

National Spatial Strategy – Indications for the Way Ahead

Submission from the Western Development Commission

1. Introduction

The Western Development Commission (WDC) welcomes the publication of the consultation document for the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) *Indications for the Way Ahead*. The preparation of the NSS is a milestone in Irish public policy and can provide a realistic basis for achieving the goal of balanced regional development for the first time in the history of the state. The case for such a strategy is overwhelming and has been succinctly made in the document. As Dublin's over-development calls for "effective planning and infrastructural response" so clearly does the under-development of the Western Region¹. The Western Development Commission's report *The State of the West*, published in July 2001, contains a detailed analysis of recent economic performance in the region. It reveals the nature and extent of the development gap in the productive sectors and the serious deficit in transport, power and telecommunications infrastructure.

The following highlights from that report show key aspects of the development challenge in the Western Region.

- Apart from Galway and Clare, the seven western counties are attracting a tiny share of investment through state-supported industrial employment – a net gain of only 201 jobs (out of a total to the region of 2,807) for Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Mayo and Roscommon combined, over 1999-2000.
- Net industrial output in the Western Region grew at a rate of less than a third of the national average between 1991 and 1998.
- Many of the best and brightest leave the seven western counties. This brain drain leaves a major human resource gap in the region. The absence of a third level institution of university size and status north of Galway means that the region has a weak research and technology capacity and is disadvantaged in attracting research funding or the new 'knowledge-based' industries.
- Opportunities for growth, based on the natural resources of the region, exist in areas like organic farming, specialist crops, aquaculture and value-added seafood. There is considerable development potential in tourism, provided a strategic approach, involving all the interests in the sector, is put in place.
- The region is predominantly rural, with only four towns with population in excess of 10,000 and a further five with more than 5,000. Over 80 per cent of the population live outside towns of 5,000+ population.

¹ Counties Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim Roscommon, Mayo, Galway and Clare.

- Detailed analysis of physical infrastructure reveals the nature and scale of the major deficit in transport, power and telecommunications in the Western Region. This is largely the result of decades of under-investment but is now being compounded by deregulation of the power and telecommunications sectors.

A great deal of public expenditure is committed to investment in infrastructure under the NDP, but the Western Region nevertheless remains seriously underdeveloped and increasingly unable to compete in a deregulated environment. A national spatial strategy could provide a clear rationale and context for the interventions needed to underpin development in the Western Region.

In broad terms, much of the analysis and the recommendations in *The State of the West* are reflected in the NSS consultation document. However, there are some gaps, notably the omission of access to adequate power/energy as a key dimension of the infrastructure problem.

As we found that the questions suggested in *Indications for the Way Ahead* were a little ambiguous we have adapted them and have added some of our own headings.

2. Guiding Vision and Principles

The WDC has no difficulty agreeing with the Guiding Vision for the NSS. Clearly, the goals of balanced regional development and preservation of the natural environment and cultural heritage underpin the work of the WDC. The strength of public concern about regional disparities is very evident from the list of frequently recurring topics from the NSS consultation. Most of the issues on the list reflect the concerns of citizens in less developed, predominantly rural, areas such as the Western Region and those highlighted in *The State of the West* i.e. employment prospects, transport, access to health and education services, the brain drain, the inability of less developed areas to compete for mobile investment etc. It is also evident that those consulted fear that the problems of less-developed areas may not be given the same priority as those in areas that are more developed.

The WDC also welcomes the Guiding Principles for the NSS, particularly the recognition of the need to create new development opportunities in the BMW region and to ensure the viability of rural areas. These principles and the outputs envisaged (e.g. shortening commuting distances, reducing youth migration, targeting small urban centres and rural areas for a wider variety of leisure and employment options, improving accessibility etc) coincide closely with strategic priorities that the WDC has identified for the Western Region. The development initiatives which were proposed in *The State of the West* are designed to address these.

3. Functional Areas

3.1 The Concept

The concept of a Functional Area (FA) was used by the WDC in *The State of the West* to describe relatively small areas, often including several small towns and their hinterlands, which might make up a functioning entity. FAs are based on existing

spatial patterns that are, in turn, determined largely by infrastructural endowment especially transport, employment, housing and educational opportunities, as well as leisure and recreational facilities, and landscape. We regard the FA concept as a useful way of capturing the spatial dynamics of a region and identifying appropriate loci for strategic intervention.

We understand that the concept is used somewhat differently and on a larger scale in *Indications for the Way Ahead*, in that FAs may be taken to indicate areas with a mix of urban, small town, village and rural areas which form **an entity whose basis is not entirely clear**. Perhaps the use of the term 'functional' in this context is somewhat misleading because some of these areas can not be said to be 'functioning' in a meaningful way as entities. In the North Midlands, for example, there is little relationship between say Roscommon and Tullamore. Some of the FAs are very large, and although they may be in the catchment of a gateway town they are not really operating as 'functional' entities. Perhaps this is a problem of semantics, but they could perhaps more appropriately be seen as a couple of overlapping FAs. While it is recognised that more numerous FAs would not necessarily benefit the NSS, some consideration needs to be given to the internal patterns of FAs in order to plan appropriately for them.

The example of river catchment management has been used as a metaphor for the FA. However, a river catchment is clearly physically delineated, whereas FAs with fuzzy edges will be subject to debate unless there is a clear rationale for their delineation, and a coherent logic for their use as a basis for spatial planning. It is important therefore, to clarify the concept and scale of FAs so that responses arising from the NSS are appropriate to current circumstances, including internal heterogeneity/homogeneity, while based on a clear and realistic appraisal of future potential.

3.2 Basis for Functional Areas

We are aware that the delineation of FAs is largely based on 1996 data and it is clear that many of the social and economic changes which have resulted from recent rapid economic growth, have occurred since then. It is very likely, therefore, that spatial patterns in the FAs may have changed considerably since the data were collected, for example, the expansion of some centres and/or contraction of others. For instance, population expansion in some parts of the Western Region is reflected in an increase of two thirds in the number of housing completions 1996-2000, compared to a state average increase of 48 per cent over the same period. **Thus, it is important to be cautious about the spatial dynamics within FAs, when these may have changed quite significantly in the last five or six years.** It is also important to recognise that existing patterns are not immutable and that new spatial relations can be created by changing the mix of infrastructure and opportunity mentioned above. **In productive sectors, of tourism, fisheries, agri-food production, smaller centres can become growth hubs and achieve critical mass on a smaller scale.**

If, as has been stated, the delineation of FAs is based on research of activity patterns, and includes how residents themselves identify with their localities, it is important to recognise that this has consequences for spatial patterns. For example, much of the 'North Midlands' appears to include localities which would function and receive

services from towns in the Western FAs such as Castlebar, Tuam or Galway and that the inhabitants would more likely identify with these centres.

A more fundamental issue relates to the fact that the FAs, as delineated, do not correspond with any of the boundaries of strategic intervention currently in use by state agencies. These are usually based on aggregates of counties. Although the FAs are apparently based on existing spatial patterns, it is clear from *Indications for the way Ahead*, that if the delineation of FAs is accepted in the consultation process they will also form the basis for the NSS. Thus, existing organisations may be expected to use FAs as a context for planning and as a basis for resource allocation, including deployment of services. However, for some state agencies, there may be no coherent logic by which they can engage with areas of this size or scale, because their unit of operation is either much larger or smaller. While FAs, by taking account of the heterogeneity of the regions, can allow for response to be customised, this clearly requires strong regional capacity, as well as guidance from the NSS itself (this issue is considered further below).

4. Appropriateness of Different Responses

4.1 Gateways and Hubs

The seven county Western Region, which comes within the remit of the WDC, is predominantly rural, as pointed out above. There are a limited number of obvious gateways and larger hubs but the region is dominated by an urban structure of small market towns. Clearly, while there is a need to target gateways for investment and as centres of knowledge, such a city-led approach on its own has limited applicability for predominantly rural regions and this is acknowledged in the document.

The need for an emphasis on towns has been consistently pointed out in WDC reports. In *Blueprint for Investing in the West*, the WDC, on the basis of detailed research, identified ten ‘first tier’ locations in the region which could become the focal points for small and medium-sized overseas firms. (Indeed, case studies of such firms already located in small western towns are included in the report). Such towns, and others throughout the region, are also locations for many strong and well-rooted and successful indigenous SME firms. **They can and should also be targets for the decentralisation of government services so that they become focal points for the creation of critical mass of economic and social development to underpin development of the surrounding region.** In this sense, the WDC would see them as development hubs.

There is also a need to target groups of smaller, ‘second tier’ towns for development and, in some cases, appropriate targets for small-scale decentralisation. This, in effect, will mean the selection and promotion of development hubs made up of linked towns, or could mean the creation of a new hub development based on a particular infrastructural facility such as Knock airport. In *The State of the West*, WDC have recommended an Invest in the West programme which attempts to operationalise a **development strategy based on small towns, which includes developing their educational, social and cultural infrastructure as well as their business capacity.**

4.2 Rural Areas

The consultation document *Indications for the Way Ahead* contains relatively few specifics about the future of rural areas. On the basis of our experience of working in a rural region the WDC believes that there is a need to recognise the diversity within such regions and to operationalise a spatial strategy for rural regions which can respond to the needs of different zones. At least three distinct types of rural areas can be identified in the Western Region. These are similar to the six way typology developed in the background research for the NSS.

Mainly farming areas where the rural economy has traditionally been based primarily on farming and on agri-based industry and services. Such areas are already experiencing changes associated with declining numbers in farming and are vulnerable to the fall-out from industrial restructuring, especially in the food industry. Traditionally reliant on farming, they may lag behind more marginalised farming areas in terms of the development of tourism, forestry or other natural resource-based activity. Those near to larger towns will have already established commuting patterns, as farm family members travel to off-farm jobs. **Diversification of the rural economy and adequate linkages to population centres are essential to retaining population and services in such areas and to providing off-farm employment opportunities to facilitate part-time farming.**

Marginal farming areas that are heavily dependent on small-scale non-viable and part-time farming. Some of these areas have significant capacity in other natural resource-based sectors such as tourism, forestry, and fisheries particularly in scenic and coastal areas. The more remote areas continue to lose population but, generally, there is evidence of stabilisation and even increases in recent years. Poor economic and social infrastructure and access to services are critical issues for such areas.

Rural areas close to cities and larger towns. The economic growth of recent years has led to rapid suburbanisation and to the development of commuter belts around cities and larger towns. Competition for land has escalated land prices and the demand for housing can put considerable pressure on the local authority planning system and on infrastructure and services. Housing development can treble or quadruple the population of a small town or village, virtually overnight, and alter forever its character and the quality of life of its residents. Local facilities and services become overburdened. In such areas the interests of ‘old’ and ‘new’ residents are often opposed, with each blaming the other for a situation over which neither has control.

Rural development therefore, needs a strategic approach which can respond to the problems of particular zones. Such an approach characterises the WDC report *Blueprint for Tourism in the West* which sets out a strategic approach to sustainable tourism development which has a strong spatial dimension. Three distinct tourism zones are identified and a set of strategies tailored to their current state of development and resource endowment is outlined. A Steering Group led by Bord Failte has been established to implement this strategy in the region.

5. Environmental and Social Sustainability

The quality of life available in rural communities and small towns is being increasingly recognised and valued. This is not just a matter of cheaper housing but

reflects an awareness of the worth of a clean environment, safety and security, scenic beauty and a unique culture. Recent migration to rural areas in the West (such as Carrick on Shannon) is evidence of the attractiveness of rural living once the opportunities exist to earn a good livelihood. There is a need to ensure that the fragility of the rural environment, which is inherent to its attractiveness, is not detrimentally affected by new developments and haphazard settlement. It is desirable that there be an appropriate balance between public good and private entitlement in relation to location of new residences.

The activities of the community and voluntary sector have underpinned much local economic development and social infrastructure provision the West in the past decade. This is a valuable 'social capital' resource and should be harnessed productively and it is important that such efforts continue to be supported and recognised. Paralleling this activity has been the development of a pattern of local protest and activism particularly in relation to environmental and health issues. In this context it is important that appropriate mechanisms for consultation be an integral part of public policies and that meaningful partnership characterise the relationship between citizens and the state.

The practical implications of achieving the goals of environmental and social sustainability are not addressed in any detail in the consultation document. While it is easy to imagine shifts in economic resources or policy priorities emerging from the NSS, it is more difficult to envision the implication of these goals. Indeed, addressing some economic priorities may have the potential to adversely impact on the environment or on social exclusion. It is not clear as to whether/how the NSS intends to provide a framework that can accommodate or address such difficulties.

7. Linkages

While the attractiveness of the quality of life is a powerful factor in the revitalisation of rural areas, its potential is limited in the absence of adequate services and social infrastructure, particularly in health and education. Given the size of the region and low population densities it is accepted that people may have to travel some distance to avail of services. Thus the issue of **linkages** is particularly important and is essential to the functional operation of the gateway and hub concepts. The linkages of roads, public transport, energy and communication infrastructure are obviously critical to ensuring that the smaller towns and more remote areas can benefit from the designation of hubs and gateways in their area. But, in addition to the designation of the development of these 'hard' linkages, it is essential to recognise the importance of the 'soft' linkages which are operating on the ground, between people, and take account of social and cultural connections.

The NSS needs to be built around a **logic of accessibility**, because ease of access and linkages within and between functional areas and the growth centres within them will be critical. **A crucial determinant of success of the NSS will be investment in linkages (roads, public transport, services) between and within FAs. Such linkages must be given equal priority with the development of gateways and hubs.** Moreover, linkages should be developed in a way that enhances rather than further undermines the competitiveness of the peripheral regions. It is important to

recognise that providing good access to gateways alone could actually accentuate rather than redress tendencies to agglomeration.

Good access is critical to the successful development of economic activities in rural regions. A key part of this is the development of airports in the region, which provide access to global markets, both for the development of tourism, and also for local and international industries based in the region.

Much of what is being suggested under the heading of *Indications for Spatial Policy* in the document reflects suggestions and recommendations that have been made in the various WDC Blueprint documents. **The WDC particularly welcomes the recognition of the need for “a prudent provision of infrastructure beyond which certain levels of demand might suggest” and the rationale on which it is based.**

7. Specificity of the NSS

While the WDC recognises that the Spatial Strategy is a national document which addresses the need for balanced regional development at a national level, and provides indications for spatial planning at a regional level, we would emphasise the necessity of making the NSS sufficiently specific so as to be a meaningful guide to local authorities and other agencies operating at a regional and local levels.

We understand that the NSS itself should not provide detailed instructions/indications for what should happen locally. Nonetheless, it must provide a very clear context and direction which can guide implementation at a regional and county level. Otherwise there is a risk of dilution. Certainly we recognise and emphasise the importance of local knowledge and input into the implementation of the Strategy. Nonetheless we feel that providing clear and specific direction for those who will develop the NSS at a regional level will allow for more consistent implementation, while at the same time allowing for local adaptation and response to the individual needs of each region.

The WDC would be concerned that, in the absence of a clear set of actions formulated in the NSS, the gateway towns (because of their attractiveness to the private sector and their established critical mass) would develop in response. However, without a commensurate development of linkages and infrastructure, which rely to a great extent on public funds, smaller towns and rural areas might not be in a position to benefit from the NSS and might end up being left out of the process.

8. Implementation of the NSS

Clearly, effective implementation is crucial to the success of the NSS, and unless the NSS forms a central element of planning and implementation activities of all public agencies and provides a meaningful regulatory and practical framework for the private sector, it will have little impact.

The WDC views the NSS as an opportunity for integrated development planning. Where gateways are designated, they should act as magnets in their region, attracting

investment and people to live and work in them. Hence, it is crucial that there is planning for the inevitable suburbanisation of gateways. It is essential that the implementation process includes integrated planning for the consequences of growth and development which can enhance quality of life and environmental sustainability.

In relation to implementation, the NSS can provide a real rationale for a more coherent approach to development at regional, county and sub-county level. The way this is managed in practice is crucial to the success of the NSS. There are two key areas of implementation to be considered, viz., ensuring that local and regional planning is consistent with the NSS and that it also underpins the actions of development agencies and service providers.

8.1 Integrating the NSS into Planning Process

In order for the NSS to be implemented, its integration into the planning process is essential. This must happen at county level in County Development Plans and in the County Development Boards's Strategies for Economic, Social and Cultural Development. CDBs have rightly been identified as having the potential to play a crucial role since they are charged with the production of an integrated development strategy for a county.

8.2 Development Agencies and Service Providers

In addition to ensuring that the NSS is integrated into the planning processes, it is also essential that the actions of statutory bodies are consistent with it, and that where appropriate, there are incentives to ensure private enterprise is also acting within the same framework.

The provision of social infrastructure is important to the development of an area, not only providing essential services, but also providing employment in an area. Hence key Departments (such as the Departments of Health and Children, Education and Science and Social Community and Family Affairs) must provide services and social infrastructure in accordance with the NSS.

The provision of 'hard' infrastructure is also critical to the successful implementation of the NSS. State agencies with responsibility for infrastructure (e.g. the NRA, Iarnrod Eireann) should also be required to operate within the strategic framework set out in the NSS, and similarly the state agencies with responsible for supporting employment and enterprise (IDA, Enterprise Ireland, Udaras na Gaeltachta, Shannon Development). It is not clear as to how the NSS could impact on the implementation of EU programmes and initiatives in Ireland. It would be essential that there should be consistency between the implementation of the NSS and such programmes.

Deregulated or privatised bodies with responsibility for the provision of infrastructure are operating in response to market/pseudo market forces (e.g. the communications and energy sectors). In these cases it may be necessary to provide incentives to ensure that appropriate investments are made in accordance with the NSS (which would be implemented by the DPE). It might also be appropriate to ensure (through legislation) that the regulators operating in these areas give due consideration to the NSS.

8.3 A Statutory Basis for the NSS

There is much to be said for the creation of a statutory framework to give legitimacy to the entire NSS and to ensure compliance. Otherwise, difficult political choices may be avoided or fudged. A legislative basis would both emphasise government commitment to balanced regional development and provide a mechanism for the enforcement of the Strategy. Clearly the most effective implementation will result from commitment from those bodies whose work is to be guided by it, but the existence of a statutory basis will provide additional authority.

8.4 Managing Authority

It is important that one authority is charged with the management of the implementation process and with ensuring that the NSS effectively guides development and achieves its objectives. It would probably be most effective if the managing authority were to be part of an existing organisation that has previously established links and authority in relation to planning, its development and co-ordination. The managing authority should also make use of existing organisations with an appropriate remit and expertise at regional and local level (such as the regional authorities and the WDC) to promote and ensure coherent regional implementation. The active participation of other bodies whose planning and developments would be guided by the National Spatial Strategy in its implementation should help to ensure it is effective. The WDC do not feel that a new authority for the management of the NSS would be appropriate.

8.5 Monitoring the Implementation of the NSS

Monitoring of the NSS is essential to ensure that it is effectively implemented and to highlight areas of difficulty. Indicators of achievement should form some part of the monitoring process. It is important to ensure that the indicators are chosen with the participation of the agencies involved in the NSS implementation. Furthermore, the indicators should be simple, easy to collect, and provide data which are useful to both the managing authority and to the organisation to which it relates. This will help to bring about timely and quality data collection.

In addition to collecting regular monitoring data the NSS should be subject to evaluation in the medium and long term, to assess the effectiveness of implementation and, more importantly, to learn from the implementation process and allow for adaptations and developments to respond to regional development needs. Related to the necessity for evaluation is the need for ongoing research on spatial issues.

9. Research Needed.

A considerable amount of research has been carried out for the NSS to date, which has provided detail on patterns of behaviour and needs, as well as on the process of spatial planning and models from elsewhere. The strong research basis for the NSS is very welcome. There is, however, need for additional work even after the NSS has been formulated. Firstly as mentioned earlier, much of the research relating to population trends and spatial behaviour patterns (e.g. commuting) was based on data from the 1996 Census or other more recent but less robust data. There have been considerable changes in Ireland since then and it is important that the patterns of these changes are examined when data from the next census become available.

In the last five years agencies and individuals have been making decisions which affect the development and process of change in different regions. If the NSS is to be implemented effectively it should be operating in concert with some of the changes that are already occurring, while trying to apply a brake to others which are not consistent with the NSS. Doing this requires a good understanding of what has been happening in recent years. By maintaining links with those research institutions which have contributed to the Strategy (and providing for others to participate), knowledge of spatial processes and planning skills can be developed in Ireland, which will in the future contribute to quality regional and spatial planning.

The WDC believe that it is crucial to understand the economic development interventions that can most effectively apply to peripheral areas. In addition to updating analysis on spatial patterns, there are other significant research needs. **For example, even though the importance of rural areas and small towns has been recognised throughout the consultation process for the NSS, there is still some difficulty in understanding the relationship between rural areas and small towns, and between small towns and larger gateways.** It would, therefore, be useful to undertake research on such issues, ideally using case studies at regional level. The WDC has the skills to contribute to this, and given our recognition of the importance of smaller towns and their hinterlands in the development process, and our ongoing work in the area, we would be happy to work with the managing authority in the further development of a strategy for the development of smaller towns and rural areas. The WDC is in a unique position to further the development of the NSS and can act as a ‘testing ground’ for developments, which if successful can be adapted and implemented elsewhere.

Finally, the WDC (and others) have identified rural tourism, small business support, organic agri-food production, aquaculture etc., as potential growth areas. Appropriate transport, power and telecommunications technologies can address the infrastructure deficit but **there is no cohesive strategy or drive to maximise their combined impact.** In the absence of such a strategy, it is inevitable that peripheral (rural) areas will always lag behind and lack the capacity to compete on the basis of any ‘value for money’ criteria for private funding or public investment.