

IPI National Planning Conference 2010

‘Planning for a Smarter Ireland’

The Role of Local Government in Developing Smarter Communities

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Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen. The topic of my talk is sufficiently general to give me the freedom to express some of my general views and experiences of local government and also particularly with regard to the challenges facing local government having regard to their mandate of general competence in acting in the interest of the community.

Initially, I would like to reflect on the outcomes of the recent period of growth which has ended so suddenly and dramatically. Planning Authorities across the state had to respond to a period of unprecedented activity in the development/construction sector. The expectations of the Government and the private sector through this period was that the planning system should be in a position to process the development proposal of clients. This was matched by an increasing requirement to prepare Local Area Plans, in

addition to County and Town Development Plans. I would like to acknowledge the contribution of local authority planners during that period during which their response was, in general, far in excess of what might be reasonably expected. During this period, Local Government delivered on significant investment in Roads, Water, Waste Water, Libraries, Leisure Centres, Parks and Cultural Infrastructure.

In 2000, Local Government was given the lead in promoting the integration of all public services locally through the establishment of County/City Development Boards. Much progress has been made over the 10 years since their launch in co-operating on a diverse range of economic, social and cultural initiatives across the different counties and cities.

In considering the outcomes of this period of growth, it is important to distinguish the planning authority role as a service provider in facilitating government policy of promoting residential, commercial and industrial development. Market forces dictated the scale of activity in planning departments. On a positive note, there are many fine examples of modern Business Parks, quality Shopping Centres and Residential Developments.

However, certain lessons have been learned. For example:-

- ◆ Significant increase in vacant commercial property
- ◆ Absence of regulation of on-site waste water systems
- ◆ Limited support for community planning
- ◆ Reduction in level of volunteerism supporting community activity
- ◆ Unfinished Housing Estates

Looking Forward: Role in Developing Smarter Communities

Firstly, we must recognise the changed work environment. Income from all sources has reduced, i.e. government funding, rates, planning fees, development levies etc. Staffing levels have dropped in the Local Government Sector by in excess of 10%. Staff are in dispute with Government over pay and conditions. The morale in the sector has been damaged by the termination of contracts of colleagues who gave a serious commitment to the service during the period of growth. The Government is pursuing the transformation of the public service agenda. This agenda has an emphasis on rationalisation, value for money and greater efficiencies. The challenge is to work smarter. What does this mean? Local Government is already co-operating on a range of services, Waste Plans, River Basin Plans, Road Design, Regional Planning Guidelines – further limited opportunities

Following on the publication of the McCarthy Report, the government established the Local Government Efficiency Review Group on 23rd December, 2009, to review the cost base, expenditure and numbers employed in local authorities with a view to reporting on:-

Specific recommendations to reduce costs

- ⇒ The effectiveness of particular programmes
- ⇒ Optimal efficiency in the way programmes are delivered
- ⇒ Any other proposals to enhance value for money in the delivery of services at local level.

In terms of the re-organisation of services and the impact on our communities, two key areas require consideration:

- ◆ Competitiveness
- ◆ Compliance

Competitiveness

Local government has a key role to play in stimulating local conditions which can support the competitiveness of all sectors.

- Deliver services at the most efficient cost (issues of direct provision versus contracting will require resolution).
- Take a pro-active role in employment generating initiatives.
- Maintain high quality infrastructure supporting business including water services, transport, energy and broadband.
- Create the conditions locally, to present businesses in the best possible way to customers.

Compliance

In the future, there will be a much greater emphasis on the capacity of the environment to accommodate development. In the past the conflict between development which supported employment versus environmental impacts

often favoured support for employment creation. Also in the case of one-off housing local need, considerations were and are normally accommodated.

There are now increasing responsibilities on local government to comply with environmental standards set by the EU through a series of directives e.g. Water Framework Directive.

Arising from a recent ECJ Dangerous Substances Case, there must now be a surplus capacity in the treatment system when granting new permissions and taking account of the cumulative impact of permissions granted. Breaches of this code if proven can lead to conviction of a criminal offence.

Under the Surface Water and Ground Water Regulations 2010, public authorities cannot carry out functions in a manner which will knowingly contribute to a deterioration in water quality standards.

We have in Ireland approximately 440,000 on site treatment system serving one off houses. It is estimated that approximately 25,000 of these are contributing to ground water pollution and 120,000 to surface water pollution.

Arising from an ECJ Case against Ireland, the state (with the exception of Cavan) was found not to comply with the Waste Directive. The Government has given a commitment in the Programme for Government to introduce controls.

Each of these instances will influence where development can occur. The population targets set in the Regional Planning Guidelines will also be a significant consideration.

Planning will now experience a greater degree of conflict between environmental and development considerations, Development Plans will need to strengthen their compliance objectives in support of the higher environmental standards. This no doubt will also challenge the political system in Councils.

These new environmental considerations will require professional and measured systems of monitoring, testing and reporting.

In considering the shape of our cities, towns, villages and communities into the future, our capacity to deliver infrastructure beyond essential services has been seriously reduced in the short to medium term. The lessons from the past 15 years would suggest a greater requirement supporting communities in identifying and meeting their own needs. How can this be achieved? It may be timely for Local Government to revisit its relevance to communities. Over the last 20 years there has been targeted support at three levels.

1. Disadvantages urban and some rural areas – benefiting from government funded initiatives.
2. Progressive rural communities who availed of Leader (E.U.) funding to support economic, social and cultural activities.
3. Communities/Local Authorities who availed of Government Schemes to deliver Community Infrastructure.

4. Organised Community Development – Tidy Towns etc.

Case Studies - Examples

Ballyhoura Development

Model

Local Communities organised/representatives sought and succeeded in getting agency support.

Showed resilience in early years.

Leaders emerged.

Adare

Model

Tourism (underdeveloped) supported employment in catchment.

Gap: Visitor facilities

Partnership between community/business and local authority delivered Visitor Centre.

Thurles, Co. Tipperary

Model

Loss of Agri-industries, Sugar Factory, Erin Foods.

Locals envious of development in other neighbouring towns e.g. Clonmel and Kilkenny.

Partnership between Chamber of Commerce & Town Council

Identified four infrastructural Projects – two delivered:-

1. Arts Centre/Library
2. Swimming Pool

Rates increase 25%

Carlow

Thirty year tradition of interest and support for Visual Arts (Éigse).

No suitable dedicated venue.

Partnership: Local Authority/Carlow Community

Delivered: Flagship Project €18 million in 2009 – Visual.

CONCLUSION:

The model of multi-agency/partnership with communities to identify needs or strategic objectives usually has the local authority as a significant player.

With the initiation of Community & Enterprise Departments, a certain formal structure has been placed within local government.

Now might be an appropriate time to strengthen the linkages between Community & Enterprise and Planning Departments to assist in supporting communities who have not benefited from any initiative in the past.
