

IPI National Planning Conference

President's Address

Minister, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

May I welcome you all to this, the 31st Annual Conference of the Irish Planning Institute. The title of this year's conference – 'Planning for a Sustainable Economic Future' could hardly be more appropriate to the difficult times we now face. I think everyone finds it hard to accept how seriously and how rapidly our circumstances have changed even since this time last year when we met in Westport.

Everyone is now looking for prudent and sustainable solutions to problems that are impacting aggressively on our way of life at a scale and pace that is difficult even to contemplate.

I have to say that I find it interesting and at least a little ironic that the word 'sustainable' is now a word that is on everyone's lips. The quest for sustainability is no longer the preserve of bearded, tree-hugging sandal-wearing environmentalists. And whilst it has been the watchword of planners for many a year, it can only be good news that it seems to have fast become the watchword of a much broader group of policy makers throughout our society.

But let's be clear about this. Nothing in our conference over the next two days should be about trying to be smart and say 'we planners, we knew about sustainability all along and we told you so'. There will no doubt come a day when it's appropriate to indulge ourselves in a measured reflection on the causes of our present difficulties. But that day is not today – there's too much to do that's more important. Right now, the most urgent need is to identify sustainable solutions to our economic problems as a critical part of a unified national approach to recovery. And planning has a key role to play.

But having said that there's a key role for planning to play in securing a sustainable economic recovery, it's clear that to rebuild our economy on more competitive and sustainable lines, the role of every aspect of government, at national level and at the local level, including our planning system, is going to be subject to considerable scrutiny.

So suggesting that what we need is 'more of the same' from our planning system, in my view, simply won't do. The public and Government will, rightly be asking for much more than that if planning is going to have a pivotal role in shaping a more sustainable future for our citizens. I think that our profession, perhaps more so than at any time since 1963, needs to be ready to embrace the process of reform and change in order to secure a more sustainable economy for all of us.

It's easy to talk about planning and competitiveness but what do we mean when we say that more effective planning going to make us more competitive? It's easy to say, in these difficult times that 'all development is good development' and that 'planning is a luxury that we no longer afford'

If planning can add to the effectiveness and sustainability recovery of our economy, what should be done?

I know that, in the last few months, the captains of our ship are putting all their energy in to preventing the ship from sinking in the storm. But there will come a moment, when the storm abates and the ship is on a more even keel, and it is then that we will need to look carefully at the course we're taking. And when that time comes I think our nation needs a thorough and far reaching debate on the future of our planning system.

In my mind the over-arching issue is this:

We need a planning system that itself is efficient, effective and sustainable and, in turn, will deliver an economy that is more competitive and more sustainable in the future.

Put another way:

We need a system that stops bad development but places fewer impediments in the way of good development

We need a system that is self sustaining in terms of the resources necessary to make it efficient and effective

Our planning system needs to deliver an environment that includes the basis for a more competitive and sustainable economy

So what's inefficient about our system? Where is the 'red tape' that needs to be cut away?

First of all, for a nation of about four million people, I think we have too many planning authorities. Of the 114 local authorities in this country, 88 of them are planning authorities. Many of the smaller authorities represent very small populations and their planning functions often lack adequate resources.

The result of this is that to a user of the planning system, the system seems almost crazily fragmented and confused. Do I go to the Town Council or the County Council? If you go the Town Council, it very often doesn't cover the whole of the town never mind the villages that are just outside. To make it even more confusing the unsuspecting customer then often finds that it's the County Planners who are providing the planning service in the town but they're operating to a different development plan.

What signal is this giving to those who want to invest in the development of our country?

During the last few months of crisis, the Government has repeatedly said that it's serious about reforming the public service. The fragmentation of our planning service across a historic patchwork of local authorities is an issue that needs to be tackled if we are to present a coherent front to those who wish to invest in development particularly development that will bring sustainable employment and restore economic growth.

Planning authorities need to represent viable planning units within our population. Their current boundaries are most often based on an historical footprint of our towns and cities often going back many decades. An efficient and effective planning system needs to be based on a reduced network of planning authorities each serving an area that reflects not only the way our country has changed in recent years but that also reflects the way we want it to change in the future. So we need to find a system that will allow whole cities and their hinterlands to be planned cohesively. We need to plan our towns and the villages and rural areas that they are interdependent with together, as part of the same process.

Fewer planning authorities means a reduced number of development plans but each plan covering a wider and more meaningful area. Fewer planning authorities means a less confusing and more coherent and consistent planning service for the public.

But I suspect that many people see our current planning system as 'nothing but unnecessary red-tape' because the system sometimes seems designed to put at least as many obstacles in the way of development that we should be encouraging, as it places in the path of the development that should be refused. I think that many people, private individuals and experienced developers, find engaging with our planning system generally stressful and frustrating. Despite all our development and local area plans, the likely outcome of a planning application is not clear enough at the outset. Perhaps it will always be like that, to a degree. But it seems to me that both the public and developers find it difficult to work out, with any certainty, what development is likely to be permitted and what is likely to be refused.

There will be significant benefits both to users of the planning system and to the rebuilding of our economy if we can remove impediments to sustainable development without compromising our ability to resist development that is inappropriate or unsustainable.

So what problems does our system place in the path of those proposing sustainable development? There are two main problems:

Firstly, we do not have sufficient confidence in development and local area plans to give them greater weight in the planning application process.

Secondly, the right of third parties to challenge a permission that is consistent with a development or local area plan brings significant uncertainties to all applicants.

It seems to me that if we could speed up and give greater confidence to those using our planning process if we were able to have greater confidence in our development or local area plans. If we could improve our system for making these plans, then it might possible to allow planning applications that were consistent with them to be approved without the risk of appeal by a third party.

To have such a level of confidence in our plans would need significant alterations to at least two areas of the plan making procedure:

There would need to be a way of bringing an independent assessment to areas of a plan where elected members had modified the plan against the advice of officials;

There would also need to be a mechanism to allow the public to have their objections to parts of plan to be independently assessed

Although these measures might add to the time taken to prepare plans, they might create conditions where certain classes of development (for example development consistent with a specific zoning objective in a plan) could benefit from a significantly accelerated planning application process. A little like the procedures we have today within Strategic Development Zones, Development that was consistent with a zoning objective in a plan, could be exempted from the possibility of appeal by third parties at the planning application stage.

This would bring significant benefits for users of the system who would be able to frame their development proposals against the background of a plan where third party concerns had already been assessed and any difference of opinion between elected members and planning authority officials had already been independently resolved. There would also be wider benefits for the implementation of national or regional strategies because there would be a clear incentive for developers to frame their proposals so that they were consistent with the plan. Developers who chose to make proposals outside the terms of the plan (for example on un-zoned land) would not be ruled out but would know at the outset that they may face greater difficulties in securing planning permission. Those proposing to invest, particularly in employment generating development would know with greater confidence what was required of them in terms of the location and design of their development in order to secure an accelerated low risk route to a planning permission.

In terms of resources, I don't imagine that these changes are going to add significantly to the resource necessary to operate our planning system. There may be a new role for An Bord Pleanála, in reviewing those parts of plans that where elected members had included provisions in a plan against the advice on local authority officials or where a member of the public's objection to a plan was not resolved at the local level, but that extra work might well be off-set by the reduction in appeals.

Overall, the performance of our planning system has continued to improve as the effects of the major review brought forward in the Planning and Development Act 2000 have bedded in an matured. But no complex regulatory system such as our planning system can remain effective or adapt to new challenges if it remains static. So as a profession we must engage with the process of review and embrace changes that will contribute positively to a more sustainable future for our society.

On the issue of resources for our planning system, I am of the view that the current arrangements for resourcing the planning system are far from sustainable. There has been no real increase in the fees charged to users of the planning system since 1998. The Government's Consultation paper 'Resourcing the Planning System' published last year suggests that the state is subsidising the average cost of processing a an average planning application by about €1500.

Planning is a core regulatory and local development function of local authorities and as such, should be self-funding, rather than subsidised by the other revenue sources of local authorities, or by central governments. The improvements that are demanded in planning authorities' performance must be matched with improvements in funding; otherwise planning authorities will struggle to deliver them. It would be in line with the overall principle of 'user pays' to ensure that persons proposing development pay for the service provided to them.

We must move towards a position where the costs of the system is met by the charges paid by those who use it, thereby releasing taxpayer's money for purposes that are more urgent.

But although developing reforms to planning system will help deliver will help deliver a platform for more sustainable planning decisions, it's also important that there is a consensus about the direction of those decisions and their role in a sustainable economic recovery.

So I suppose it's here that we have to ask ourselves 'Where did it all go wrong? How did we loose our competitiveness?

I began to think that we were getting something seriously wrong when my teenage daughter got a weekend job in a department store in Cork and although in a location that is better served by public transport than many others, she could not get to work on Sundays unless I drove here their in the family car. I also found, that to avoid here waiting for an hour and a half after work on Sunday, I had to go and collect her by car too.

So I learnt first hand how difficult it was to join the work force unless you were a car owner. Even for a humble weekend job in department store.

The Census tells us that the average distance travelled to work in this country has risen by 60% in the 20 years since 1986. The average journey to work has risen from 9.9 km to 15.8 km in that time.

The difficulty for employers is that, because so much of both our employment and our housing is located where the only realistic option is travel to work by car, in order to attract employees, even at the lower levels in our economy, then it becomes necessary to set wages at a sufficient level to pay for the cost of travel to work by car rather than at level sufficient to by a bus or train ticket.

The key is to make better planning decisions that allow more people the opportunity to live closer to where they work.

The best solution is plan so that more people can walk or cycle to work. Without doubt, that's the lowest cost means of travelling to work and employers who are located in areas where a significant number of their workforce can avail of those means of transportation can have the prospect of being able to pay lower wages without compromising the quality of life of their workers. In so many towns and cities the distance between major employment and residential areas is not great. But the lack of convenient and attractive links suitable for walkers and cyclists often means that the car, and the costs of car-ownership, is the only practical option for most. How many roads in how many towns lack basic footpaths never mind a dedicated cycle-way?

Yet rather than provide more footpaths and cycle-ways, low cost transport solutions that can have a big impact on peoples ability to move around their local area without the need for a car, we seem to think that we get better value for money from lavish road schemes directed, often exclusively, at the private car.

Forget the environmental benefits for a moment, we can make significant reductions in the cost of employing workers in this Country if we plan and invest to reduce the cost of travelling to work.

We need low cost schemes, often involving only minor engineering works or perhaps just better road markings, to improve local accessibility particularly in towns and cities, for walkers and cyclists.

Everywhere, we need to plan for more mixed use higher density development located on existing public transport routes.

Everywhere, we need to stop planning for large scale homogeneous residential and business areas where the only option is travelling long distances for everyday journeys.

Everywhere, where we have made these mistakes in the past, we need to develop adaptive strategies to provide residential and business communities with lower cost and more sustainable means of transport.

And to reduce the number of the longest journeys to work, we need to refocus our strategy for rural areas. Although the population of a great many rural areas has begun to rise in recent years, all too often this growth is based on long distance commuting for work.

We must put an end to strategies for rural areas based solely on increasing population. Instead we must focus on delivering sustainable employment for rural communities encouraging population to rise in balance with employment opportunities.

If we can use our planning system to encourage sustainable development, particularly employment generating development, by placing less obstacles in the way of the types of development that we should be encouraging, if we can plan and invest to reduce the cost of entering the work force, then through sensible and prudent planning we can begin the process of turning Ireland's economy on to a more competitive and sustainable path, bringing lasting economic, environmental and lifestyle advantages for all our citizens.

Let's begin that process at this conference.