

# **National Spatial Strategy**

## **Irish Spatial Perspectives – Paper 13**

### **“Rural and Urban Roles”**



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## Background

This paper forms part of a body of research commissioned as part of the National Spatial Strategy and which consists of the second of four stages in its preparation. Together with the other research tasks, this stage is intended to provide a strong analytical basis for understanding the spatial functioning of Ireland and in turn to provide a basis for developing strategic choices and policies in the pursuit of the goal of “Balanced Regional Development”.

## Introduction

One of the subjects the NSS seeks to gain a comprehensive understanding on relates to the oft held assertions that distinctions between “urban” and “rural” are no longer valid and that in fact the two are closely and increasingly related.

One of the manifestations in these linkages relates to settlement and the Irish phenomenon of significant house building in the countryside over the past 30 years or so. This area is one where spatial implications are greatest for many local authorities and perhaps where the needs for development of strategic spatial policy is most needed.

This paper has a number of key objectives

- To explore the historical debate on the question of rural housing as an element of the interrelationships between town and country
- To comprehensively describe and map the differing development contexts of various types of rural areas by analysing recent patterns of rural house building.
- To compare and contrast the various policy approaches to this question from the national level – “Sustainable Development – A Strategy for Ireland” / White Paper on Rural Development, to the regional (SPG – Regional Report) and local (County Development Plan) level.
- To describe a “consensus of view” that would emerge from this policy background
- To compare the recommendations of these policy documents to what is unfolding on the ground including the spatial implications of current trends.
- To consider the possibility of international comparisons.
- To suggest a typology of potential policy responses.



# I Rural Housing in Ireland - Roles in Rural – Urban linkages

## I.1 Settlement as an Output of Socio-economic Interaction

The settlement pattern of a given inhabited area is one element of landscape, which in turn is both a manifestation of society's economic and social interrelationship with the physical environment that envelopes it and reflective of the manner in which that society functions from economic and social standpoints amongst others.

The nature of such interrelationships and functions alter and evolve over time in line with the development of a society and as such, a settlement pattern at a given time may contain elements of diverse origin, from the deeply historic, to contemporary drivers.

As such, the frequent reference to landscape in rural areas being natural, is erroneous. As with urban areas, the rural landscape has been “created” and moulded over time by complex interactions between society and habitat. Settlement pattern in rural areas is but one expression of this interaction.

The rural settlement pattern of Ireland is predominantly dispersed in contrast with many European cultures where differing land ownership structures have historically developed a clearer distinction in physical terms at least, between urban and rural. By contrast, in Ireland the share of the total population living in urban areas is less than in many European countries and historically we have a tradition of a significant rural population in relation to our urban population. (See Table 13.1.1)

The manner in which Ireland's rural population is dispersed is not constant and reflects historical drivers. In remoter parts of the north and west, clusters or “clachans” developed from a rural based society and yielded minute territorial divisions and an agrarian system of land tenure focussed around clusters of housing.

This pattern of fragmentation and subdivision eventually undermined the sustainability of this settlement process in terms of supporting the population and maintaining effective returns for landowners. With this in mind, the landlords intervened, undertaking sweeping clearances where scattered farmsteads were arranged on farms with ladder like field patterns. Thus evolved what has been described as a circular process between clachans and single farm holdings.

The effect of the 19th Century clearances and their partial failure in remoter parts can account to some extent for the differences in patterns of rural settlement between principally the western coastal fringe of Ireland and more central and eastern parts. In some parts of the western coastal area and particularly in parts of Donegal Mayo and Galway, random clusters of housing have evolved into a distinct settlement form and have in some cases underpinned the emergence of particular urban concentrations like Gweedore in County Donegal.

Elsewhere in Ireland, the rural settlement pattern remained in a relatively constant state of dispersed farmsteads until the revolution in mobility represented by rising car ownership in the 1970's and net migration and housing demand that developed out of a renewed economic confidence through the 1960's and into the 1970's.

Fundamentally however, the way a society arranges the provision of shelter has much to do with the socio-economic structures that house it and with the sea-change in rural house-building patterns in areas close to urban centres that emerged from the early 1970's onwards reflected associated structural change in both Ireland and its rural and urban areas. Rising affluence, increased mobility and a desire for rural environments with the benefits of proximity to urban facilities were amongst the factors that gave rise to the phenomenon of "urban generated" housing in rural areas from the 1970's onwards. The market created for this type of housing in turn created an opportunity for rural land-owners to sell building plots for a return many multiples of what was achievable from traditional agricultural activity. In recent years, with increasing house prices and weakness in farm produce prices, rural landowners seek to avail of the buoyant demand and enhance their income.

## **1.2 Rural Development and Physical Planning - Relationships**

Returning to the issue of landscape as an out put of interaction between society and habitat, until recent times, there was little concerted effort to create a landscape underpinned by physical planning concepts, save for the occasional demesne or similar feature. This was largely driven by the fact that rural landscapes were the product of necessity – of rural communities adjusting and adapting to the environment. There was an innate sense of balance between the activities of society and its long-term survival as witnessed in land tenure restructuring in Ireland.

In the post industrial era of today, the character and diversity of the landscape is vastly more open to structural change and frequently damage, driven by the greater technological capabilities and economic forces of current society. Such qualities can therefore only be restored or conserved by express wish or action through a planning process. The form of the rural landscape in this context becomes a focus for debate and driven not by necessity but societal values.

In this context, physical planning becomes a process where these values and their relative prioritisation are teased out in a political process. In Irelands case, a conflict quickly developed in the 1970's and which continues today, between physical planning policies which aimed for a clear distinction between town and country, perhaps reflecting value systems from the cultures and societies from which the core elements of the Irish system were borrowed, (generally U.K.) and indigenous enthusiasm for a laissez faire approach to the question of rural housing. Had there been a coincidence between Irish and other value systems in terms of rural housing development, then this would not have been an issue. However in Ireland, the tradition of small farmer holdings and a society which saw rural living as frequently more attractive and affordable than the urban alternative quickly gave rise to strong resistance to control oriented spatial planning policies.

Coincidence of value systems or not, such conflict cannot detract from the intrinsic worth of what accumulated spatial planning experience would inform us of, in terms of the consequences of poorly structured policies and approaches for rural settlement. This issue is dealt with in more detail in Sections Three and Four.

One of the fundamental issues that underscores the rural housing question is that society in general has not perhaps come to terms with the profound and irreversible changes that have occurred in rural Ireland over say the past thirty years or so. Rural housing, and flexibility in accommodating it has been frequently advocated as a counterbalance to issues such as:

- Rural Population decline
- Falling farm incomes
- The viability of rural services such as schools etc

Such arguments are often supported by references to Irelands long tradition of rural dwelling and the perils of this tradition being lost. What is not recognised in these arguments is the very significant differences between rural house-building patterns traditionally and the technological capabilities of today in dramatically altering the landscape through development and the comparative impacts in relation to environmental, heritage and transportation impacts – the size of the “ecological footprint”. This reflects the contrast between a rural landscape shaped by necessity historically but increasingly by value systems today. A summary of issues surrounding the rural housing question is presented below.

**Table 1: Rural Housing Issues**

Positive" Issues	Negative" Issues
<p><b>Countering Rural Population Decline</b> The view is often put forward that to sustain rural services and the vitality of rural communities and life generally, rural population should be stabilised. Additionally there is the view that persons supporting the rural community need to be expressly catered for.</p>	<p><b>Utilisation of Services</b> A fundamental basis for spatial policies that aim to strengthen existing urban structure is the belief that dispersed or ribbon type development is incompatible with the maximum utilisation of existing services and the minimisation of demand for new services.</p>
<p><b>Supporting Farm Incomes</b> The buoyancy in the housing market of the 1990's and onwards has dramatically increased the price of building land and farming organisations along with rural development activists have argued that rural landowners should have the right to sell building plots to support family or farm restructuring.</p>	<p><b>Transportation</b> Statistical analysis clearly shows that rural dwellers are predominantly and increasingly car based in terms of modal choice than their urban counterparts. When this issue is combined with greenhouse gas emissions from private transport and the impact of increased transport demands on rural roads as well as parking in towns, it is clear that the transportation impacts of dispersed development patterns is a significant and long term spatial issue in rural housing. Associated with this issue is the question of frontage type development on particularly national and regional roads adversely affecting the capacity of these routes through increasing the opportunities for conflicts of movements.</p>
<p><b>Rural Housing and Affordability</b> In the late 1990's the housing supply and demand interrelationship moved into a position of imbalance creating affordability problems. Many see the chance of a rural site, often obtained at low cost from family members or relations as a means to enter the property ladder.</p>	<p><b>Environmental Impacts (1) Water Quality</b> Dispersed rural housing is by its nature dependent on individual arrangements for wastewater treatment and disposal. Whilst many parts of the country can provide the depth of overburden and groundwater conditions to permit the conditions for effective disposal of effluent, this is conditional upon high standards of provision of effluent disposal means and maintenance thereafter. Surveys have shown in the past that this is not being achieved. In addition many parts of the country pose severe difficulties for the installation of effective and reliable means of treatment. These areas coincide with the areas of greatest pressure.</p>
<p><b>Rural Housing and Demand Overall</b> There is the argument also that demand for housing in rural areas, even if urban generated, was diverted through strong spatial policies to urban areas, this would further move the housing demand – supply interrelationship out of balance.</p>	<p><b>Environmental Impact (2) Biodiversity</b> As part of the attempts by local authorities to ensure new development does not adversely impact upon traffic safety, there are generally requirements of planning consents to remove roadside hedges. In Co Kerry alone, it has been recently estimated that this results in the loss of 40 km's of natural hedgerows every year. In addition to this there is the issue of loss of the land itself, either from agricultural production or as a natural habitat.</p>
<p><b>Quality of Life</b> It is believed that the attractiveness of rural areas in terms of privacy and separation from urban stresses such as congestion or crime, may be significant attractions for the occupants of urban generated dwellings in rural areas.</p>	<p><b>Environmental Impact (3) Landscape Quality and Integrity</b> Few would disagree with the undesirability of development in areas of high amenity, but in many rural areas the physical character of the landscape has become suburban and surveys have shown that this has become the subject of adverse comment by tourists.</p>
<p><b>Social and Family Linkages</b> Rural housing is frequently cited, particularly by elected members, as a way in which family members resident in rural areas, can be cared for by other family members who would frequently move out from urban areas to construct houses in the countryside.</p>	<p><b>Impacts on Rural Land Uses</b> There have been instances of severe conflict between occupants of urban generated housing in rural areas and normal rural activities in the agricultural sector. Widespread development in rural areas can make it difficult to persist with or develop farming practices, especially where the issue of farm wastes are involved. This issue also arises where long term development constricts development options for necessary new infrastructure such as new roads or power lines.</p>
	<p><b>Prejudicing Comprehensive Development</b> It is argued in many cases that development, contiguous to rapidly developing urban areas, reduces long term spatial development options either by land-locking and or by creating difficulties for the integration of infill development in the long term.</p>
	<p><b>Social Stratification</b> This argument posits a positive relationship between urban sprawl and the decay of urban areas in social and physical terms</p>

Comparing the negative and positive sides to spatial arguments surrounding the rural housing question, it is clear that the “spectrum of issues” spans from those associated with the individual to those associated with long term development and the principles that should apply to this. This reflects somewhat the “battlefield of hearts and minds” within which assessment of rural housing proposals must take place within.

Arrival at a physical planning decision frequently involves balancing the negative and positive aspects of rural housing and it is frequently with rural housing development that is driven by the needs of a rural community that such balance is easiest to achieve. Typically, it comes as little surprise that virtually all County Development Plan type planning policies support such development.

### **1.3 Rural Housing – The Spatial Understanding Challenges**

Comparing the spatial “pro’s” and “cons” of the rural housing question poses a number of “Spatial Understanding Challenges” as follows:

- Conceptualising a policy framework to achieve balance between accomodating the type and scale of development in rural areas to sustain rural communities and their service infrastructure, whilst conserving rural areas from unnecessary development that is not of rural areas and indeed may be destructive to its long term interests in a spatial sense.
- To develop this conceptual framework upon a thorough understanding of the spatial contrasts between different types of rural areas whether these are remote, robust in agricultural competitiveness, marginal or subject to metropolitan or development pressures. This will be explored in the subsequent section.
- Suggesting positive mechanisms with which to address the rural housing question in all its shades and with a reasonable approach. This will be explored in Section 5.



## 2 Rural Housing Development Patterns

### 2.1 An Analysis of Recent Trends in Planning Statistics

Hearsay evidence from planning authorities around the country would seem to indicate that the issue of rural housing is becoming more problematic both in terms of quantitative demands upon planning authority resources and the time intensive nature of dealing with such applications.

To establish the actual position in relation to applications for single dwellings, a number of data sources were used such as the CSO statistics on planning applications and the Quarterly returns on Planning Statistics published by the Department of the Environment and Local Government for the years 1997/1998/1999.

These data sources were explored and analysed to answer three basic questions:

1. Have planning authorities generally been experiencing increased numbers of applications for single dwellings?
2. If so, what is the nature of this increase?
3. Have the numbers of planning applications for single dwellings as a proportion of all applications been increasing?

The importance of question 3 relates to the issue of whether single house applications are becoming proportionally more significant in an environment where all planning authorities generally are experiencing greatly increased numbers of planning applications.

Appendix One illustrates the results for each planning authority in both the BM+W and S+E Regions and the results are discussed below.

#### 2.1.1 Rates of Change in Single House Applications

All planning authorities have been recording increases in the numbers of applications for single dwellings in the period between 1997 and 1999 and many have been experiencing significant increases.

- In the period 1997-1998, most planning authorities experienced increases of between 20% and nearly 70%
- Only two planning authorities (Kildare and Kerry) experienced a decline in applications –42% and –1.94% respectively.
- In the period 1998-1999, many planning authorities experienced slower rates of increases. A notable feature of this period however is the level of increases experienced by such counties as Leitrim, Offaly, Sligo, Carlow and Wexford. This might indicate a lag between the pressures concentrated in urban areas, which emerged in the 1997-1998 period and the emergence of similar pressures in more rural areas in the 1998-1999 period.

### **2.1.2 Rates of Change in Proportionality**

The numbers of applications for single houses was then compared to the total numbers of applications to establish whether this type of application was increasing as a proportion of all applications. This raises interesting issues which are set out below.

- Over 55% of planning authorities have been experiencing a significant increase in the proportional importance of single house applications and particularly so those in the Midlands, West, and Southeast. In many of these cases, the proportion has increased from the low to mid 20% to just under 30%, a significant increase when the total increase is borne in mind.
- 34% of planning authorities are experiencing steady state conditions where single house applications are keeping pace with the general rate of increase. These planning authorities include border counties and those, which either comprise of urban authorities or are under significant influence of major urban areas.
- The remainder or about 11% of planning authorities are experiencing a decline in the proportion of single house applications. These include Laois, Leitrim and interestingly both North and South Tipperary.

### **2.1.3 Conclusions**

The above data indicates clearly that:

- The issue of single house applications in rural areas is becoming a major one for most planning authorities.
- Despite a buoyant level of development activity in many urban areas, a significant move is underway towards applications aimed at rural house-building.
- Those counties that either comprise of urban authorities, or which are adjacent to major urban areas seem to be operating stronger controls and this may be affecting the numbers of applications received.

It is accepted that the above data does not address the issue of completions, this is described in Section 2.2 below.

## **2.2 Rates of Rural House-building, A Survey of Recent Trends.**

Precise estimates of the numbers and distribution of new dwellings that are built in the countryside are difficult to establish. However, the Electricity Supply Board has supplied details of the numbers of new domestic customers it has connected to its supply grid, by county and for areas it describes as rural.

In relation to the definition of “rural” used by the ESB, it should be borne in mind that this can be assumed to correspond broadly to the Central Statistics Office “census town” threshold of a centre with more than 1500 people. This is due to a different billing method for rural customers driven by higher infrastructure costs.

This approach would however permit the inclusion of residential development in very small villages and centres to be theoretically included within a “rural house-building” figure. However, this phenomenon is expected to be visible in the data when compared with other parameters such as rural planning application types. While it is recognised that there are limitations as to how the data should be interpreted, nonetheless, the ESB data is an interesting insight into the dynamics of recent development patterns outside the main urban areas.

It should be additionally noted that in general, the numbers of applications considered by planning authorities for single houses (which are overwhelmingly located in rural areas) is shadowed closely by rural completions. This does not account however for those applications which are refused. It might therefore be the case that this fraction is similar to the fraction of houses built in small villages. In any case, the number is not estimated to be so large in magnitude as to fundamentally undermine the worth of the data explored below.

### **2.2.1 Rural House-building patterns**

Table 2 below sets out data for counties relating to new rural domestic ESB connections and rates of change, compared to total house-building as well as the proportionality of rural development as a fraction of total housing development.

The main general trends that are evident from this data can be summarised as follows:

- All areas are showing markedly increased levels of residential development.
- In terms of totals, increases in rural development are out accelerating urban increases. For instance, rural connections in 1999 rose by 23% on the previous year compared to a rise in total house completions in the same period of 9%.
- There are markedly different trends between counties when the rates of change in the proportion of rural development to urban development, is analysed.
- The proportion of rural housing completions as a fraction of all completions rises as you get further from the main urban areas.

**Table 2: Rural Housing Completions**

		Note (1)	Note (2)	Note (3)	Note (4)	Note (5)	Note (6)
County	Year	One-Off applic's	Rural Houses	Annual RoC%	Total Houses	Annual RoC%	Rural Total %
Carlow	1997	154	182		656		27.7
	1998	173	156	-14.3	603	-8	25.9
	1999	227	275	76.3	816	35.3	33.7
Cavan	1997	297	273		440		62
	1998	367	294	7.7	495	12.5	59.4
	1999	454	443	50.7	664	34.1	66.7
Clare	1997	450	570		1435		39.7
	1998	652	581	2	1221	-14.9	47.6
	1999	803	657	13	1487	21.8	44.2
Cork	1997	1530	1927		3222		59.8
	1998	1486	2333	21.1	3903	21.1	59.8
	1999	1932	2137	-8.4	3702	-5.2	57.7
Donegal	1997	928	1132		1502		75.4
	1998	1126	1209	6.8	1883	25.4	64.2
	1999	1446	1493	23.5	2393	27	62.4
DLR	1997	79	32		712		4.5
	1998	96	51	59.4	549	-22.9	9.3
	1999	91	108	111.8	886	61.4	12.2
Fingal	1997	161	189		2707		7
	1998	213	112	-40.7	2618	-3.29	4.3
	1999	267	291	159.8	4269	64.1	6.8
Galway	1997	868	1005		1295		77.6
	1998	1458	1399	39.2	1849	42.8	75.7
	1999	1639	1557	11.3	2113	14.3	73.7
Kerry	1997	928	714		1242		57.5
	1998	910	822	15.1	1638	31.2	50.2
	1999	956	1005	22.3	1686	3	59.6
Kildare	1997	324	509		2095		24.3
	1998	185	569	11.8	2509	19.8	22.7
	1999	280	758	33.2	2419	-3.6	31.3
Kilke.	1997	326	326		628		51.9
	1998	534	304	-6.7	701	11.6	43.4
	1999	487	428	40.8	708	1	60.4

**Key to Table**

- Note 1:** Refers to applications for planning permission for single dwellings received by planning authorities.
- Note 2:** Refers to connections to the ESB grid in rural areas from new single residential customers.
- Note 3:** Refers to the annual rate of change in (2) above.
- Note 4:** Refers to total housing completions in County Council areas (also derived from ESB data).
- Note 5:** Refers to annual rate of change in (4) above.
- Note 6:** Refers to the % proportion of all houses built in County Council areas that are accounted for by rural connections/rural housing.

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		Note (1)	Note (2)	Note (3)	Note (4)	Note (5)	Note (6)
County	Year	One-Off applic's	Rural Houses	Annual RoC%	Total Houses	Annual RoC%	Rural Total %
Laois	1997	209	190		399		47.6
	1998	287	227	19.5	452	13.3	50.2
	1999	385	271	19.4	660	46	41
Leitrim	1997	162	242		265		91.3
	1998	161	235	-2.9	295	11.3	79.7
	1999	263	260	10.6	396	34.2	65.7
Limer.	1997	540	462		903		51.2
	1998	601	458	-.9	1197	32.6	38.3
	1999	699	431	-5.9	610	-49	70.7
Louth	1997	308	303		1191		25.4
	1998	311	309	2	1171	-1.7	26.4
	1999	398	598	93.5	1581	35	37.8
Mayo	1997	709	867		1431		60.6
	1998	1008	899	3.7	1527	6.7	58.9
	1999	974	1166	29.7	1797	17.7	64.9
Meath	1997	276	506		1318		38.4
	1998	388	520	2.8	1422	7.9	36.6
	1999	409	628	20.8	1480	4.1	42.4
Monagh	1997	238	205		295		69.5
	1998	253	298	45.4	423	45.4	70.5
	1999	325	261	-12.4	353	-16.6	74
Offaly	1997	286	222		382		58.1
	1998	289	282	27	624	63.4	45.2
	1999	481	399	41.5	604	-3.2	66
Roscom.	1997	261	190		292		65
	1998	380	232	22	305	4.4	76
	1999	448	281	21	406	33.1	69.2
Sligo	1997	220	363		666		54.5
	1998	243	368	1.4	903	35.6	40.7
	1999	357	370	.5	865	-4.2	42.8
S.Dub	1997	68	29		2479		1.2
	1998	79	23	-20.7	2013	-18.8	1.1
	1999	83	18	-21.7	2049	1.8	.9

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County	Year	One-Off applic's	Rural Houses	Annual RoC%	Total Houses	Annual RoC%	Rural Total %
Tipp N	1997	300	467		749		62.3
	1998	346	446	-4.5	823	9.9	54.2
	1999	418	566	26.9	1032	25.4	54.8
Tipp S	1997	309	83		478		17.4
	1998	361	207	149.4	557	16.5	37.2
	1999	375	265	28	606	8.8	43.7
Waterf.	1997	298	235		539		43.6
	1998	382	243	3.4	520	-3.5	46.7
	1999	482	388	59.7	1007	93.6	38.5
Westm.	1997	341	467		929		50.3
	1998	396	446	-4.5	1105	19	40.4
	1999	432	566	26.9	1140	3.2	49.7
Wexf	1997	669	878		1446		60.7
	1998	875	861	-2	1484	2.6	58
	1999	1302	1726	100.5	2375	60	72.7
Wickl	1997	288	350		1147		30.5
	1998	326	362	3.5	1335	16.4	27.1
	1999	368	498	37.6	1294	-3.1	38.5

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### **Points of Detail**

- A group of counties including Cavan, Longford, Monaghan, Offaly, Roscommon, Limerick and Tipperary S.R. have been showing an increased proportion of rural to total house building. This trend, when compared to other trends below may indicate the relative weakness in the urban structure of these counties and the corresponding buoyancy of the rural housing demand.
- Counties such as Donegal, Galway, Laois, Leitrim, Sligo, Westmeath, Cork, Tipperary North and Waterford have been showing a decreased proportionality, though against an aggregate increase in rural house-building. It may be that these areas are displaying signs of resurgence in urban-based development, perhaps in some places this being due to the influence of metropolitan areas. This would seem to apply to Laois, Westmeath and Cork/Waterford/Galway.
- Meath, Kildare and Wicklow all indicate large increases in rural housebuilding, lesser so in the case of Meath with its history of strong settlement control policies. However, these counties show increased proportionality for rural house-building, though this may reflect pressure for in-depth development in small villages.
- Mayo, Sligo, Kerry and Wexford are a group of counties where rural house-building numbers seem to consistently outperform the numbers of applications for individual houses, handled by the planning authorities. This might indicate the operation of the seaside resort scheme and in depth development of small tourism driven housing schemes in rural areas and small seaside resorts.
- The three Dublin counties are all showing increased pressure but particularly so in the case of Fingal, presumably because of its larger rural area component.

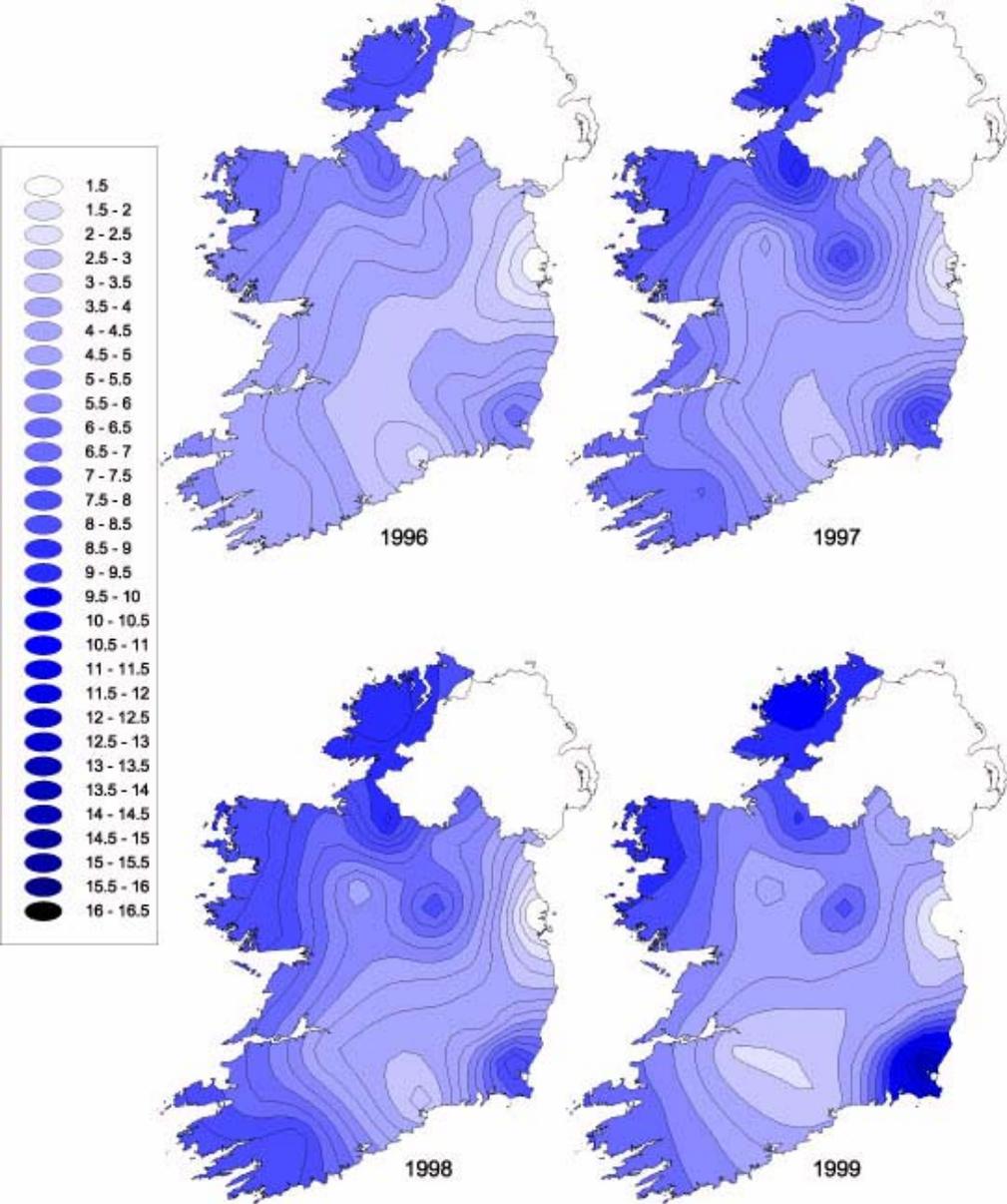
The data trends above have also been mapped to determine any spatial patterns in terms of:

Map (1): Total house completions by county per head of population in 1996.

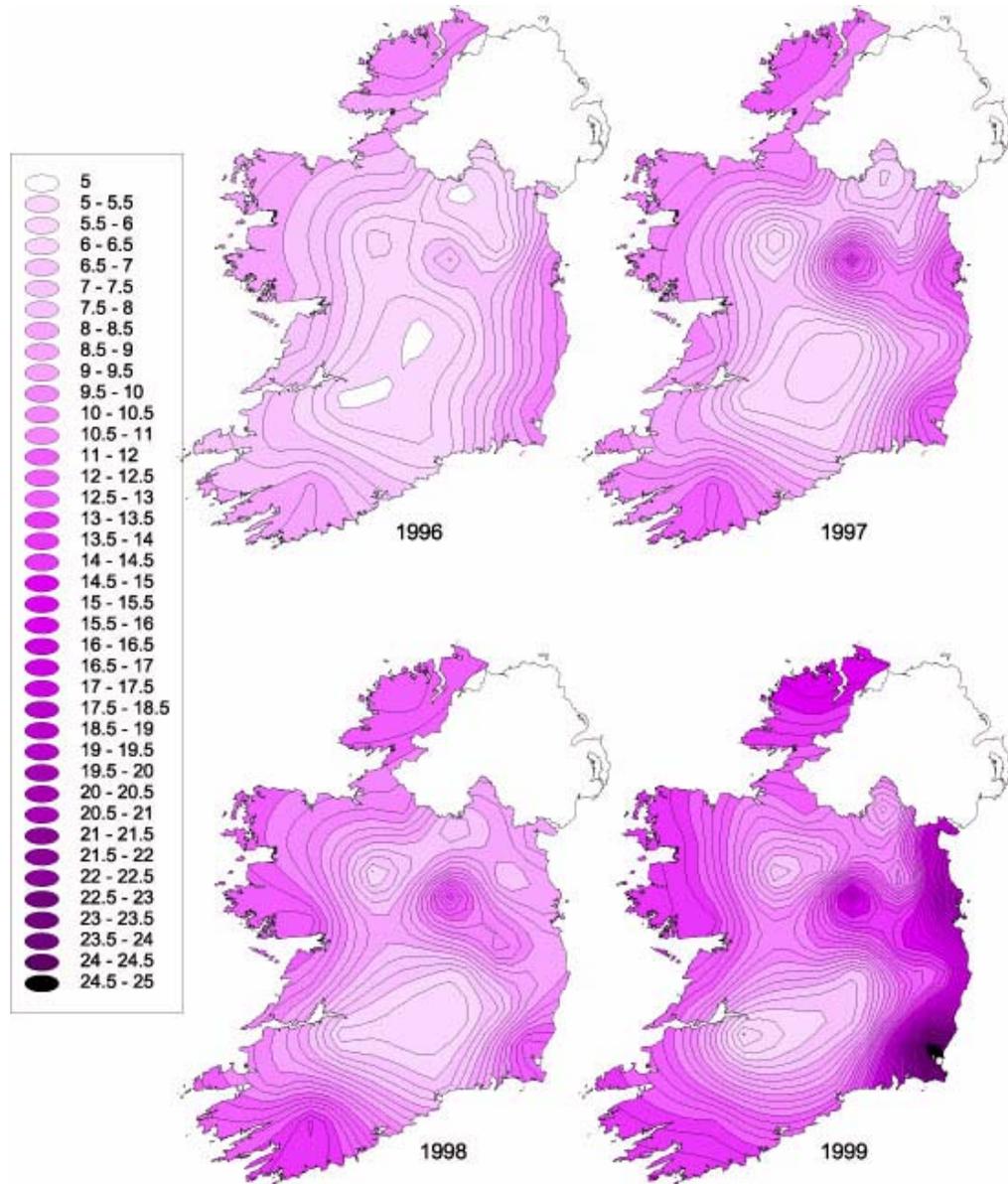
Map (2): Rural housing development by county per head of aggregate rural population in 1996.

Map (3): Rates of change of rural housing proportionality.

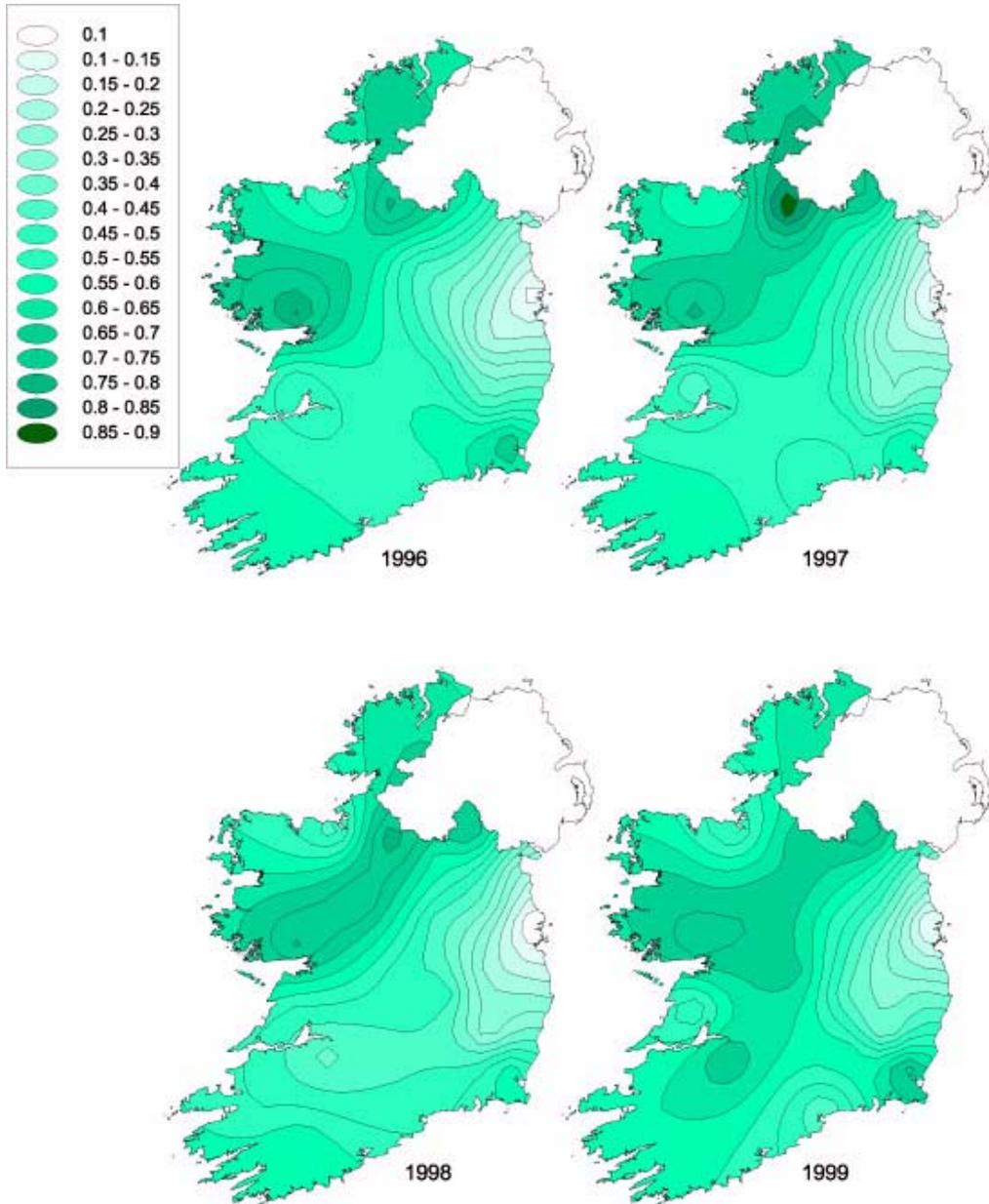
Map I: Total House Completions per 1000 Population



Map 2: Proportion of Rural Houses built per 1000 rural population



Map 3: Proportion of Houses built in Rural Areas 1996-1999



### 3 Current Policies – Comparisons and Consensus?

#### 3.1 The International Level – European Spatial Development Perspective

The European Spatial Development Perspective is based on the European Union aim of balanced and sustainable development across the territory of the Union. This aim is to be addressed through economic and social cohesion. In keeping with the definition of Sustainable Development laid down by the Brundtland Report, sustainability (which includes the economic, social and environmental aspects of development as well as promoting a proper balance between them) includes not only economic development that is environmentally sound but which also includes a balanced spatial development. The ESDP states that this means in particular “reconciling the social and economic claims for economic development with the areas ecological and social functions”. Through this process it is argued that the EU will develop from an Economic Union into an Environmental Union into a Social Union.

This reflects the triangle of objectives linking the fundamental goals of European policy:

- Economic and social cohesion,
- Conservation of natural resources and cultural heritage and
- Balanced competitiveness of the European territory.

The political objectives and options set out in the ESDP are aimed at guiding, in a non binding manner, the spatial development of the fifteen member states.

The ESDP then sets out a series of policy aims and options for the EU territory subject to three overarching “Spatial Development Guidelines”

- Development of a polycentric or multi-centred and balanced urban system and the strengthening of partnership between urban and rural areas.
- Promotion of transportation and communication concepts which support polycentric development through gradual development of parity of access to infrastructure and knowledge.
- Development and conservation of the natural and cultural heritage.

The policy aims and options are then spelled out with the proviso that these should be interpreted according to the economic, social and environmental situation of an area.

The ESDP acknowledges both the structural weaknesses and new pressures emerging in rural areas and in recognising the diversity in rural areas and their circumstances, recommends that "spatial development strategies must begin by taking into consideration local and regional conditions, characteristics and requirements". This may variously focus upon the types of pressures on rural areas adjacent to towns under pressure for first or second homes or the need to diversify and restructure the rural economy to face the challenge of international competition, often by rediscovering indigenous potential.

Relevant policy options to the question of rural housing relate to:

#### **Indigenous Development, Diverse and Productive Rural Areas**

- Supports for rural areas in education training and the creation of non agricultural jobs,
- Strengthening small and medium sized towns in rural areas as focal points for regional development,

#### **Urban Rural Partnership**

- Integrating the countryside surrounding large cities in spatial development strategies for urban regions, aiming at more efficient land use planning, paying special attention to the quality of life in urban surroundings.
- Maintenance of a basic supply of services and public transport in small and medium sized towns in rural areas, particularly those in decline.

#### **Preservation and Development of Natural Heritage**

- Preparation of integrated spatial development strategies for protected areas, environmentally sensitive areas and areas of high biodiversity,
- Promotion of energy saving and traffic reducing settlement structures, integrated resource planning and increased use of renewable energies to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

### **3.1.1 Broad Conclusions from the ESDP**

The ESDP broadly acknowledges the scale of the challenge in addressing on the one hand, the scale of structural change underway in rural areas and on the other hand the significant pressures emerging. It appears to recommend a close quarter analysis of the particularities of various places before framing policy responses so as to ensure a best fit between local needs and those policies.

It is clear from the ESDP however that the form of spatial policies for rural areas must be driven by

1. a clear vision of the role they are to play in the future,
2. a recognition of current realities in relation to agricultural reform,
3. a concerted self examination of rural areas to rediscover indigenous potential such as in conservation and promotion of cultural and natural heritage in tourism or communal wind energy to name two examples

4. pursuit of positive policies to reverse rural decline where necessary, such as in encouraging both the sourcing of off-farm employment and the skilling to match this
5. Exercising of caution in relation to the creation of settlement patterns that are energy and transport intensive.

Indeed, it is clear from the ESDP that the vision for rural areas in settlement terms at least must be closely associated with its urban structure and strengthening this, whilst identifying conserving and developing rural potential whether that is in accommodating industry, tourism or the infrastructural and other supports necessary to sustain this.

## **3.2 The National Level**

### **3.2.1 Sustainable Development – A Strategy for Ireland**

This strategy, published by the then Department of the Environment in 1997 set out an overall approach and sectoral policies to integrate the concept of sustainable development within the everyday actions of state agencies, the local government sector and other implementing authorities. The overall aim of the strategy was stated as:

“to ensure that economy and society in Ireland can develop to their full potential within a well protected environment, without compromising the quality of that environment, and with responsibility towards present and future generations and the wider international community”

Within this aim, Government commitment to protection of Irelands environment for its own intrinsic value was re-affirmed, together with a commitment that Ireland’s economic growth and social development could not be to the detriment of environmental quality and must be within the limits set by nature.

Chapter 14 – Spatial Planning and Land Use, one of the chapters dedicated to sectoral policies, sets out a number of areas of relevance to the question of rural settlement policies and the linkages between rural and urban areas. In this section, the strategy states that land use planning can support the objectives of sustainable development in a number of ways:

- efficiency in the use of energy, transport and natural resources may be encouraged through the careful location of residential commercial and industrial development, and controls on the shape, structure and size of settlements;
- the planning process can also promote the most effective use of already developed areas;
- the protection and enhancement of the natural environment, including unique or outstanding features, landscapes and natural habitats can be secured: and

- new development needs can be accommodated in an environmentally sustainable and sensitive manner.

Pressures on the shape of the landscape identified in this section included, changing agricultural practices, increased afforestation, the continuing expansion of urban settlements, one-off rural housing, increased private car ownership, increased tourism activity, new forms of commercial and business development, coastal erosion and mineral extraction.

The role and significance of the Development Plan in reconciling these pressures was acknowledged as well as a commitment that such plans should in the future, take a more strategic view of settlement, development needs and infrastructural supports.

In Chapter 15 – The Built Environment, specific policies in relation to the urban context were outlined including:

- stronger linkages between land use and transportation planning;
- the promotion of higher residential densities on public transport corridors, brownfield sites and near the centre of urban areas;
- clear demarcation between town and country.

The issue of Urban Generated Housing was given specific mention. Whilst the predominant demographic characteristic in rural areas in terms of population decline was acknowledged, the strategy states that in some areas, there is severe pressure for one-off housing to meet the needs of people working in nearby towns and cities. The strategy also states that there is demand to build tourist housing in scenic areas. It continues stating that:

*“ Growing demand for housing in the countryside from people working in cities and towns is generally unsustainable because:*

- being separated from all other activities which the householder normally has to resort to, such as work, shops, schools and entertainment, one-off housing is a large utiliser of energy;
- most one-off houses are served by individual septic tanks, raising concerns for groundwater protection;
- there are increased roads and transportation costs and
- there is a negative impact in terms of the urban fabric of towns.

The strategy continues stating that there must be a presumption against urban-generated one-off rural housing adjacent to towns. It points out that the planning legislation enables local authorities to grant permission for dwellings for certain categories of persons whose occupation requires them to be rurally based thereby catering for genuine needs subject to certain principles:

- development on national primary and secondary roads should not be permitted on traffic safety grounds;
- the need to protect sensitive landscapes should be recognised;
- good siting and design should be emphasised;
- the site should be suitable for wastewater disposal;
- rehabilitation of old houses should be encouraged rather than the construction of a new dwelling.

### **Broad Conclusions from “Sustainable Development – A Strategy for Ireland”**

The policy imperatives from this strategy are clear.

1. Unless housing development in rural areas is associated with the needs of the rural community in occupational or similar terms, then the energy needs and landscape, transportation and environmental impacts of dispersed settlement patterns render these contrary to the principles of sustainable development.
2. By dis-aggregating the question of urban generated housing from the wider issue of rural housing and targeting the pressure areas enveloping urban centres particularly, the strategy would seem to support a more strategic and spatial analysis of the rural housing question and the framing of appropriate policies in response to varying contexts.
3. The strategy refers to the powers of planning authorities under planning legislation to distinguish between persons in terms of a decision to grant permission for a rural house.

### **3.2.2 “Ensuring the Future – A Strategy for Rural Development in Ireland - a white paper on Rural Development”**

The publication of this paper in 1999 represented the establishment of a comprehensive expression of Government policy on the many elements of relevance to rural communities. A particular element of the strategy is its application of sectoral policies to have a regional and rural focus. It states at Section 6.1 that:

*“A key objective of the Government’s strategy is the maintenance of the rural population, not just in terms of aggregate numbers but in a balanced spatial distribution”*

The strategy in turn referred to a NESC report (Population Distribution and Economic Development; Trends and Policy Implications” (1997) and key issues in regional development. In particular, the strategy highlighted the reports findings that regional development based on the distribution of a network of urban centres serving and at the same time, dependent on a dispersed rural community in towns villages and the countryside in their rural hinterlands, is an essential component of an effective rural development strategy.

In terms of environmental issues, the strategy states at Section 11 that the Government’s vision for the future of rural society is based on the maintenance of dispersed, vibrant rural communities. Achievement of this goal is dependent on an approach to rural development which is environmentally sustainable.

Linking to the sustainable development strategy referred to above, the white paper stated that the Government is committed to the implementation of rural development policies which are formulated within a sustainable development framework.

Turning specifically to the issue of housing in rural areas, the paper states that:

*“To achieve the aim of a balanced rural population, planning policy should, as far as possible, facilitate people willing to settle in rural areas, especially those willing to settle in their own areas of origin. At the same time as respecting the aspirations of the rural community, planning policy must be sensitive to the conservation of the rural environment, including preservation of natural beauty spots and natural habitats”*

The particular pressures for holiday homes are also addressed. The white paper identifies that such pressures may be causing affordability gaps for local people. Amongst the strategies proposed to deal with this is the targeting of investment in water services infrastructure in small villages and towns to open up development opportunities.

### **Broad Conclusions from the White Paper**

At face value, there appears to be an issue in terms of integrating the vision for rural areas set out in the White Paper, with the Government's strategy for sustainable development.

The sustainable development strategy envisages clarity in the roles of urban areas, in accommodating the residency of persons whose functional lives are urban based and roles of rural areas in terms of sustaining the rural population.

The White Paper, in encouraging flexibility in planning policy to accommodate persons willing to settle in rural areas clearly raises a further question, (when the objectives of the sustainable development strategy are taken into account) - what type of settlement in rural areas should accommodate rural needs – a random and dispersed pattern or one designed and enabled to bolster the vitality of rural villages and towns?

Such need for integration is tempered by an understanding of the concept of “rurality” embraced by the white paper and which includes small towns and villages. From the paper's acceptance of the recommendations of various reports and strategies in terms of bolstering the urban structure in rural areas, this need for further development of the white paper's conclusions would appear to be driven by the need to disentangle the issue of urban generated housing from the broader issue of how to breathe new life into the rural settlement structure.

As the collective conclusions of such reports as the NESC report indicate, rural revival depends more on effective linkages and interdependencies with urban structures than an unstructured approach to rural settlement.

These inter-linkages could take the form of supports to service and open up small villages, which are part of larger urban networks, so that they could capture the residency and or service functions for larger nodes.

### **3.3 The Regional level – “Strategic Planning Guidelines for the Greater Dublin Area”**

The above guidelines have been the only comprehensive and strategic spatial statement on the development of a particular region in recent years, outside of the urban centred Land Use and Transportation studies carried out for urban centres such as Cork and Galway. The Strategic Guidelines have statutory effect under the new Local Government (Planning and Development) Act 2000.

The guidelines divide the area of the Dublin authorities and Meath/Wicklow and Kildare into “Metropolitan” and “Hinterland” areas respectively and support a broad strategy of containment within the metropolitan area and controlled development of “primary” and “secondary” development centres in the hinterland.

The guidelines acknowledge the need to accommodate local growth in those parts of the hinterland outside the identified development centres. However, it states that in these areas identified as “Strategic Green Belts”:

*“Development outside of designated centres should be strictly limited to local need. The spread of development intended primarily to serve the Metropolitan Area and generating significant levels of commuting is neither environmentally sustainable or economic and should be restricted using demand management techniques. In particular the spread of housing in rural areas should be severely restricted to local need” (Chapter 9-Strategy and Vision)*

The Strategic Planning Guidelines acknowledge the reality that the hinterland of the Dublin Metropolitan area is under sustained and intense pressure for urban generated housing due to accessibility improvements, affordability pressures and preferences for rural living with urban benefits of many house buyers. Echoing the land use prerogatives set down in the document “Sustainable Development – A strategy for Ireland” the guidelines reject this as a serious long term development option due to the energy intensive transportation pattern this would generate, as well as the landscape, environmental and urban dispersal rather than consolidation effects it would encourage.

### **3.4 County Level – A Comparison of County Development Plan Policies**

Continuing the process of comparison and contrast in spatial planning policies relevant to the question of rural settlement, all of the current or draft County Development Plans have been examined from the perspective of the following parameters

1. Analysis of the spatial patterns of development including in particular the identification of particularly anomalous pressures associated with urban generated housing;
2. The establishment of a strategic spatial vision for the county or borough including as appropriate, the establishment of differing rural housing policies for differing developmental contexts.
3. Establishment of clear mechanisms in which both alternatives to urban generated housing are put forward and effective controls on occupancy of permitted rural housing are required.

Table Three below, sets out the comparative analysis of the development plans.

**Table 3: Rural Settlement Policies in Current County Development Plans**

County	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Carlow	I (a)	X	X	X	I	X
Cavan	X	I	X	X	X	I
Clare	I	I	I	X	I	X
Cork	I (b)	I	X	X	X	X
Donegal	I (c)	I	I	I	I	I
Dun-Rathd	X	I	I	X	X	X
Fingal	X	I	I (d)	X	I	X
Galway	I (e)	I	I	X	X	X
Kerry	X	X	X	X	I	X
Kildare	I	I	X	X	X	X
Kilkenny	I	I	X	X	X	X
Laois	(n.a.)					
Leitrim	X	X	X	X	X	X
Limerick	I	I	X	X	X	X
Longford	X	X	X	X	X	X
Louth	I	I	X	X	I	X
Mayo	X	X	I	I	X	X
Meath	I	I	I	I	I	I
Monaghan	X	X	X	X	I	X
Offaly	I	I	X	X	X	X
Roscomm.	X	X	X	X	X	X
Sligo	X	X	X	X	I	X
S.Dublin	I	I	I	X	I	X
Tipp NR	X	X	X	X	X	I
Tipp SR	I	I (f)	X	X	I	X
Waterford	X	X	X	X	X	X
Westmeath	I	I	X	X	X	X
Wexford	I	I	I	X	I	X
Wicklow	I	I	X	I	X	X

**Key to policy codes**

**Note 1:** Identification of particular areas under pressure or spatial development issues

**Note 2:** Matching of specific policies to specific spatial issues

**Note 3:** Broad controls on occupancy – Conditions only

**Note 4:** Specific controls on occupancy – Legal (S38) Agreements

**Note 5:** Siting and Design guidelines or manuals

Specific statement on rural housing facilitation – no specific controls

(source – DoELG)

### Notes

- a. Pressure areas identified generally by proximity to main urban areas
- b. Operates a 3 mile control area around key centres
- c. Control areas are based around landscape sensitivity considerations
- d. Requires occupancy conditions imposing a min period of 5 years
- e. Control area applies to E. Galway Environs and 1.5 miles of development boundary/40 mph speed limit of certain towns
- f. Control area is covered by the Clonmel Environs Development Plan

### 3.4.1 General Comments

The issue of how comprehensively or otherwise, the rural housing issue is dealt with in a given development plan cannot be separated from that of the balance achieved in these plans between an overall level of strategic vision and development control detail in relation to policies in an overall sense. In some development plans, particularly those of the Dublin counties, Cork, Meath and Clare, there is a deeper analysis of issues in rural areas and a strategic vision as to how these will be responded to than in many other counties. This is possibly true of other policy areas in these plans as well.

It is fair to say that in analysing the various county plans, the contentiousness of the rural housing question is perhaps reflected in the degree to which there is a lack of strategic vision in terms of the development of rural areas and instead an emphasis on engineering and other development control detail. In particular:

- Only 44% of County Development Plans articulate to any spatial degree, the varying levels of development pressure or planning issues across their area of jurisdiction. Fewer planning authorities even map these issues.
- A similar percentage of Development Plans structure their development plan policies such as to respond to these varying developmental contexts.
- Almost half of the current or draft plans have no specific policies requiring any controls on occupancy or use of permitted development and virtually all of these bar one (Wicklow) are of the type where the planning authority states it will place a condition on planning permissions regulating occupancy to the applicant or his/her immediate family in the first instance.
- Wicklow County Council is unique in referring to the use of a condition requiring that developers of single rural houses enter into an agreement under Section 38 of the 1963 Local Government (Planning and Development) Act, restricting occupancy of the dwelling to the applicant and members of his/her family.
- Only one third of County Development Plans have any particular requirements regarding siting and design manuals or guides, published either as part of the plan or separate documents.

- A small number of development plans have statements that set out very broad policies towards facilitating choice in peoples housing needs.
- Few development plans set their rural development policies in any broader context reflective of documents referred to above.
- Virtually no development plans set their policies in the context of how they interact with policies applying in contiguous authorities. This has been referred to as an issue by elected members as a perceived significant factor in rural housing issues.

### **3.4.2 General Conclusions from Development Plan Comparisons**

In general, the contentiousness of rural housing as a spatial planning issue for planning authorities has been leading to a situation where development plan policies are increasingly being framed in a loose manner.

In particular, policies are generally tending to express positive presumption towards farm family members, regardless of whether these might actually be working the land and relatives of those living in rural areas. In this regard, it is probably harder to define those persons to which restrictions would be applied, than those who would not be subject to them.

This raises two subsidiary issues:

1. What is the cumulative impact of the legacy of urban generated development from the past in terms of creating demands for second or subsequent generation urban generated rural dwellers? In other words, are housing policies, which favour rural dwellers per se, as opposed to those functionally related to rural areas, policies at all?
2. Is it reasonable to discriminate in terms of housing policy, between persons desire to develop new houses in rural areas on the basis of their access to family owned or controlled land?

The implications for spatial policy that might be considered to address these issues are set out in Section 5.



## 4 Current Trends – The Spatial Implications

In this section, potential spatial scenarios are explored which potentially may arise where current rural development patterns as identified in Section 2 remain unchecked in the context of the development issues surrounding rural housing identified in Section 1.

### 4.1 Population and Rural Demographics

The issue of sustaining the rural population and particularly rural villages is one of the main arguments put forward by proponents of a flexible approach to rural settlement. It is interesting therefore to examine the population of Ireland's small villages, from a population of under 1000. The census data offers material for 448 of these centres, whose population in 1981, 1991 and 1996 is set out in Appendix 1. Whilst data for the period covered by the data on house completions will not be available until the 2001 Census, some interesting points emerge:

- With the exception of some villages that come under the influence of larger urban or metropolitan areas, virtually all of the 448 centres have experienced significant population decreases over the past 15 – 20 years.
- Whilst this may have been substantially driven by demographic restructuring associated with an ageing population, the question can be fairly asked, why these centres are not attracting new development, and especially in the context of historically high levels of rural housing development. In effect are we seeing the creation of “doughnut” villages, - whose physical form remains generally constant, but whose hinterland is the area in which what limited development takes place?
- If so, what measures are necessary to unlock any potential smaller settlements may have? This could act as a means by which the legitimate ambitions of people seeking a rural lifestyle could be catered for but in a way which permits the orderly provision of services, the conservation of rural heritage and the supporting of essential rural services such as schools, post offices and so on.

## 4.2 Loss of Land and Biodiversity

The loss of arable land attributable to development needs for individual houses is frequently described as a significant spatial implication. In the context of EC Common Agricultural Policy reform and associated set aside and redundancy of land from production, this issue has its detractors. The question might be asked by such detractors, if the land is redundant anyway, why not develop it?

Considered in a more strategic light, the capacity of land to produce food, once lost cannot be replaced and as history has shown, the value of land as a mechanism to provide food is one that changes over time. This is also a sustainability issue in that we are leaving behind a reduced percentage of good agricultural land for these purposes to future generations.

Taking the rural house building statistics from Section Two, estimates of loss of land to agriculture have been made which would indicate:

- In 1997, assuming at least 10,000 dwellings were constructed in open countryside at an average site size of .15 Ha. (S.R.6 1996 requires a minimum site size of .2 Ha) would result in a land take of 1500 Hectares.
- In 1998, with an estimate of 11,000 rural completions, this land take would have risen to 1650 Hectares.
- In 1999, assuming 14,000 completions, 2100 Hectares would have been consumed.

In terms of biodiversity impacts, the loss of natural hedgerows due to sightline requirements for entrances could be similarly estimated to be of the order of:

- 300 kilometers of hedgerow (assuming a standard 30 metre frontage) in 1997
- 330 km in 1998
- 420 km in 1999.

## 4.3 Transportation

The interrelationships between settlement form, development patterns generally and the demands this gives rise to in terms of mobility needs between various elements, is an area in which some research has been carried out.

It is clear that in a period over the last 30 years or so, in which agricultural employment has halved and where both dispersed rural housing and car ownership follow display strong growth, contemporary expansion of isolated rural development has little to do with the rural economy. Increasing levels of car ownership are allowing many people to work in many places, but live in the countryside.

However, the question arises, if the resurgence in rural living is effectively being underwritten by use of the car, does this give rise to long term sustainability issues?

TEST (1991) concludes that the car is the least efficient form of transport today consuming twice as much energy per passenger moved as a train and five times more than that for a bus. More critically, in the area of Carbon Dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions, TEST (1991) also concludes that private car's emissions are 50% higher than a diesel train or 400% more than a bus, in terms of grams of CO<sub>2</sub> per passenger kilometer.

McGrath (1996) in a limited survey of households which compared travel patterns in a rural area, not served by public transport, with a dormitory town connected to Dublin city by both bus and rail services found that:

- Travel by the rural households surveyed was similar to that of urban households.
- However, as urban households made more use of sustainable modes such as walking, cycling and public transport, rural travel involved 32% more energy consumption and 28% more CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.
- Very few rural children walked or cycled to school whilst these were the principal modes in the urban households surveyed.
- In quality of life terms, the often stated advantages of rural living compared to proportionally less travel by rural households by adult and adolescent household members to recreational activities than their urban counterparts.
- In rural households, the partner with the greater access to the family car, spent over an hour a week on journeys "to serve passenger"

In these respects, it is important to respond to the often stated advantages of rural living by referring to the energy intensive nature of the transport systems needed to serve it and the implications for lifestyle affected by transportation.

It is beyond the scope of this study to extend this type of research to quantify the energy demands of rural households. Additionally the other values of rural settlement which are intrinsically bound up in rural life and activities need to be emphasised. Nonetheless, the question arises: should the energy and other transportation impacts of a dispersed settlement form not be included in the strategic assessment of this option, where such settlement has little or no functional relationship to the rural economy?

Looking at the national picture, some interesting trends emerge. Feeney (2000) in a comparison of the proportion of workers in both urban and rural areas using sustainable transport modes, compared figures for both 1986 and 1996. The results are presented below and highlight some worrying trends.

Table Four: Use of Sustainable Transport Modes (Public Transport/Cycling/ Walking) by aggregate urban and rural areas 1986-1996

**Table 4: Use of Sustainable Transport Modes (Public Transport/Cycling/Walking) by aggregate urban and rural areas 1986-1996**

Area	Prop. of Workers 1986 (%)	Prop. Of Workers 1996 (%)	Growth Rate (%)
Aggregate Town Areas	43.7	35.9	-17.9
Aggregate Rural Areas	11.3	10.0	-11.5
The State	29.6	25.2	-14.9

Firstly, as Feeney states, the difference in the use of sustainable transport modes between urban and rural areas is unsurprising given the separation of residency and employment in rural areas coupled to the poor economic viability of public transport services in rural areas.

Notable also is the greater rate of decline for urban areas.

In a recent survey of attitudes to the environment, the Department of the Environment and Local Government (2000) estimates that very few of the drivers surveyed (18%) indicated that they make an effort to cut back on driving for environmental reasons.

It is clear from these sources that a considerable challenge awaits in terms of encouraging modal shifts generally to more sustainable forms of transport, but what the above information shows equally clearly is that rural living, which is functionally related to urban areas is highly undesirable from the standpoint of contribution to environmental impacts from transportation.

#### 4.4 Water Resource Conservation

In terms of public awareness regarding environmental issues, the quality of drinking water as a basic prerequisite of life, is a major issue for the general public. In a recent survey (DoELG 2000) 38% of respondents said they were concerned about the quality of drinking water, whilst 67% believed that Ireland has plenty of good quality drinking water that costs nothing to produce.

Most cities, large towns and urban areas are supplied with drinking water to a high level of quality provided by sanitary authorities and which complies with a regulatory environment. This regulatory system is framed by the European Communities (Quality of Water Intended for Human Consumption) Regulations 1998. These regulations give effect to the European Community Directive 80/778/EEC relating to the quality of drinking water.

Houses in rural areas are generally supplied from (a) public supplies, (b) group schemes served from the public mains, (c) privately sourced group water schemes or (d) private wells or other individual domestic supplies. Categories (a) and (b) are supplied from tightly regulated and publicly controlled supplies.

However, it is now widely accepted that the quality of water from a significant number of privately sourced group water schemes is deficient in quality. In 1991 it was estimated that these serve 50,000 households and 150,000 persons. The EPA in a recent report (The Quality of Drinking Water in Ireland) published water quality monitoring results from samples of 1200 or so group schemes out of a total of 5500 schemes. It found that 42% of these are polluted. Polluted is defined in terms of the presence of faecal coliforms and other contaminants, contrary to the guideline limits of the EU's Drinking Water Directive.

An amendment to the Drinking Water Regulations in November 1999 required group schemes serving more than 50 persons to comply by law with the standards set out in the directive.

The EPA report states that altered local circumstances have been a substantial cause of this loss of quality as areas which were pristine when selected originally, came under pressure for housing or intensive farming activities, industry and the like.

The EPA warns that the adoption of the Drinking Water Directive and its new found applicability to most group schemes will entail a sea change in the way water quality from private group scheme sources are monitored.

This in turn will become an important spatial determinant through necessitating an effective policy response that is preventative in terms of conserving water quality.

In the light of these statistics and the patchy nature of comprehensive monitoring data for all group schemes, the DoELG commissioned a pilot study into water quality in group schemes in County Roscommon. The most important outcome from the pilot study was that:

- in terms of occurrence of bacteriological contamination, 95% of sources were contaminated as indicated by the presence of presumptive total coliforms. As the report states:

“This level of contamination indicates that the source protection implemented for these sources is totally inadequate.”

Echoing many similar previous reports, the value of source or groundwater protection schemes is advocated as an important spatial response to this issue.

It is clear from the above referred to reports that:

- the issue of groundwater protection per se, has not been a strong spatial determinant of rural development but will become so in the future.
- this may have been driven by a lack of comprehensive data as to the on-the-ground trends in water quality.
- the incremental nature of considering individual developments over a long time line, creates difficulties in predicting future trends.

It is also clear that to protect still-pristine sources from inappropriately located development as a key strategic resource to replace compromised sources that (a) these need to be comprehensively identified, (b) appropriate spatial policies need to be developed and (c) proper monitoring measures need to be established.

In terms of resource identification, the Geological Survey of Ireland has been engaged in Vulnerability Assessments for a number of local authorities. From these and other sources Map Four indicates the spatial extent of areas where groundwater quality is vulnerable to contamination from inappropriately designed, located or constructed development. It is interesting to compare the spatial patterns of this to the spatial patterns of rural housebuilding in Section 2 to see where pressures coincide with vulnerability – Galway being a case in point amongst others.

The issue of environmental attitudes is also relevant here and should be considered in the context of the increasing trend towards proprietary wastewater treatment facilities being provided in difficult sites or conditions. These are increasingly being put forward as a technological response, but demand high levels of expert maintenance and continual energy inputs.

In the study of environmental attitudes described above, less than one third of respondents (32%) routinely empty their septic tanks once a year as recommended. In addition, A further 32% would only empty it if there was a problem.

In the context of a rural landscape that contains an estimated 357 000 septic tanks or individual wastewater disposal system and would appear to add to this at the rate of over 15 000 per annum in recent years, such attitudes indicate the practical difficulties in enforcing good environmental practice.

Of course, a frequently expressed view is that historically, Ireland had a very high rural population and therefore how difficult should it be to accommodate this today? The one strategic difference this view fails to recognise is the difference in the use of water as a medium to handle and dispose of waste. This returns to the concept of change in rural housing's "ecological footprint" referred to in section one of this paper. Historically, with limited transport, less water based waste handling issues and sourcing of daily needs locally, rural housing had a profoundly different impact than that of today. Today's rural households may have to travel many miles or even tens of miles to work, leisure or even schooling to where the household is functionally based. This represents a very real difference between the environmental impact capacity of today's society compared to those historically.

In particular, considering the daily discharge from say 15 000 additional individual wastewater disposal systems estimated as being of the order of 9.24 million litres per day, this issue is one of the more pressing ones relating to dispersed rural settlement, particularly so as it affects one of the basic prerequisites of life – the availability of clean water.

## **4.5 Landscape and Tourism Impacts**

Pressure on scenic landscapes and associated tourism areas for one-off homes and for either permanent or second home occupation is a frequently recurring theme in considering such proposals. In addition to the issue of impacts upon the integrity and quality of scenic landscapes, there is the associated question of whether this in turn impacts upon the commercial value of this in sustaining rural economies through tourism.

A recent survey by Mayo County Council and An Taisce (Mayo-Sustainable Tourism in the Coastal Zone (2000)) clearly shows a positive link here. Respondents were asked about their images of Mayo before coming and frequently cited scenery and wild/barren/ natural as expected characteristics.

When asked if their expectations were fulfilled, 94% responded positively and overwhelmingly, when asked about what was special of the area, wilderness and being unspoilt was most often quoted.

Those who had visited Mayo previously were asked what changes they had noticed since their last visit and the change most often quoted was the extent of new housing and new building. For some this was a positive change but for others it was perceived as a negative.

When asked about the changes they would not like to see, the single biggest issue (45% of responses) was more development.

Whilst the interactions between various activities and Irelands landscapes is a subject for separate research in the NSS, the above survey clearly indicates the particular issue of development in scenic areas in terms of effects upon the potential of such areas to sustain a developing tourism sector.

## **4.6 Summary Findings**

Sections Two and Four of this paper, establish findings in terms of patterns of rural housing development which stand in some contrast to the recommendations of the various reports and strategies explored in Section Three. This is especially relevant for the National Spatial Strategy as it points to a need to explore a more co-ordinated and vigilant approach to policy. This is so because of a number of key spatial questions regarding the strategic development of Ireland, which will be explored in Stage Three of the preparation of the NSS could be significantly affected by spatial policy in relation to rural housing.

These spatial questions relate to:

1. The relationship between “urban” and “rural” and the nature of the spatial roles each will play in the future. In particular, whether or not increasingly, rural (countryside as opposed to rural villages and towns) areas offer an “opt out” clause for those disillusioned with urban living and both the social consequences for urban areas and the physical consequences of rural areas, from this.
2. The manner in which the requirements of people in terms of movement can be met to ensure a high degree of sustainability in terms not only of energy consumption but also the consequences of this in a regional sense and for the treatment of rapidly growing urban areas.
3. How the developmental needs of society as a whole, whether they relate to natural resources such as water, landscape or the physical acts of accommodating necessary physical infrastructure, are matched with the interests of those who live in the areas where such resources lie or where such infrastructure is to be provided.

It is clear from the previous sections that far from establishing clear policy balance on these issues, there is much to be done in terms of matching actions on the ground with policy statements.

This in turn may be linked with the still continuing process of a society coming to terms with its developmental impacts and needs which are so different from the legacy of its history and culture.



## 5 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.

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## **Appendix I: Population of Towns and Villages**

**1981 – 1996**

# **National Spatial Strategy**

**Irish Spatial Perspectives – Paper 13**

**“Rural and Urban Roles”**

**Summary of “Implications for Spatial Policy”**

## Implications for Policy

### Introduction

This summary paper, sets out the “implications for spatial policy” that arise from Research Task 13 – “Urban and Rural Roles”. It is not a summary of research findings, rather a set of policy issues that arise from the research.

#### **Background to the Research Paper**

One of the subjects the NSS seeks to gain a comprehensive understanding on relates to the oft held assertions that distinctions between “urban” and “rural” are no longer valid and that in fact the two are closely and increasingly related.

One of the manifestations in these linkages relates to settlement and the Irish phenomenon of significant house building in the countryside over the past 30 years or so. This area is one where spatial implications are greatest for many local authorities and perhaps where the needs for development of strategic spatial policy is most needed.

Research Task 13 has a number of key objectives

- To explore the historical debate on the question of rural housing as an element of the interrelationships between town and country
- To comprehensively describe and map the differing development contexts of various types of rural areas by analysing recent patterns of rural house building.
- To compare and contrast the various policy approaches to this question from the national level – “Sustainable Development – A Strategy for Ireland” / White Paper on Rural Development, to the regional (Strategic Planning Guidelines – Regional Report) and local (County Development Plan) level.
- To describe a “consensus of view” that would emerge from this policy background
- To compare the recommendations of these policy documents to what is unfolding on the ground including the spatial implications of current trends.
- To consider the possibility of international comparisons.
- To suggest a typology of potential policy responses.

## **Implications for Spatial Policy**

Arising from the research carried out on foot of the above objectives, the following implications for policy are identified. These policy areas will require attention in Stage Three of the process of preparing the NSS.

- 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.
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- 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.