

NFP Submission of Alan Mee

This submission, made in a personal capacity, is on the document titled ‘Ireland 2040, Our Plan, Draft National Planning Framework’ (2017). In general, I welcome the opportunity to comment on the document, and am grateful for the clear language and layout of this important public statement related to Irish specific spatial culture. This submission deals with four topics: definitions, research, design, and reference to one case.

Definitions (urban)

Irish definitions of spatial units are sub-optimal, (and in particular the concept of the ‘urban’) and seem to be open to lazy and changing official interpretation, increasingly related to political cultures of avarice and neoliberalism. As I have commented before¹, while the contemporary Irish urban condition is undoubtedly complex, having a contradictory and confusing new definition of small urban towns as ‘rural’ for example, (Pgs 44/45) seems unhelpful at least, and almost designed to confuse at worst.

Research (analysis and evaluation)

The need for Irish specific research at the macro, meso and micro spatial scales related to settlement is not sufficiently emphasised in this document. Interdisciplinary understandings in particular, and research by design would seem to become more urgent as potential for renewal reduces and complexity of problems increases. The need for research, in particular related to spatial analysis and evaluation of Irish urban and spatial units, is not prioritised in this document.

Design (urban design)

There is no reference to the discipline of urban design in the document. As I have previously argued² in relation to official Irish guidance on local area plans, omitting or consciously excluding an entire specialist body of knowledge on design of urban environments limits our capacity to understand complex contexts and sites, and therefore to plan and design appropriately for inevitable change. While contemporary urban design embraces co-production of place and active placemaking by citizens more generally, spatial Ireland has a blind spot in relation to urban design.

Case (Athlone)

In illustrating the three topics raised above, a case urban unit is useful. Athlone highlights some specifics on these points.

Definitions (urban)

Spatially trapped between provinces, regions, counties, local authorities, dioceses, parishes, neighbourhoods, and even football teams, despite this Athlone is still changing dynamically without any overall vision. In this respect, I note previous submissions (to the ‘Issues and Choices Paper published February 2017) by representatives of ‘Destination Athlone’, and AIT in relation to the designation of Athlone as a city in the future. Some commentators see continued spatial sprawl and unsustainable growth of the town as a necessity for

¹ ‘Instant Urban’, (2011) Urban Agenda, Architecture Ireland No.257.

² ‘Life after Local Area Plans ?’, (2012) Urban Agenda, Architecture Ireland No.264, Pg 26.

economic viability, but without consensual, agreed and clear spatial definition of the whole urban unit of Athlone, shared vision is impossible.

Research (analysis and evaluation)

Athlone needs the ‘Big Conversation’ as suggested by Dick Gleeson/TrinityHaus, in that previous submission³ about Irish Towns, and his proposal should be publicly resourced and encouraged for every Irish Town. As part of a discussion for Athlone for example, consensus on the need for site specific research could emerge as a key input to consensual decision-making, in particular close analysis and evaluation of what is constituted by a joined community around the ‘idea’ of Athlone as an urban (designed) unit.

Design (urban design)

As a native of the town, and an urban designer with long experience of the negative impacts of rapid spatial change there, especially on the historic urban core of Athlone, I am extremely cautious about expecting re-categorisation of the urban unit (to city) as a solution to real and deepening urban quality of life problems in Athlone. Actively co-producing new vision and urban design ‘futures’ for the Town could engage a renewed urban and civic community, overcoming problems of existing on a spatial fault line of Ireland by synthesising, through design, the many complex potentials and opportunities of Athlone.

In summary, these four topics are addressed in this submission: sub-optimal Irish definitions of spatial units, a need for Irish specific research at multiple spatial scales, the need to integrate urban design in official and spatial Ireland, and reference to one case, Athlone, which illustrates some local issues related to deficiencies or omissions of the document.

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³ Submission 0193 to the ‘Issues and Choices Paper published February 2017, by Dick Gleeson/TrinityHaus.