



It's not the plan that's important, it's the planning

Introducing the National Planning Framework

February 2018

After three years of consultation, assessment, assumptions and projections the ambitious National Planning Framework (NPF) has arrived. We've outlined below the key themes and objectives of the NPF from a planning and environmental perspective.

What is the NPF?

It's a plan to provide for a focused approach to the distribution of population, jobs, housing and infrastructure in a compact urban form targeting the cities of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford.

What's new?

Unlike its predecessor, the National Spatial Strategy of 2002, the NPF will have a statutory footing aimed at streamlining approaches to zoning land for development. The NPF is also aligned with the ten year National Investment Plan that has earmarked over €115bn of capital investment in specific projects prioritising transport, housing and health sectors.

How will it be implemented?

A properly functioning planning system is absolutely critical to success of the plan. In recognition of this the NPF provides for a new Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR) to be established to review the procedures used by planning authorities and An Bord Pleanála thereby ensuring enhanced transparency and effectiveness in the planning process. The key functions of the OPR will also include assessing local authority development plans and regional strategies, including proposals on land zonings. Once the Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2016 is enacted the OPR will be established.

In addition the objectives of the NPF will be applied on a regional basis through statutory Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSEs) prepared by the three regional assemblies. The RSEs must accord with the NPF and in turn, local authority development plans which address local matters, such as the zoning of land, must be in accordance with the RSEs.

What are the core objectives of the NPF?

There will be a presumption in favour of development that encourages more people, jobs and activity within existing urban areas, subject to development meeting appropriate planning standards and achieving targeted growth.

It recognises the need to have a planning system that is responsive to our national environmental challenges to ensure that development occurs within the requirements of all relevant environmental legislation. Projects requiring consent arising from the NPF are to be subject to the relevant environmental assessment requirements including SEA, EIA and AA as appropriate.

Investment in Green Infrastructure and reducing Ireland's carbon footprint runs throughout the NPF. It promotes a national transition to a competitive low carbon, climate resilient and environmentally sustainable economy by 2050, through harnessing renewable energy potential and electrification of much of our transport and energy systems including strengthening all-island energy infrastructure and interconnection capacity to enhance security of electricity supply.

Integrated land and marine planning in tandem with the EU requirement to develop a national maritime spatial plan by 2021 are also a focus. Support, for offshore renewable energy development in recognition of our offshore renewable energy potential, including domestic and international grid connectivity enhancements are emphasised.

In urban areas, planning and related standards, including in particular building height and car parking will be based on performance criteria enabling alternative solutions that seek to achieve well-designed high quality and safe outcomes in order to achieve targeted growth and that protect the environment.

Tiered active land management is advocated with a new implementation body to be established, the National Regeneration and Development Agency, and seeking to broaden the applicability of compulsory purchase legislation to enable urban development in certain circumstances to ensure the development infill and brownfield lands in the most sustainable economic and environmental manner possible. Planning authorities will be required to apply a standardised, tiered approach to differentiate between i) zoned land that is available for development, ii) zoned land that requires further specified investment in basic infrastructural services for development to be realised and iii) zoned land unlikely to be serviced within the life of the relevant plan.

When zoning land for development, planning authorities will apply a specified standardised approach in establishing an order of priority for development of land taking account of proper planning and sustainable development, and in the case of adjoining interdependent landholdings, evidence of landholder commitment to necessary cooperation to release lands for development. Planning authorities will use compulsory purchase powers to facilitate the delivery of enabling infrastructure to prioritised zoned lands.

It targets the delivery of 550,000 additional households up to 2040 in accordance with the policy objectives of Ireland 2040 and use new statutory guidelines to improve the evidence base, effectiveness and consistency of the planning process for housing provision coupled with a 'Housing Need Demand Assessment' (HNDA) being undertaken for each Local Authority Area.

Conclusion

Like all plans, they must be implemented to become effective. The establishment of the Office of the Planning Regulator is a positive step towards improving the existing structure of the planning regime in Ireland as it should create greater certainty in the expected planning process timelines and enhance transparency around the entire planning process including better interaction between the bodies involved in granting approval to commence construction of strategic infrastructure.

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