

Good morning, everyone - and thank you for coming along today.
Thank you, Commissioner, for a wonderfully inspiring keynote address.

Your words of encouragement will remain with us throughout the day - and beyond - as we seek to ensure that the widest possible community input goes into the preparation of a strategic framework for the development of the region over the next 25 years.

Your presence here is indicative of the increasing need for us to understand that we must see ourselves in a European and, indeed, a global context. We are all beginning to realise that we, in this region, like so many others are dependent upon other communities and economies. In our case this is particularly true of the rest of the island of Ireland, Great Britain and Continental Europe. But the global economy will make those relationships more intimate through improved transportation infrastructure and telecommunications. Northern Ireland has enormous potential and capabilities. The region enjoys a quality environment and has rich human capital. The region's economy has grown steadily in recent years and the process of securing a lasting peace offers new opportunities.

Challenge or Opportunity?

Therefore, preparing a strategic framework for the future development of Northern Ireland is an extremely exciting challenge - and for the word "challenge" I think we can substitute "opportunity". The objective is to optimise the future patterns of regional development from a number of policy perspectives. First, the framework must truly reflect the value and aspirations of the citizens of Northern Ireland. Second, it must maximise the benefits to society as a whole by promoting the most efficient use of infrastructure investments. Third, it must emphasise the link between concern for the environment and economic prosperity, social benefits and the needs of future generations. Fourth, it must exploit every opportunity to reduce inequalities and heal deep divisions throughout Northern Ireland by bringing people together in pursuit of their common wealth.

Rising to the Challenge - Taking the Opportunity

In the 6 months I have been here it has become more and more apparent that the people of this region want - very much - to make the best of that opportunity and to have a say in how the region should be developed over the next 25 years. I am conscious that, possibly because of the difficulties you have had to endure in the past, a strong community network already exists here and people are very well informed about the issues which affect their lives. That in itself is an advantage upon which we hope to build. But more about that later. Other small regional economies faced with serious challenges have made the best of these opportunities to achieve success.

The Political Context

A strong economy, a sustainable environment and an inclusive society are the objectives to which the Government aspires.

Sustainable Development - We have put sustainable development to the forefront of our policies. We want to raise the standard of living and quality of life through economic development but in a way which protects and enhances the environment. And we must try to ensure that the benefits of a vibrant economy and a healthy environment are enjoyed by all sectors of society; and by future generations as well as our own.

Integrated Transport Policy - We plan to develop an Integrated Transport Policy. We recognise the relationship between health and the environment.

Waste Management Strategy - We have begun the task of developing a Waste Management Strategy. Equality of opportunity and equity of treatment are implicit principles which feature throughout our policies whether they relate to strengthening the economy, education, agriculture, health and social services or the environment.

Regional Strategic Framework - But importantly we are committed to a regional approach where this will ensure that our policies are introduced in the most appropriate way. This is particularly relevant in the context of Northern Ireland.

In many ways the preparatory work which has already been done on transportation and in beginning the development of a Regional Strategic Framework put you ahead of the game.

And this is how I see these 4 important projects fitting together. We all know that each policy impacts, and is inter-dependent, upon the others. The Regional Strategic Framework offers the opportunity to set the direction for this region by linking these policies together in a way which is appropriate to our particular needs and aspirations. It will guide future development.

The merger of the Belfast City Region Strategy and the Regional Strategic Framework

It is perhaps timely to take a moment to reflect on how we have come to be here today.

As you know, the Department of the Environment started work on a Belfast City Region Strategy last year and completed an in depth consultation process in April this year. One of the early decisions taken following the change of government in May this year was the proposal to develop a regional strategy. In September I responded to concerns that it would be more sensible to reach decisions on the future development of the Belfast City Region within the context of an overall strategy for the development of the whole of Northern Ireland. In announcing the decision to merge the two exercises I said I wanted to have them settled together by the end of 1998.

Area Plans

I know there are those who feel that this will delay or hinder development in the Belfast City Region but this is most certainly not the case. In the Discussion Paper you will see the emerging thinking which has been formulated through intensive consultations with those in the Belfast City Region. But it is absolutely right that we now treat this as a regional strategy and engage the whole of the community across the region in the debate.

I have concluded, however, that the area plan process should proceed and I have asked the Planning Service to continue to roll forward its Area Plan Programme within the resources available to it. New Area Plans will, of course, be expected to take account of the emerging findings from the work on the Regional Strategic Framework.

I am conscious, too, of the need to ensure there is enough land for housebuilding in the years ahead. We cannot use as much greenfields as we have done in the past. Since 1951, we have urbanized something like 100,000 acres (160 square miles) of land permanently lost as countryside. And most of that is in the river valleys where the best agricultural land is located. And we have a lower percentage of good agricultural land than in England. So we are not as land rich as we might think. Therefore we must conserve this diminishing resource for future generations. This means housebuilders must make greater re-use of urban sites. This will help to renew our towns but we must not build on every site there either. We must retain the best of our built heritage and open spaces.

The Role of the Panel of Experts

In reaching my decision to merge the 2 projects I was reassured in my thinking by the international panel of experts we have assembled to advise us in the development of the strategy. I am grateful to them for giving us the benefit of their experience. The Chairman of the Panel, Sir George Quigley, commands the utmost respect not just here in Northern Ireland but further afield. He is a leading authority on economic affairs. His schedule is a punishing one; he is a frequent visitor to the United States where he undertakes many high profile speaking engagements. Most importantly he does so with a passion for wishing to see Northern Ireland assume a pivotal position in a global economy.

We are fortunate to be able to call on our local academic expertise in Professor John Darby and Professor John Hendry to bring their expertise in conflict resolution and what I'll refer to as conventional land use planning to bear in our thinking. They will be amongst a panel which will take questions this afternoon. But just in case Alan Artibise and David Lock choose to depart from the conference platform with feelings of inadequacy, I want to say how much they have done in a very short space of time to confirm that a regional strategy is critical to the future development of Northern Ireland; but they have done more than that. They bring world-wide experience to Northern Ireland and their understanding of what is a complex subject has been of great value in helping Government focus its thinking.

David Lock has an international reputation. He is widely regarded as a leading authority in both greenfield and urban regeneration environments. He is a member of the UK Round Table on Sustainable Development. Some of you may recognise him - he has spoken in Northern Ireland on more than one occasion, notably on transportation matters.

Alan Artibise is President of the Cascadia Planning Group and Professor in the School of Community and Regional Planning at the University of British Columbia. He is a prolific author and has lectured throughout the world on urban studies and planning.

Paul Schell, Commissioner of the Port of Seattle and Mayor elect of Seattle, is also helping us but could not be here today.

Dennis Glass - the Director of the project - Sir George, Alan and David will deliver thought provoking presentations later this morning to stimulate the debate. I know that to be true because I have taken a keen interest in the advice they have been offering - and I have had a preview of the papers they will present! What struck me immediately was that whilst there is no absolute science to regional planning. However, there are many good practices and examples of strategic planning in the regional context. So what's new? Well, maybe not a great deal. It was Sy Oliver and James Young who first wrote - "It aint what you do but the way that you do it". (Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald and Bananarama were amongst those to make recordings of those words in song and I think they carry a message for us.) I hope they'll not mind if I beg to differ about the sentiments expressed in the first part of the lyric because I think it is important that we do something but I agree totally that the way in which we go about it, in this case in planning for the future development of Northern Ireland, is critical.

But Why a Regional Strategic Framework ?

A framework is necessary for a variety of reasons.

First, it allows public views to be gathered and that is important if we are to agree a consensus on the priority development issues.

Second, it enables us to anticipate and enable development.

Third, it presents a mechanism to reconcile development needs with the resources available.

Fourth, it is a means by which we will agree to protect and enhance the physical and natural assets of the region.

Fifth, it will provide a planning policy framework in relation to strengthening the regional economy, tackling social disadvantage and improving the quality of life and social well-being of all members of the community.

Sixth, it will become the over-arching framework in which policies and programmes can be co-ordinated and integrated as well as providing a framework for the subsequent preparation of the more detailed Area Plans within the region.

And finally, it will help us to respond successfully to the wider national and international driving forces which are changing the world. We recognise that these are factors which influence change in our region. We cannot ignore change in seeking to shape our future. If we plan for it we can use it to the benefit of the region.

The Role of Public Consultation in Building the Regional Strategy

I cannot over emphasise our commitment to consult as widely as possible as we seek to make progress in the development of a Regional Strategic Framework. We are about securing consensus. We recognise the threat of simply fudging the issues. But we are conscious of the desire of the citizens of the region to take ownership of their destiny; the wish to develop a sense of civic pride and responsibility is something to be nurtured and cultivated rather than stifled.

Long term planning for the region is a complex task. Reaching agreement on the most appropriate Regional Strategic Framework will involve difficult choices and decisions affecting the whole community. Therefore, every effort must - and will - be made to fully engage all sections of the community in the important process of preparing an agreed final version of the strategy.

The Role of the Consortium

As many of you will know, the Department of the Environment previously invited a consortium of The Urban Institute, Queen's University and Community Technical Aid to draw out views from local communities as part of the Belfast City Region Strategy project. I am grateful to the Consortium for the very professional way in which they gathered the information initially. They have now represented all the views of local communities in an excellent publication entitled 'Public Voices'. Their work proved invaluable to the project team. The 'Public Voices' document is, in fact, included in your conference pack for today.

However, now that the Belfast City Region Strategy has been merged with the Regional Strategy I am determined to extend the work which the Consortium has been doing to ensure that we secure views from local communities throughout the region. The Consortium has agreed to undertake a further research project, but in order to recognise the very important rural issues which will need to be taken into account in the development of a regional strategy, I have invited the Rural Community Network to join the 2 Universities and Community Technical Aid in a broader based consortium. They have all agreed to begin work immediately and will be in touch with local communities soon. I know I can rely on them to emulate the work which was done previously.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO FUTURE GENERATIONS

We owe it to the young people of the region to give them the best possible legacy. They know the importance of strengthening the economy, protecting the environment, caring for the vulnerable sections of our community, tackling disadvantage and providing the basis for sustainable communities. We need to reassure them that we have not been distracted from doing so and that we are not going to abdicate our responsibilities. For that reason and to ensure we are reminded about how strongly they feel - and how important their voice is - I have decided to convene a Youth Forum next March. This will provide the young people of the region with an opportunity to have their own debate on what should be in a regional strategy. It is deliberately timed to impact on the work we will be doing on preparing the draft strategy which I wish to see published in June.

I am hoping that the young people of the region will make use of the research packs we are making available so that they can undertake projects linked to the curriculum. I expect they will work up their own ideas on what should be in the draft strategy and we will invite the authors of the best of these projects to make their presentations at the Youth Forum in March.

Primary School Art Competition

I am also pleased to announce that Eason's have agreed to sponsor an art competition for primary school children so that they, too, have an opportunity to join in. The District Councils, in conjunction with the sponsors, will be promoting this competition after Christmas and further details will be available then.

But let me just speculate for a moment :

Let us say that in our towns we build all houses within 400 metres walking distance of a public transport route.

Most of our children once again enjoy a healthy walk or cycle to school along dedicated safe routes. In Belfast all our peace walls have gone by cross community agreement, thereby giving these areas a much better quality environment.

We have re-instated some of our old railway lines and provided competitive alternatives to the car.

In Belfast, cars with 3 or more passengers are allowed to use bus lanes.

That our houses are energy efficient through natural gas and solar power - which will help improve our air quality

Land fill waste sites are no more because of re-cycling and new approaches to refuse.

Litter is a universal NO NO and plastic bags cannot be found in the countryside.

We set an example in conserving water, which is likely to be a scarce resource in the 21st century

We have the cleanest, greenest environment in Europe.

We are a leading tourist hotspot in Europe because of our fine environment, cultural heritage and hospitality.

All our young people are skilled and computer literate and have jobs with many working on a world-wide network using telecommunications.

That we have full employment, with equality of opportunity for women, equity across the region with an emphasis on hi-tech, high-value jobs.

Closing Remarks

And so, if there is one message I want to leave with you today it is this. Please remember we are asking you and all the citizens of the region to say what you think should be included in the final strategy. Today is just one opportunity for you to do that . It is the beginning of another step towards the

development of a long term strategy for the region which - with the help of everyone here, the consortium and the public at large - will be in place in time to take us into the next Millennium.

I hope you will forgive the Commissioner and Paul Murphy for having to leave later this morning but they do have other engagements. However, I will be staying at the conference throughout the day.