



[Engineers Ireland (IEI); Irish Landscape Institute (ILI); Irish Planning Institute (IPI);
Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (RIAI) and the Society of Chartered
Surveyors (SCS)]

A BETTER QUALITY OF LIFE FOR ALL

Proposals for creating a more sustainable built environment

February 2011



Urban Forum

The Urban Forum is an umbrella group of the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland, Engineers Ireland, Irish Planning Institute, Irish Landscape Institute and Society of Chartered Surveyors.

It provides a platform for strategic thinking and discussion on a variety of matters of interest to the members of the professional institutes that work in the built environment. The Forum also organises colloquia on subjects that are of significant interest to the Forums members, and which are attended by representatives of the relevant stakeholders.

Committee Members 2010 - 2011

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Executive Summary

The Manifesto examines the hangover effects from the recent economic boom in relation to the development of our towns and cities and the quality of life of the people. The main effects noted are:

- Population heading for 5million and changing demographics leading to very high demand for housing.
- Urban sprawl and one off houses lead to high car and oil dependency.
- Population and development flow to the Dublin -Belfast corridor.
- Health effects due to above factors.
- Pressure on infrastructure.

In order to address these issues and to ensure Ireland's competitiveness and the quality of life of our people, the Urban Forum puts forward five key measures:

1. Reform Local Government structure particularly in relation to the administration of planning and the delivery of sustainable communities and infrastructure.
2. Revise the National Spatial Strategy to deliver a 50 year planning framework.
3. Produce and implement a National Landscape Strategy and meet our national obligation under the European Landscape Convention.
4. Advance the Government Policy on Architecture's commitment to place quality and design at the core of National Policy on the built environment.
5. Use the opportunities created through NAMA and the Housing and Sustainable Communities Agency to bring a substantial proportion of our urban land under state control to regenerate our urban areas.

Related to these key measures the manifesto also sets out a number of important issues which need to be addressed.

These measures, if implemented will help position Ireland to take best advantage of the economic recovery, when it comes.

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1. Introduction

The Urban Forum is made up of the five bodies representing the professionals in the built environments; Engineers Ireland (EI); Irish Landscape Institute (ILI); Irish Planning Institute (IPI); Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (RIAI) and the Society of Chartered Surveyors (SCS).

Prior to the 2007 elections, the Urban Forum developed a manifesto which highlighted serious issues regarding deterioration of the quality of life in Ireland.

Since that time a sea change has taken place in the economic circumstances of the country. This paper examines these changed circumstances and proposes changes in public policy relating to Local Government and development in order to facilitate economic recovery and to position the country to take best advantage of the recovery when it comes.

2. Unparalleled Growth and Development

2.1 Fast Growing Population

The population of the Republic of Ireland now stands at over 4.4 million . its highest level for well over a century. It is estimated that our population is likely to increase to over 5 million by 2020 despite the recent economic slowdown and subsequent reduction in immigration.

2.2 Demand for Housing

Our steadily growing population, coupled with changing household size, will drive a demand for new housing units in the region of 45,000 units per annum in the medium term. This is in stark contrast to the 90,000+ units per annum constructed in the past few years, but also the 10,000 expected in 2010.

2.3 Increased Suburbanisation

This population growth has accelerated the urbanisation of the country. However, the growth is not spatially uniform. Many town and city centre populations are declining as our suburbs continue to sprawl and grow. It was noted in the Urban Forum 2007 manifesto that Dublin will soon occupy the same surface area as Los Angeles, but with less than a quarter of its population. The same effect can be seen in most of our towns and cities.

2.4 Domination by Dublin

Another dimension of Ireland's new urbanisation is the extent to which this growth in population and development is being dominated by Dublin, with the province of Leinster now accounting for 54% of our population. There appears to be a flow of population and commercial development to the Dublin-Belfast corridor.

2.5 One-Off Housing

In addition to the rapid growth of our outer suburbs, the explosion in the number of one-off houses in rural Ireland has been another phenomenon of Ireland's recent development. These now account for up to 40% of our new housing stock.

2.6 Retail

Within the retail sector the sprawl of development is driving the decline in town centres and smaller shops and the growth of supermarkets, out of town centres and retail warehouse parks on the periphery, which multiply the demand for car use.

3. Consequences

The flow of population and the recent development pattern have major consequences:

3.1 Pressure on Infrastructure

Schools and other facilities in our cities and inner suburbs are struggling to remain open while the demand for school places in outlying areas is booming. Many hospitals are now in the wrong locations to best serve the population.

There is increasing pressure on our water and sewerage systems. There is also increased pressure on urban landscapes. Insecure public ownership, reduction in park lands and sporting facilities for new development and infrastructure as well as underdeveloped park resources contribute to a poorer urban quality of life.

3.2 Increasing Oil-Dependency

One of the consequences of Ireland's suburbanisation is the reality that for many city dwellers, they are as car dependent as their rural neighbours. The average car in Ireland travels, on an annual basis, 24,400km per year . 70% more than France or Germany, 50% more than Britain . and even 30% more than the USA.

The price of this rapid economic success and our fast increasing use of cars is that Ireland has become the fifth most oil-dependent country in the EU and the ninth in the world. This is taking place at a time when oil is becoming an ever-scarcer resource.

3.3 Imbalance in Infrastructure Development

It is becoming obvious that infrastructural development, driven by national policy, is not following the development or population trends described above.

Major pieces of infrastructure, roads, bridges, rail lines, water supply and drainage, typically have useful lives of over 120 years; Organisations such as hospitals or schools can last even longer. It seems obvious that the policy that governs the provision of such infrastructure should have as distant a horizon as possible.

At the same time, development policy should reflect the pertaining reality as well as seeking to influence and to make provision for future development.

3.4 Serious Health Effects

There is evidence to show that as a result of increased car dependency, longer commuting times, fewer opportunities for physical exercise and increased rates of social isolation, we in Ireland could be facing epidemics of chronic illnesses such as diabetes, obesity, depression, osteoporosis and cancer, which are devastating to people's quality of life as well as their life expectancy. Fundamental changes to our built environment are necessary to help combat these new epidemics.

4. Necessary Measures

4.1 A New National Spatial Strategy

The Urban Forum calls for the preparation of a new National Spatial Strategy (NSS) in order to reflect the changed realities in terms of population growth and development patterns since the strategy was prepared.

The Urban Forum believes that the planning horizon of the NSS should be extended to at least fifty years, with reviews at perhaps ten year intervals, in order to better reflect the useful life of the infrastructure to be provided.

The Urban Forum commissioned a study on the Gateways, and how they might develop over the next 25 years, from DIT. This study presented three scenarios, (1) concentration on the Eastern Dublin / Belfast corridor, (2) the Atlantic Gateway, (3) development spread over the whole country. After extensive consultation in all the Gateways outside Dublin, the study concluded that the Eastern Corridor will be the continuing driver of the economy, and will create a city region on a scale to compete with other European cities, as Copenhagen / Malmo. The Atlantic Corridor presents a strong option, but would need substantial additional investment.

A subsequent Report by the Irish Academy of Engineering, *Infrastructure for an island population of 8 million+* published in February 2010 reinforced those findings as set out in the following conclusions.

- A focus on eight City Regions accounting for 90% of the population which will deliver economies of scale and efficiencies necessary for international competitiveness;
- Increased urbanisation and density of the city populations, which will allow the delivery of the first-class infrastructure;
- A Dublin-Belfast corridor with a population of four million and appropriate infrastructure investment which can compete with other major European urban zones. This would be complemented by a South Western corridor linking Cork, Limerick and Galway and comprising a further two million people;
- High quality connectivity both within and between the eight City Regions;
- Development of Dublin Airport, complemented by Belfast international, as an international hub to improve worldwide connectivity for business on the island; and,
- Use of innovative financing to fund infrastructure development.

In the time of severe national austerity we should also refer back to the Buchanan report of the 1960s a benchmark for future priorities.

While the Urban Forum and its constituent institutes do not necessarily support all the conclusions of these studies, it considers that urgent debate is needed on the issues raised, alongside the expected White Paper on Local Government.

4.2 Retail Strategy

In the parallel with the National Spatial Strategy develop a new Retail Strategy.

4.3 National Landscape Strategy

The National Landscape Strategy, should be published as quickly as possible. The Strategy would be a significant step in fostering positive, socio-economic development, employment and tourism at regional and local levels. It would also provide a basis for developing regional level Green Infrastructure in a holistic manner with such issues as natural assets management, biodiversity, tourism, climate change mitigation, public

health, sports and recreation. The strategy should also be integrated with the revised NSS.

The Urban Forum welcomes the current Programme for Government's commitment to protect parks. The Forum recommends that the following measures be introduced:

- A distinct, stand-alone national policy on Urban Parks and Green space that sets the direction of green infrastructure on a national basis, with measurable targets and a strategy for implementation at national, regional and local levels.
- Legislative provision to implement national policy aimed at the protection, provision and planning of existing and new urban park green spaces.
- Guidance and regulations for the protection, provision and planning of existing and new urban park green spaces.
- A mandatory planning regulation, requiring all regional and Local Authorities to conduct regular Open Space Audits and develop a strategy for their statutory area.

4.4 Integrated Regional Governance

The Urban Forum calls for a comprehensive review of Local Government structures, particularly in relation to the administration of planning and the delivery of sustainable communities and infrastructure.

The present structure of several, often conflicting, local and functional authorities in our regions prevents the integrated planning and delivery of social infrastructure and prevents educational and healthcare facilities being provided in parallel with other physical infrastructure, and in accordance with National Strategy.

A greater emphasis on appropriate rail based transport modes is essential to achieve the urban development patterns that are envisaged in national and regional planning strategies.

The Urban Forum believes that there is a need for integrated planning of social infrastructure so that educational and healthcare facilities are developed as part of the basic infrastructure along with roads, drainage etc.

4.5 Independent Agencies

Independent Agencies whether set up by Local Authorities as in Ballymun Regeneration, or by Central Government as in Temple Bar or Dublin Docklands have played an important role in Urban Regeneration, and the recent problems with the DDDA should not prejudice their future role but should inform their future regulation. The work of these agencies could revert to the Local Authorities, when the developments they create are complete.

4.6 Built Environment Forum

The Government Policy on Architecture states that the DEHLG will liaise with City and County Managers Association to establish a Built Environment Forum to heighten awareness of the measures that can be taken to drive a quality agenda for urban

design, architecture, architectural conservation, building control, and landscape design and conservation.

The ground work for such a Forum has already been undertaken in the colloquia held by the Urban Forum, which can offer the base for operating such a Forum.

4.7 Energy and Communications

A national body is needed with specific responsibility for provision of the basic infrastructure in the Energy and Communications sectors, in order to ensure that we are best placed to take advantage of the economic upturn, when it arrives. There are now a large number of private providers in the energy sector. Our ability to generate energy from alternative sources will increase hugely in the coming years. To take advantage of this new energy, the distribution network will need comprehensive restructuring.

Investment in the electricity distribution network will allow us to take advantage of new methods of energy generation. The roll out of high speed broadband to all urban areas is essential for our national competitiveness.

4.8 Government Guidelines

The Urban Forum welcomes the Department of the Environment Heritage and Local Government's (DoEHLG) new legislation ensuring compliance of local authority planning policies with strategic planning policies at regional and national level as well as planning guidelines as such policies and guidelines are currently ignored by many authorities. A correct balance must be found between local democracy as evident in policy choice at local level and avoiding poor zoning policies in relation to towns and villages.

The preparation of new guidelines for Local Area Planning and the manual for streets will reinforce the current guidelines.

4.9 Staffing of Planning Authorities

In the light of the reduction in economic activity, the Urban Forum considers that it is appropriate for the DoEHLG to monitor the performance of the Local Authorities in the area of pro-active planning policies and plan led development.

The creation of strong regional authorities would present the opportunity for Local Authorities to share or pool professional staff in order to avoid the disruption of existing planning policies and the return to *laissez-faire* policies. The Urban Forum believes that in a time of reduced public spending and reduced economic activity, good planning policies are even more important to ensure wise spending of money.

The Government Policy for Architecture calls on Local Authorities to consider the benefits of the provision of architectural services in all authorities headed by the City or County Architect.

The creation of Regional Authorities offers the opportunity to share these services for smaller Local Authorities.

4.10 Delivery of Social and Affordable Housing

In the current financial situation there are major problems with the financing of social affordable housing. Part V of the Planning Acts is not functioning and demand is increasing. There is a serious need for new policy on funding and delivering.

There are also problems with the management of both public and private schemes and overlaps related to Part V housing in private schemes. New structures for management need to be set up.

The Urban Forum welcomes the creation of the new Housing and Sustainable Communities Agency.

4.11 Plan Led Development

Local Authorities should be encouraged to consider the full implications of re-zoning land and to prepare comprehensive local plans with coordinated infrastructure provision (including school and other community infrastructure) where lands are zoned for development.

It would be useful if the DoEHLG would issue statutory guidance on the preparation, process and content of Local Area Plans.

Full input from local communities in decision making in relation to the built environment is essential to achieve the objective of creating sustainable communities. The Urban Forum also believes that participation is one of the key steps in creating a more active citizenry and in developing the country's social capital. While some Local Authorities have adopted the Local Area Plan planning mechanism in a creative and effective manner, others have failed because such plans are used primarily to achieve rezoning of individual landholdings with little community involvement.

4.12 Fiscal Measures

The National Recovery Plan 2011-2014 has stated that a Site Value Tax will be introduced over the four year period. It would be used as a major source of Local Authority funding and would take over from Commercial Rates.

The Urban Forum held a colloquium in March 2010, which presented research on the potential benefits of S.V.T in comparison to other forms of Property Tax and the way it is used and operated in other countries.

It could also form a major source for Regional/Local Authority funding.

Its introduction could stimulate development activity, particularly if it is substituted for Development Levies.

There is an urgent need to further debate the way this tax is introduced and any alternatives.

4.13 Service Charges

It remains important for Local Authorities to charge for specific use of services such as water and waste collection in order to encourage the efficient use of scarce resources.

Charging an annual fee to users of septic tanks for periodic inspections would encourage owners to maintain their tanks or connect to group schemes. This will result in improvements in ground and river water quality.

4.14 National Asset Management Agency

The establishment of NAMA presents an opportunity to improve the type and quality of development on land already zoned.

In formulating a medium term strategy, an important component will be consideration and measurement of social and environmental benefits as part of the return to the state.

4.15 Research

Independent research is needed in the areas of construction, development, architecture, planning and green space.

In particular, a system of assigning value to social amenities such as roads, hospitals, etc. must be developed so that proper cost benefit analysis of proposed public expenditure can be carried out.

A national body with responsibility to coordinate and appraise existing research and to stimulate further research is necessary. The new Housing and Sustainable Communities Agency with its existing research facility could undertake such a role.

4.16 Development Expertise

The respective professions that collectively form the Urban Forum are under severe pressure as a result of the downturn in the economy and the reduced activity in the construction sector in particular. There is a real danger of losing the experience of a generation of professionals. Creative measures are needed to preserve the knowledge built up in the professions over the past decade and to pass this on to new entrants.

4.17 Delivery

The proposals presented above are, we believe, on the whole, cost neutral. They will help provide a better quality of life for all people on the island and they will help position the country to take best advantage of the economic upturn when it comes.

5. Conclusion

Some of the decisions taken over the period of the boom have contributed to unsustainable patterns of development. The current downturn affords a key opportunity for Government and Irish society to critically appraise urban policy and its future direction. Some of this appraisal should include an updating of best practices and the incorporation of the latest thinking in energy conservation, renewable energy, sustainable water management, landscape conservation, building technologies and civil engineering.

Clearly the decisions and actions we take at this moment will have a massive impact on the country's landscape and cityscapes as well as on the lives of at least the next five or six generations.

The Urban Forum believes that it is time to take stock so that we can continue doing those things that we are doing well and correct those elements that are not so good. We believe it is critical that the built environment features in the public and political debate that takes place in the lead up to and during the next election.

We hope this manifesto contributes to this debate and we very much look forward to playing our part and engaging with all parties in this regard.

In summary, the Urban Forum puts forward five key messages:

1. Reform Local Government structure particularly in relation to the administration of planning and the delivery of sustainable communities and infrastructure.
2. Revise the National Spatial Strategy to deliver a 50 year planning framework.
3. Produce and implement a National Landscape Strategy and meet our national obligation under the European Landscape Convention.
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