

Section 1

**What is the National
Spatial Strategy (NSS)?**



Main Points

- This Strategy is a twenty-year planning framework designed to deliver more balanced social, economic and physical development between regions.
- Ireland's economic success in recent years has been accompanied by spatial patterns of development which have seen employment opportunities becoming more concentrated in some areas, while economic weaknesses remain in others.
- A commitment to prepare a spatial strategy to plan at national level for the country's future spatial development was included in the National Development Plan 2000-2006.
- Balanced regional development requires that the full potential of each region to contribute to the overall performance of the State be developed – on a sustainable economic, social and environmental basis.
- The Strategy sets out how all areas of the country will have the opportunity to develop to their potential.
- The Strategy will provide strategic planning guidance for a range of Government policies and regional and local plans.
- In conjunction with the Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland, Shaping our Future, the NSS addresses spatial issues for the island of Ireland as a whole.
- The rate at which the NSS can be implemented will be subject to overall macro-economic and budgetary considerations.

1.1 Purpose of the NSS

This National Spatial Strategy for Ireland (NSS) is a twenty year planning framework designed to achieve a better balance of social, economic, physical development and population growth between regions. Its focus is on people, on places and on building communities. Through closer matching of where people live with where they work, different parts of Ireland will for the future be able to sustain

- a better quality of life for people
- a strong, competitive economic position and
- an environment of the highest quality.

This Strategy is

- national – it provides a national framework to guide policies, programmes and investment
- spatial – it is concerned with the location of people, their work and other activities and with how different places relate to each other
- strategic – it offers a broad, long-term, comprehensive twenty-year view for achieving more balanced patterns of development.

The remarkable economic, social and physical progress of recent years has established a platform upon which policies can be put in place to ensure that more balanced development is achieved, within a well-planned spatial structure of attractive, competitive and innovative places.

The overall approach taken by the NSS to achieving balanced regional development is as follows:

(i) Economic role of Dublin and of other regions

Much of Ireland's recent prosperity has been generated in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA)¹. The performance of the GDA will remain pivotal to the overall economic well being of Ireland. However, Ireland also needs to build up other places and areas to be similarly strong on a national and international scale — generating benefits closer to where people live.

(ii) Quality of Life

Unbalanced development is affecting quality of life. It is, for example, leading to more long-distance commuting due to the strong economic performance of some areas and the comparative weakness of others. Long distance commuting and residential development located at greater and greater distance from where people work, are not sustainable in the longer-term — economically, socially or environmentally. More balanced regional development is the answer but this must also be supported by appropriate local land use policies.

(iii) Settlement

Ireland's growing population provides a foundation on which a thriving economy can continue to be built into the future. That population increase can be accommodated within existing settlements, including cities, towns and villages, while the economic and social strengths and resources of rural areas are also promoted. Completely new cities or towns are not required.

(iv) Planning

Ireland needs to renew, consolidate and develop its existing cities, towns and villages – i.e. keeping them as physically compact and public transport friendly as possible and minimising urban sprawl, while also achieving a high quality of design in new development and refurbishment. Urban land needs to be used carefully, sensitively and efficiently – with the aim of reducing dereliction and under-utilisation. Where greenfield development is necessary it should take place through the logical extension of existing cities, towns and villages.

(v) Implementation

Policies and programmes will be consistent with the NSS where they seek to enhance and build up economic and social activity within the national framework provided by the Strategy. Policies based on an unstructured, scattered approach to public investment and the promotion of economic activity would not be consistent with the NSS.

In essence, balanced regional development means

Developing the full potential of each area to contribute to the optimal performance of the State as a whole – economically, socially and environmentally.

The key concepts for this process are set out in Box 1.1.

¹ This refers to the area including Dublin City and all of the Counties of Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown, Fingal, Kildare, Meath, South Dublin and Wicklow.

Box 1.1

Key Concepts

- The key concepts are potential, critical mass, gateways, hubs, complementary roles and linkages.
- Potential is the capacity that an area possesses, or could in future possess, for development, arising from its endowment of natural resources, population, labour, its economic and social capital, infrastructure and its location relative to markets.
- Critical mass relates to size and concentration of population that enables a range of services and facilities to be supported. This in turn can attract and support higher levels of economic activity and improved quality of life.
- Gateways have a strategic location, nationally and relative to their surrounding areas, and provide national scale social, economic infrastructure and support services. Further development of the five existing gateways at Dublin, Cork, Limerick/Shannon, Galway and Waterford is a key component of the NSS.
- In addition a small number of other large towns which have the potential capacity to become gateways and lead development in their regions will play a key role in achieving more balanced regional development.
- Hubs. A number of towns will act as hubs, supporting the national and international role of the gateways and in turn energising smaller towns and rural areas within their sphere of influence.
- Complementary roles for other towns, villages and rural areas; various medium-sized towns in each region will act as 'local capitals' providing a range of services and opportunities for employment. Within the spatial framework proposed by the NSS, rural potential will draw upon local economic strengths, supported by a stronger structure of smaller towns and villages as a focus for economic and social activity and residential development.
- Linkages in terms of good transport, communications and energy networks are vitally important to enable places and areas to play to their strengths.

1.2 Role of the NSS

In this Strategy the Government is spelling out the basis on which all areas of the country will have the opportunity to develop to their potential within a national spatial planning framework for the period up to 2020.

The Strategy will

- support a better balance of activity and development between areas experiencing rapid development and congestion and areas that are economically under-utilised
- guide Government departments and agencies in formulating and implementing policies and public investment decisions which have a strong spatial dimension or which may otherwise be affected by spatial considerations
- set a national context for spatial planning to inform regional planning guidelines and strategies and county and city development plans and strategies
- provide a framework, in conjunction with the Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland, *Shaping our Future*, for the spatial dimension of the development of an all-island economy
- inform strategic investment, transport and other infrastructure policy decisions, for both the public and private sector; it will also help to shape future National Development Plans and other investment plans

- promote certain strategically located places as part of an all-Ireland network which will energise the potential of urban and rural areas
- support spatially balanced provision of key social and economic infrastructure, with a particular focus on this network of strategically located places
- set out general principles of good spatial planning practice to help to develop ways in which the location of people and employment and the use of environmental resources can best serve national competitiveness, sustainability and a high quality of life
- be complemented by relevant plans and strategies of other public bodies.

1.3 Sustainable Development Policy Framework for the National Spatial Strategy

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of this generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. The concept captures the important ideas that development

- has economic, social and environmental dimensions which together can contribute to a better quality of life
- will only be sustainable if a balance is achieved between these three dimensions
- should allow future generations to enjoy a quality of life at least as high as our own
- should respect our responsibilities to the wider international community.

Sustainable development is more than an environmental concept, although it includes that important element. It also requires a combination of a dynamic economy with social inclusion, giving opportunities for all in a high quality environment. The World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg in September 2002 and the national report for the Summit, *Making Ireland's Development Sustainable*, have underscored the international and domestic commitment to sustainable development. The NSS, through its focus on economic, social and environmental issues and on the inter-linkages between them, is a key policy instrument in the pursuit of sustainable development.

From the point of view of strategic spatial planning, sustainable development will, among other things, mean:

- maximising access to and encouraging use of public transport, cycling and walking
- developing sustainable urban and rural settlement patterns and communities to reduce distance from employment, services and leisure facilities and to make better use of existing and future investments in public services, including public transport
- promoting cost-effective provision of public services like roads, drainage, waste management facilities, lighting, public amenities and schools
- contributing to the evolution of socially integrated communities in both urban and rural areas
- minimising the consumption of non-renewable resources like soils, groundwater and agricultural land
- avoiding adverse impacts on environmental features such as landscapes, habitats and protected species, river catchments, the maritime environment and the cultural heritage
- ensuring that construction design is of a high quality and appropriate to the scale and context of its surroundings.

1.4 Economic, Budgetary and Regulatory Context for the National Spatial Strategy

The National Spatial Strategy will be implemented within an integrated and sustainable macro-economic and budgetary framework. Investment funded by the Exchequer on foot of the NSS will need a sufficient level of economic growth to generate the required resources. In particular, the level of investment in infrastructure will be governed both by reference to the overall budgetary situation and the priorities arising from the Strategy.

Implementation of the Strategy will also recognise the constraints imposed on budgetary policy by the terms of the EU Stability and Growth Pact. The Pact requires that Government budgetary positions should be close to balance or in surplus over the medium term. Implementation will also take account of other pressures on the public finances.

It is also important to recognise that there are non-budgetary constraints on the role of the State in implementing the Strategy. Many sectors of the economy have been, or are being, liberalised and are no longer under direct State control. EU legislation, particularly in relation to State Aids, places constraints on State intervention. Many sectors of the economy are also now subject to independent regulation.

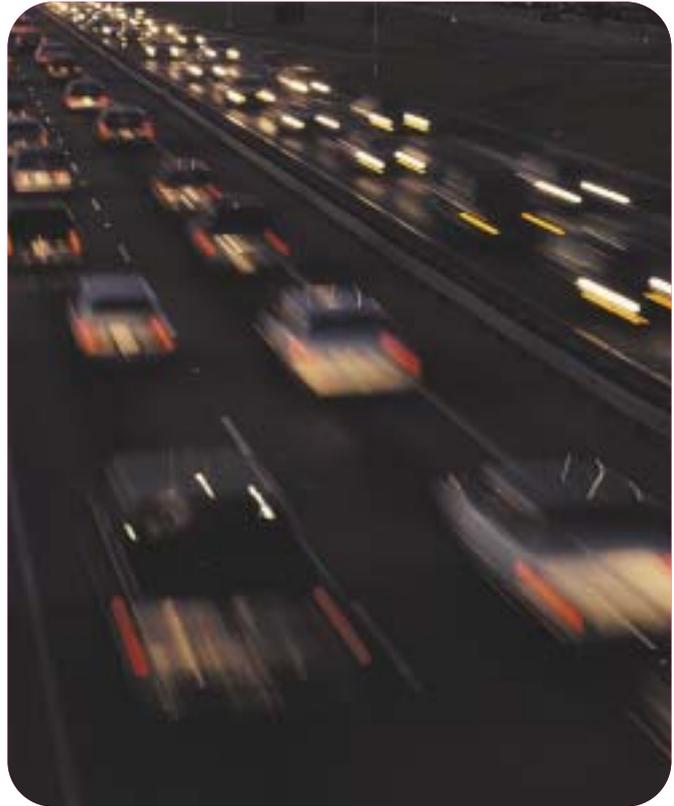
1.5 Reasons for a National Spatial Strategy

Strengthening and restructuring of the Irish economy gathered pace during the late 1980s and accelerated during the 1990s. By the end of that decade, a major transformation had taken place. Unemployment rates fell dramatically from a level of 14% in 1994 to less than 4% in 2000. The numbers at work grew by 500,000 from a base of 1 million in 1990. While average per capita income and output moved towards and even beyond EU averages, disparities between and within regions in Ireland remained. Net migration of people into the country, at unprecedented levels, replaced decades of emigration.

There were many reasons for this transformation. For the NSS the most important outcome has been the emergence of a new socio-economic geography, shown by new spatial patterns of development. The strength of the larger urban areas such as Dublin, Cork, Limerick/Shannon, Galway and Waterford and the preference of foreign direct and other investment to locate in or near such areas, has tended to accelerate the development of these cities and their associated regions. Within this, regional specialisation has emerged, such as the concentration of pharmaceutical and chemical companies in the Cork City area, information and communications technology in the Mid-West, food in the North East and health care and medical devices in the Midlands.

During the latter part of the 1990s, the performance of Dublin has been particularly significant in sectors such as internationally traded services, to the point where 77% of national employment in this sector is now located within the Greater Dublin Area. These levels of employment growth have also influenced development patterns such as house building in and well beyond the Greater Dublin Area, as investment and population have gravitated towards the eastern parts of Ireland.

Employment growth has occurred throughout the country, but has been stronger in some regions than in others. Employment opportunities have tended to become more concentrated in certain parts, with a consequent influence on where more and more people live. While all of the investment attracted or generated has been vital to overall national economic success, economic disparities between different parts of the country remain. There are increasing contrasts between areas encountering congestion due to a concentration of economic activity, and areas experiencing under-utilisation, because of a lack of competitive and balancing locations for economic activity.



Addressing these contrasts is a key concern for this Strategy. This concern is shared by Government and key agencies, the social partners, regional and local bodies. Unbalanced spatial development is also a key concern of EU policy.

In particular there is a realisation that

- Ireland's future socio-economic and physical structure will differ from its past structure
- this structure will be strongly influenced by the impact of European and global economic, technological, trade and investment trends on the open Irish economy
- a strategic, concerted and comprehensive spatial response is needed.

There have been a number of reports² in recent years that supported the need for strategic, national spatial frameworks like the NSS. These reports have emanated from:

- government departments, through policy documents such as *Sustainable Development: a Strategy for Ireland (1997)* and the *White Paper on Rural Development (1999)*
- the Economic and Social Research Institute
- the National Economic and Social Council
- Forfás.

The need for the NSS was formally recognised by the Government with the publication of the 2000-2006 National Development Plan (NDP).

The Government's objective for regional policy set out in the NDP is

To achieve more balanced regional development in order to reduce the disparities between and within the two Regions (Border, Midlands and West and South and East) and to develop the potential of both to contribute to the greatest possible extent to the continuing prosperity of the country. Policies to secure such development must be advanced in parallel with policies to ensure that this development is sustainable with full regard to quality of life, social cohesion, and conservation of the environment and the natural and cultural heritage. (paragraph 3.19 of NDP)

Under the NDP, the NSS is mandated to

- identify broad spatial development patterns for areas, and
- set down indicative policies in relation to the location of industrial development, residential development, services, rural development, tourism and heritage.

In addition to initiating the process of preparing the NSS, the NDP 2000-2006 identified the five main cities, Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford, as 'Gateways', or engines of regional and national growth. The NDP set the NSS the task of further developing the Government's approach to achieving more balanced regional development, including the identification of a limited number of additional gateways. Appendix I outlines the approach taken to preparing the NSS and the outcome of the consultation process which assisted its preparation.

² *European Spatial Development Perspective* (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 1999); *Sustainable Development: a Strategy for Ireland* (Department of the Environment and Local Government, April 1997); *Ensuring the Future - A Strategy for Rural Development in Ireland: A White Paper on Rural Development* (Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, August 1999); *National Investment Priorities For The Period 2000-2006* (Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute, Policy Research Series No. 33, 1999); *Opportunities, Challenges and Capacities for Choice* (National Economic and Social Council Paper 105, 1999); *Shaping Our Future: A Strategy for Enterprise in Ireland in the 21st Century* (Forfás, May 1996).

