

RURAL AND URBAN ROLES

1 Implications for Policy

In this section, some broad issues are set out in summary form, which point up areas that could inform future policy development in Stage Three.

- The overall finding that of the order of one in three housing completions in Ireland, is taking place in the open countryside, presents profound challenges in terms of arriving at a settlement structure that is sustainable, serviceable and in terms of resolving appropriate settlement roles for areas both urban and rural.
- The national sustainable development strategy represents a substantial framework within which social, economic and environmental arguments concerning rural housing and by extension, roles for urban and rural areas, can be reconciled. The objectives of Government in relation to rural areas espoused in the rural White Paper raise consequent issues in terms of how its approach to rural development could be reconciled with the document “Sustainable Development – A Strategy for Ireland”. This could be explored in Stage Three with support from the participation pillars for the NSS in refining possible approaches.
- Interrelated with the above, there is also a need to explore practical spatial policies which would realise the ESDP’s belief in the potential of smaller rural settlements to play an active and vibrant role in partnership with larger urban areas and as part of an urban-rural economic continuum. To some extent, the issues in this are being teased out in the Rural/Urban structure studies. Task 13 should build with the outputs from these and other tasks in the enterprise and transport areas into practical sets of policies.
- The Strategic Planning Guidelines for the Greater Dublin Area set out a realistic policy agenda for the particular and special needs and pressures of the Dublin area. It could be argued that such policies act in the interest of rural communities by protecting land prices from being inflated by competition for development opportunities coming from urban based dwellers wishing to move out. As has been explored in this document, such spatial issues transcend boundaries and there is a need for co-ordinated and consistent policy in the remaining regions that recognises the particularities. The approach within the SPG’s represents a mechanism which could be echoed in the eventual National Spatial Strategy itself as it constructs complementary “functional areas” and role identification for all parts of the country which build to national progression and development.

- The County Development Plans are a key local component in the process, which join national to local policy. However, development plans are increasingly being “hollowed” out in relation to settlement policies which in many cases offer little strategic direction and which in the worst cases, treat rural housing as a spatial issue in little more terms than development control criteria.
- It is also clear that plans that better analyse the range of rural issues within a given county afford the opportunity of matching a given set of circumstances with appropriate policies. For example, an area not under serious development pressure and suffering population decline, particularly in villages, could be the subject of specific proposals to unlock underutilised land, provide basic services and attract development into settlements (rather than hoping to drive development into them by restrictive settlement policies alone), which would reinforce rural structures. This is not happening on the ground for many local authorities, which grapple with and primarily focus on similar issues in the principal settlements.
- It is probably true that one reason for the large increases in rural house-building has much to do with the high cost of housing and the supply side difficulties that have been extant for some years now. This introduces a speculative element, which would appear to be underway in those counties closest to urban areas. The desirability of a rural site has increased its value to the point where there is now a very real incentive to abuse the planning system by persuading a planning authority to grant permission on the basis say of local need and then to sell. Occupancy conditions offer little resistance to this and perhaps consideration could be given to the facility in the planning legislation of binding legal agreements governing occupancy and the issues surrounding this. At present, only one authority and county development plan has followed this option. It has much to recommend it in terms of applicability in a more widespread sense and would be welcomed by planning authorities and genuine local applicants alike as a mechanism that would defuse much of the distrust concerning the veracity of information tabled to planning authorities in considering applications.
- A key issue consequent from the above is the fact that responses to pressures on rural areas must also lie in urban solutions and vision. Concerted efforts are being applied to achieving a better level of equilibrium in the housing market. The identification in this paper of a significant “leakage” to rural area probably raises the game somewhat in this context. County Development Plans and other sectoral/infrastructure programmes should recognise the imperative of capturing urban generated housing demand in urban areas and prepare for/facilitate this. In reverse, nothing, such as infrastructure or land shortages in villages/small towns, should obstruct rural generated housing demand from being satisfied in rural areas. This is

what is at the heart of supporting and enabling the full potential of urban and rural settlement roles.

- The areas of data collection have been a constant area of difficulty for the NSS. Similarly so in the area this paper is concerned with, there is a need for rural housing surveys to establish the reasons behind many peoples preference for rural living. Such surveys were carried out for An Foras Forbatha in the past, but with the demise of that organisation, no comprehensive database on rural spatial trends in relation to housing, have been maintained.

These implications could be considered in the process of synthesis and integration proposed in Stage Three of the process of developing the National Spatial Strategy. The information provided from other research tasks such as Rural/Urban Structure, Rural Enterprise etc would provide immediate junctions with which this paper and its findings, could be integrated with.