances its residents' quality of life and our country's attractiveness and competitiveness into the future.

### National Spatial Strategy

As we have now moved into a new and more uncertain economic environment, an environment where we will literally have to do “more with less”, all of us, in our different roles and capacities – whether as policy makers, politicians, professionals or individual members of society – have a key part to play in helping the country to manage its way out of the current difficulties. There is an onus on us to question how we operate, how we spend taxpayers' money and whether we can do things better and more efficiently.

As policy makers, we need to know:

- where we are in terms of delivering sustainable development?
- are our policies reflective of the changed reality on the ground?
- how can we grow our economy and the quality of life of our citizens in a sustainable way?

Spatial planning plays a key role in answering these questions and in helping to build a comprehensive picture and an evidence-based rationale for future development. It also provides us with key information which enables us to prioritise and target State investment in both hard and soft infrastructure and with the overall vision to create competitive and dynamic cities and regions which will help improve our quality of life in economic, social and environmental terms.

In order to deal with the economic shocks that we have faced, we must maximise our strengths and ensure that we are well-positioned to grasp the opportunities that come our way and to create new opportunities for ourselves.

Before pushing ahead, policy makers and practitioners need to stop and take stock – to assess how far we've come in terms of our accepted vision for Ireland in 2020 and beyond.

### National Spatial Strategy Update and Outlook

As part of this stock-taking process, the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government has undertaken a focussed review of the National Spatial Strategy, assessing:

- o where we are, seven years into the 20-year spatial planning framework;
- o what challenges remain, and perhaps more crucially;
- o what the NSS can do to help the country on the road to economic recovery.

Given the significant economic and social change in the last seven years and the uncertain short- to medium-term future, it was timely to undertake this update. It's not about starting from scratch. After all, the NSS is designed to 2020 and its fundamental approach and vision are still sound. It is more to do with how we need to focus and improve on a consistent basis across all levels of government in implementing the NSS.

Some interesting analysis is emerging from the NSS Update". For example, while all regions have been growing in demographic and economic terms over the last few years, the growth of the gateways has not been keeping up with national population growth. Indeed, a number of gateway city centres recorded actual reductions in their population. In contrast, the population growth rate of towns of less than 10,000 people was more than double the rate of the gateways.

The Update shows that there has been strong coordination between land use and transport policy and delivery through, for example, the roll-out of Transport 21, and between planning and school building programmes, facilitated in part by the Protocol agreed between the two Departments and the CCMA. However, in these straitened financial times, the report points to the need for even greater prioritisation and alignment of sectoral infrastructural and services expenditure to those locations which have the capacity and critical mass to grow in the medium term and create centres of competitive economic activity.

For this co-ordination to be effective, there needs to be more effective joined-up planning at local level, looking beyond administrative boundaries to reflect land use patterns and enhanced governance to provide a solid footing for future plan-led investment. This "new deal" will be informed and facilitated by the Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill and by the forthcoming White Paper on Local Government Reform.

The NSS update is also closely tied in with the ongoing statutory reviews of our Regional Planning Guidelines. The importance of the review of the Regional Planning Guidelines to the NSS cannot be overstated, because they translate the principles of the NSS into regional and local policies and targets – without robust RPGs, the NSS will never achieve its full potential in delivering strategic planning at national, regional and local level.

The NSS Review and Outlook will be finalised shortly and will be published before the Summer.

#### Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2009

The Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2009 is currently progressing through the Houses of the Oireachtas, with a view to enactment as soon as possible.

The Bill contains key provisions which will further strengthen the overall approach to strategic planning. One such provision is the requirement to include an evidence-based 'core strategy' in development plans. This will strengthen the development plan as the fundamental link with national and regional policies and, in setting the city or county policy context, for local area plans. The key objective of the 'core strategy' will be to ensure a strategic, prior approach to zoning.

This more strategic approach, aligned with the accompanying checks and balances set out in the Bill, should facilitate development to take place at the right time and in the right place and will allow the State to plan for the provision of infrastructure with much greater certainty.

The 'core strategy' will also support the emergence of more sustainable patterns of development and, particularly, more strategic and sequential development, especially around Gateways, Hubs, County Towns and other key urban centres identified in the NSS.

A recent report by the National Competitiveness Council reinforced internationally accepted analysis that strong cities make strong regions. Having a vibrant, progressive and growing urban core is critical to supporting the wider region's economy – without a strong regional and urban focus, surrounding rural areas will suffer in terms of lower economic activity and less opportunity to develop sustainable rural initiatives. As a nation focused on getting back on its feet economically, we cannot afford to let that happen.

Cities and towns are powerful drivers of the Irish economy, and I believe we must promote and nurture the urban environment.

I believe that there has been traditionally some antipathy towards cities and towns in certain quarters. However the majority of Irish people now live in urban areas and our planning, environmental and design systems must reflect this. The Department has published the new Urban Design Manual, the Green City Guidelines, Design Standards for new apartments, Residential Density Guidelines and the Government Policy on Architecture. In recent years communities have voiced concern about increased densities in new developments, but I believe higher densities combined with high quality design and provision of green space can be

the key to more liveable walkable communities.

Looking ahead, the 'Manual for Streets' currently under preparation by the Smarter Travel and Transport Office will assist planners, architects and all who design the crucial interface between buildings and the outside world. To paraphrase Winston Churchill –  
“We shape our cities; thereafter they shape us”

Recently the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government submitted the City of Dublin for world heritage status with UNESCO. The submission states:

“Georgian Dublin represents a significant moment in the history of the Age of Enlightenment. The establishment of the Wide Streets Commissioners and the founding of many charitable and public institutions, in buildings of high architectural quality, were high points of that period in Europe. The

Wide Street Commissioners, Europe's first official town planning authority, was established to make 'wide and convenient streets' through the congested quarters of the city. Their remit, vision and interventions to improve the city by the rational application of scientific and aesthetic principles were exceptional...”

I believe we must learn from many of the mistakes in urban planning that characterised the latter half of the twentieth century and once again plan and re-shape cities and towns that are not dominated by cars, but that are civilised places where people are proud to live, work and relax. This will not entail the use of 'pastiche' buildings or aping styles from times gone by, but will involve the design of lively streets, squares and parks that will stand the test of time.

I am heartened to see that a number of city and county plans that are currently undergoing their review have endeavoured to implement, on a voluntary basis, the principles of the core strategy, even in advance of the Bill's enactment. This is a ringing endorsement of the value of having such a touchstone to link the various pillars of the plans

The Planning Bill will also require that Development Plans contain mandatory objectives for the promotion of sustainable settlement and transportation strategies in urban and rural areas appropriate measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This should help to ensure that the broader climate change and sustainable travel agendas are integrated with forward planning.

I urge you all to consider how best Ireland can face up to the shocks of climate change, peak oil and energy security. I believe that even the European Union's modest targets of a 20% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2020 has profound implications for the role of planners. Building Regulations will set much higher targets for energy standards in buildings old and new; carbon neutral or carbon positive buildings

will become the norm and walkable communities well-served by public transport, with land set aside for food-growing will become the norm. There will be an emphasis on mixed-use development rather than mono-functional zoning and the car will no longer be the king of the transport world. You, as planners are crucial to realising this vision.

I am also happy to note, wearing my horticulture hat, that it is proposed to amend the Bill to provide for the inclusion of a discretionary objective in a Development Plan to reserve land for allotments and regulating, promoting, facilitating or controlling the provision of allotments for individual or community use.

Before I move on from the Bill, I would just like to acknowledge the detailed submission the Institute made on the Bill following its publication. During the legislative process, it can be easy to get caught up in a legally complex piece of work and focus on the drafting rather than the practical implications and implementation of the provisions. It is crucial, therefore, to have the views of informed practitioners and professional bodies, such as the IPI, to help guide policy towards ensuring that the maximum benefit is obtained in practice from the enactment of this Bill.

The Minister is looking closely at the major issues raised by the IPI on local area planning and the proposal that material amendments to draft development plans which might arise after the conclusion of the second public consultation process would now require the support of two-thirds of the total number of members, rather than a simple majority

#### Ghost Estates

I am very concerned about the scale and impact of unsold and unfinished housing developments on both existing and new communities, not just from a planning perspective, but also recognising the impact on families and individuals that are directly affected.

Before we can agree on solutions to these so-called “ghost estates”, we must identify the extent and scale of the problem, as well as differentiating between the various types of incomplete estates – which range from finished but unsold units through to abandoned, half-finished developments with no occupants – and assess how best to manage the problems that have arisen. The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government is currently examining the potential for a more accurate means of estimating the scale and distribution of unfinished and or vacant housing developments across the country in conjunction with local authorities and other stakeholders.

The Department is also currently preparing a policy paper which aims to identify the necessary responses and to explore how they can be tackled in a coordinated and pro-active manner. The responses require a range

of interventions across a number of disciplines – there are issues of public safety, the provision of bonds and securities, environmental protection, building control and estate management. This work is also being advanced in close consultation with local authorities and other key stakeholders.

I expect that many useful ideas and approaches will be put forward at this conference on the issue and I would welcome input into our policy formulation.

While the provisions contained in the Planning Bill and the new Regional Planning Guidelines should help to ensure that such over-development does not re-occur, we need to urgently address this legacy issue.

I was not present at the Oireachtas headline yesterday suggesting that NAMA would send in the bulldozers.

However I do believe that selective demolitions will be a necessary part of the tasks required to tackle the legacy of one of the more unsavoury aspects of Ireland's building boom. The irony is that it was more of an absence of planning rather than bad planning that generated the wrong kind of buildings in the wrong places. The 'cargo cult' of rezoning for all the wrong reasons must be replaced by the proper planning and sustainable development of our cities and towns.

I have no doubt that some loans that will come into the possession of the NAMA will result in the demolition of badly designed buildings in inappropriate locations.

Along with my colleagues I worked hard to ensure that the NAMA has a remit in regard to proper planning and a planning sub-committee will have strong planning representation.

I want to ensure that future construction represents a step-change in both planning and construction. This will require well-trained architects and planners and other building professionals to design well-designed buildings and vibrant communities that stand apart from the mistakes of recent years. I intend working with my colleague Minister Michael Finneran on this issue.

#### Smarter Travel

The achievement of proper planning and sustainable development is inextricably linked with sustainable transport. In my capacity as Minister for State at the Department of Transport, I now have responsibility for the Smarter Travel Policy Agenda.

In broad terms, the 2009 Policy sets us on a course for a sustainable transport system by 2020. In achieving its vision for Smarter Travel, the Government has 5 key goals:

- to reduce overall travel demand;
- to maximise the efficiency of the transport network;
- to reduce reliance on fossil fuels;

- to reduce transport emissions; and
- to improve accessibility to transport.

The vision and targets for Smarter Travel is ambitious - by 2020, modal share for car commuting is to drop from 65% to 45%. This translates into 500,000 commuters switching to other forms of transport such as walking, cycling and public transport. It is also anticipated that the modal share for cycling will reach 10% by 2020.

The impact of our personal choices on national travel patterns is easy to underestimate. In the Dublin region, 100,000 people drive 4km or less to work in Dublin. An even starker statistic is that 45,000 people drive just 2km or less to work in Dublin. There is significant potential for change; but the key challenge for Smarter Travel is to change people's mindsets.

There are strong links between these figures and a rise in obesity in recent years.

Obesity now affects approximately one in five Irish adults and this prevalence has only occurred over the last decade. The Irish environment has been called 'obesogenic' in an international study on childhood obesity. I believe that we all have a role to play in tackling this issue. For example, the provision of protected green spaces where children can play; safe walking and cycling routes to schools and workplaces can each help in increasing the probability that people will partake in exercise. The last census showed that more girls drive to school than cycle. This must be a wake-up call for all of us to reconsider how we plan, and build.

Yesterday I launched a document produced by the National Heart Alliance and the Irish Heart Foundation entitled "Building Young Hearts". The document discusses physical activity, young people and the environment. There is an important chapter relating to neighbourhood design and there are many good practices that we can consider from the UK and beyond relating to the planning of 'Home Zones' and shared spaces.

Crucially I believe that we should involve children in the making and preparation of Development Plans and Local Area Plans. A Planning Authority is currently required to take whatever steps it considers necessary to consult the public before preparing, amending or revoking a Plan. This currently includes consultations with any local residents, public sector agencies, non-governmental agencies, local community groups and commercial and business interests within the area. Given that children under the age of 18 cannot vote, I shall be proposing that they be formally consulted as part of the making of Plans.

Aligning spatial planning and transport is a key theme throughout Smarter Travel. The Policy envisages that Regional Planning Guidelines will set targets for shifts to sustainable travel modes. It is important that the forthcoming revised Regional Planning Guidelines make

appropriate provision for these targets and fully endorse Smarter Travel Policy Objectives.

The key actions on the horizon relating to planning and transport include:

- the preparation of a National Walking Policy Framework;
- integration of sustainable travel principles into local area planning guidelines currently which are currently being drafted; and
- enhanced implementation of relevant statutory planning guidelines which are based on the concept of sustainable travel and transport.

### Spatial Planning and National Roads

Sticking briefly to the transport theme, the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government is currently finalising draft guidelines on Spatial Planning and National Roads. These guidelines have been prepared in close consultation with the Department of Transport, the National Roads Authority and senior planning authority representatives.

The guidelines are aimed at achieving appropriate and effective alignment of roads and land use planning policies in order to guide development to the most suitable locations. This will maximise the investment in the national roads network while also, in overall terms, encouraging a shift towards more sustainable forms of travel and transport. This will be driven by early and collaborative engagement between planning authorities and the NRA throughout the development plan and development management processes. It is intended that these guidelines will be issued for public consultation shortly.

### Foreshores

Let me move from onshore spatial planning to outline some important developments in planning on the State foreshore.

The Government has set itself an ambitious, but achievable, target of 40% of our energy needs being supplied from renewable sources by 2020. How we manage development on the foreshore for wind, wave and tidal energy projects will have an important role to play in meeting these targets.

The foreshore consent process for these and other major projects on the State foreshore moved to the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in January and will undergo major reform over the next few years. Steps are already being taken to streamline the consent process and to provide greater certainty and clarity as to its operation. Some of this will be done through improved administrative procedures. More will happen with the development of primary legislation in the area, work on which will commence this year. The legislation will

integrate current consents and planning procedures with a view to delivering an integrated, fast-track, transparent and participative consent process for the onshore and offshore elements of these projects.

We are also looking at how the approach to strategic planning on land, through the development of the National Spatial Strategy, can be replicated in the marine environment. The development of a Marine Spatial Plan for Ireland would ensure a much needed plan-led policy framework to realise the economic and development potential of the marine environment. Such an approach, together with the modernised legislation, would also ensure greater community involvement in coastal zone management and planning.

#### Conclusion

Planning and politics is not all that different! To succeed at either profession, you need to be skilled in change management. We have some very significant changes facing us at national and local level set out some of them for you today. We in politics need the continued engagement from yourselves, the planning professionals, to help us shape the future of the country and I look forward to working with you in bringing about that change.

Thank you.

ENDS