

DoE NORTHERN IRELAND

REGIONAL STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK - CONFERENCE NOVEMBER 1997

REGIONAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Paper presented by Professor David Lock

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 We are at the watershed of strategic planning as much in Northern Ireland as elsewhere, in the sense that there is broad consensus that we need to manage urban development with a long range sense of vision, guided by the principles of sustainable development.

1.2 We have become too dependant upon the motor car in our daily lives, which causes pollution, consumes a great deal of land (for roads and parking), reduces the tranquillity of towns and countryside, and is unfair to those who do not have a car.

1.3 We are becoming very demanding in the number of houses we need as a society: in addition to the increase in the population through the birth rate (which is relatively high here in Northern Ireland when compared with the rest of Europe), we are forming more households each of which justifiably deserves a home. Our increasing propensity to form more households is caused by:

greater longevity, and more people living independently in their old age (houses do not fall vacant as soon as they used to).

an increasing desire for independence by young people (leaving home to set up on your own).

increasing numbers of students in higher education away from home.

Break up of relationships between couples (two homes needed, where one was sufficient).

1.4 Any Government has a limited reach in its influence over these household changes, and so we must face up to the housing demands we are making. With the houses we need, comes the need for jobs, schools and all the other paraphernalia of human life.

1.5 To deal with these issues - particularly those relating to housing pressures and the dependency on the motor car - we need to prepare a strategic planning framework. We need to:

Look ahead

Make very careful assessments of the amount of new development that would be capable of being accommodated inside existing urban areas, to be sure there is justification (if there is any) for releasing unspoiled land for urban development. This is not a case for "town cramming", or a return to the high rise horrors of the 1960s, or harm to the quality of urban life. The purpose is to ensure the efficient use of land, and to restore the vitality and vitality of urban areas and thus the attractiveness of urban living.

Focus development on public transport systems

## 2.0 THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

2.1 The UK signed up to the principle of sustainable development through Agenda 21 at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro on 1992. While the majority of us may be familiar with the concept of "sustainable development", I should spend a moment making it as clear as possible.

2.2 The concept, or "principle" as it is described by its authors, of "sustainable development" was developed by the World Commission on Environment and Development, in its 1987 report (known as the Brundtland Report). The principle is that:

"The use of resources and the environment should not reduce the potential of these resources for succeeding generations".

2.3 The principle has attracted widespread support. It encapsulates the sense of stewardship or husbandry that people feel is the responsibility of those alive today to those who are yet unborn.

2.4 There are four subsidiary principles to that of sustainable development:

i) **Futurity:** the affect on human activity must not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their needs and aspirations. At its simplest, this means that at least a minimum environmental "stock" must be left for those that follow.

ii) **Environment:** the full and true environmental costs of any human activity must be taken into account. Here the authors introduce the "precautionary principle" that, where scientific doubt exists, the benefit of that doubt should be given to the planet and its people.

iii) **Equity:** both inter-generational equity (commitment to equitable access to resources between generations) and intra-generational equity (a greater degree of equity within the current generation).

iv) **Participation:** unless individuals are able to share both in decision-making and in the actual process of development, it is bound to fail.

2.5 Planners all over the world are wrestling with the implications of the concept in charting the course for urban regions. In considering a Regional Strategic Framework for Northern Ireland we should have the application of these very demanding principles in mind. We cannot possibly get there in one go - this is a journey on which we have embarked. What is the progress on the journey that we can make at this time?

## 3.0 THE BASIC CHOICES FOR PATTERNS OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT

3.1 In planning for urban growth, the basic choices can be summarised as follows:

Intensification of the urban areas that already exist.

Peripheral expansion of cities and towns along transport choice corridors

Expansion of villages where dependency upon the car will not be increased.

3.2 Wherever we build, we should be seeking to bring homes and workplaces closer together, and to locate school and daily shopping facilities within easy distance of the home.

3.3 We should also avoid protected countryside and coastal areas, nature conservation areas, the best and most versatile agricultural land, water catchment areas, and areas prone to flood or other extremes of climate.

3.4 Facing up to these challenges is very painful in democracies, as some unpopular decisions have to be made. The temptation of elected politicians is to put off the difficult decisions. We have all heard the phrase NIMTO: "Not in My Term of Office". Yet these challenges require a longer term view - it is essential to look further ahead than the next election.

#### 4.0 KEY MESSAGES

4.1 Some of the key messages in strategic planning at the regional scale today are:

##### Long term time horizons

4.2 A 20 year horizon or more is essential in order to be able to see some of the consequences of "business as usual", and to test alternative strategies for urban development. This is not as daunting a prospect as it may sound: we already know a great deal about the people that will be around over that time period, and of the condition of the infrastructure we inherit now. Economic forecasting is more problematic over such a time horizon, as we cannot be sure of the new enterprises that will develop (who could have foreseen the growth in computer software, for example), but there are sufficient indicators to provide a basis (e.g. pharmaceuticals, environmental sciences, genetic engineering, information handling, health care, education).

##### Transcending local vested interests

4.3 Strategic planning requires an holistic approach - seeing things in the round - and avoiding undue pressure from local vested interests. It also mean facing up to change, in places where doing nothing is just not an option: a degree of intensification will have to be accommodated; towns and villages will have to grow; the landscape will change. This path is painful.

##### Turning the market

4.4 There are no more cynical observers of the pursuit of sustainable development than real estate developers and their advisors. In the UK they are on record as saying that this will all blow over. The clever developers, and the most successful businesses, will be those that can see the direction in which we are heading, and adapt their services, their products and their thinking to the new environment. In our strategic planning, we have to turn the present market - presenting the new opportunities in terms that will be sufficiently familiar to allow the process of change to occur with the minimum of disruption.

##### Changing lifestyles

4.5 Whether the political strategy is to use economic instruments ("the polluter pays" means you can use your car but it will cost you dear), or fiscal measures (tax breaks to encourage change), or land use policies (to restructure the existing cities and forge the pattern of new growth), or a mixture of all of these, there should be no doubt that lifestyles will have to change. The use of the car, the pattern of work and of leisure time, and the consumer goods we use, will all have to adjust, steadily, over the years ahead.

## Patterns of development

4.6 The experience in the rest of the developed world suggests that it is easier to manipulate the pattern of housing development than that of employment: when the chips are down, it requires nerves of steel to limit the choice of location offered to an inward investor. The trends are running the right way, however, thanks to the fact that most new enterprises are small or medium in size, and that locational decisions by employers are increasingly made on the grounds of the quality of life in a locality. Information technology has set many employers free to locate their businesses where they wish. Mixed use development in places where employees can easily reach the place of work, and in communities where there is stability, are the fruits of the path to sustainable development. These are also the requirements of the modern business.

## The space we each enjoy

4.7 No matter how much we squash up our homes, we need space to move around, to educate our children, accommodate our work, and to provide space for recreation, waste collection and disposal etc.

4.8 Nevertheless, it is certain that we shall all have to get used to relatively smaller quantities of space in the home, and around the home. However, the trends are running the right way again: the proportion of the population that makes up small households (one or two people) is increasing, and the proportion of the population that is ageing is increasing. It is possible that we can proceed with relatively little threat to the ambitions of families during the child rearing years, but that we shall have to design for smaller households in such a way that higher density urban locations will become the superior choice, where access is good if you don't have a car, where health care is readily available, and where the attraction for leisure and entertainment are close at hand.

## 5.0 TRANSPORT CHOICE CORRIDORS

5.1 Public transport is now a key issue: in a sustainable future, existing and proposed public transport systems will provide the skeleton on which future urbanisation must be focused.

5.2 The basic building brick of urbanisation when approached from the transportation point of view should be the walkable neighbourhood. I stress this approach is not the old "neighbourhood" much loved by planners in the 1950s and 1960s, which was a determinist view of how we should live (everyone within their enclave).

5.3 The walkable neighbourhood concept is, rather, a way of checking what people can walk to from their front door, and seeing if we can make it a safer and more pleasant walk, widen the choice of attractions within range, and therefore the day to day quality of life that residents could enjoy. Within this walking range - typically 400m - the daily necessities of life should be available and, to provide access to a wider range of choices and higher order of facilities, there should be access to public transport. Illustrations drawn from Peter Calthorpe's excellent book *The Next American Metropolis* make the point well.

New development - whether in town, on the edge of town, or in the form of new towns and villages - must offer the daily necessities of life within walking range of the home if possible. It is possible! Like beads on a necklace, new mixed use development of this type should be located on public transport networks - trains and bus routes - so that movement to other places and different choices of facilities does not have to take place by car.

5.5 For the extensive rural areas that do not sit on a necklace of public transport at the moment, life is wholly dependant upon the use of cars. A planning priority - to reduce car dependency - should be to provide a necklace of public transport (buses or mini buses or taxis or community transport vehicles perhaps) to connect these rural communities into the main public transport networks elsewhere. Rural communities that cannot be connected by looping "feeder" routes of public transport in the way I have described, would not be suitable places for new development if we are serious about moving from a pattern of living that is dependant upon the car.

## 6.0 IMPLEMENTATION

6.1 A strategic plan is worth very little unless there is equal attention given to its implementation. This involves an appropriate blend of policies which restrict or prevent types or locations of development that unwanted, and policies which encourage what is desired.

6.2 In the UK we have been experimenting with economic instruments (grants and other tax concessions to encourage urban regeneration, for example) and that period of experimentation is not yet over. Our experience of imposing restrictive policies and regulations was not wholly successful: we found that while it was possible to prevent development occurring in one place by law, that did not necessarily mean that the development would divert to the location we preferred. Sometimes it just didn't happen at all.

6.3 Sophisticated management of market forces has never been enough, however. There are market failures to address: it is not affordable to provide sufficient subsidy from taxpayers to encourage the market to provide all the homes for the poor that we need, or to clean and re-use derelict urban land, or to provide the community facilities, schools health facilities and other non-commercial or non-profitable necessities of life.

6.4 To address these problems, the successful implementation of most strategic plans has required some form of development agency that can assemble land for strategic scale development at near to existing use value, prepare it for development, and recoup the increase in value for use on the next project.

## 7.0 PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

7.1 At the local level we need to complete, mend, repair, enliven, enrich and extend our clusters of walkable neighbourhoods.

7.2 We then need to improve, upgrade, and extend our public transport networks to provide the skeleton for further urban development. The government is committed to develop an integrated transport policy and intends to issue a White Paper on the subject in 1998. The consultation document issued in England by the DoETR in August 1997<sup>^</sup> invites us not only to achieve improvements in the train services on the routes that already exist, but also to consider the possibility of new railway lines; it invites innovation in the improvement and extension of bus, tram, and taxi services; it invites ideas for the increased use of inland waterways for freight, and the integration of airports and sea ports with the remainder of the transport network.

7.3 This puts new weight on the importance of the regional scale of planning. The objective must be to provide a long term look at the spatial structure of the region, to plan the transport infrastructure such that it is integral with the land use pattern, and to integrate economic development with land use planning so that we can at last re-connect homes with places of work.

Ends

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Current consultancy assignments include master planning the “new town in town” around the Ebbsfleet International and Domestic Passenger Station on the Channel Tunnel Rail Link in North West Kent; master planning transport-oriented new settlements in various country locations in the UK (such as Devon and Oxfordshire) and overseas; master planning “brownfield” urban regeneration projects in Sheffield, Liverpool and King’s Cross and Barking Reach in London; long range regional planning studies in various parts of the UK for commercial and public sector clients; and providing strategic planning and urban design advice on major developments such as Merry Hill in the West Midlands, White City in London, and Gunwharf in Portsmouth.

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<sup>^</sup> The World Commission on Environment and Development report Our Common Future, Oxford University Press, Oxford, England, 1987.

<sup>^</sup> Developing an Integrated Transport Policy: An invitation to contribute DoETR August 1997

Final Draft 26 November 1997: David Lock