

PUBLIC EXAMINATION INTO THE REGIONAL STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

OPENING STATEMENT BY THE DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

The Need for a Regional Approach to Development in Northern Ireland:

The origin of the Regional Strategic Framework for Northern Ireland flows from work begun in 1996 when the Department opened up a debate, at a sub-regional level, on the future development of the Belfast City Region. By early 1997, the Department concluded that a development strategy for the whole region was needed. The Northern Ireland Select Committee of Members of Parliament reached the same conclusion and in 1997 recommended that a Regional Development Strategy should be prepared.

When the present Government was elected in 1997, it stressed its commitment to regional approaches throughout the United Kingdom, with a strong emphasis on regional planning and an integrated approach to the development of the Regions. Accordingly, in June 1997, Lord Dubs, on behalf of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, launched the Shaping Our Future Process, towards a Strategy for the development of the Region.

By September 1997, the Minister for the Department of the Environment, Lord Dubs, concluded that it would be more appropriate to merge the work on the Belfast Sub-Region with the regional study, in favour of having one over-arching regional strategic framework for all of Northern Ireland. In November 1997 a Discussion Paper was published to stimulate public debate and to encourage the widest possible community input.

In the Belfast Agreement of 10 April 1998, the Government gave a commitment to make rapid progress with:

A new Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland, for consideration in due course by the Assembly, tackling the problems of a divided society and social cohesion in urban, rural and border areas, protecting and enhancing the environment, producing new approaches to transport issues, strengthening the physical infrastructure of the Region, developing the advantages and resources of rural areas, and rejuvenating major urban centres.

In keeping with that commitment, the Draft Regional Strategic Framework was published in December 1998, setting out a framework for developing the Region over the next 25 years.

Statutory Basis of the Draft Regional Strategic Framework:

The Draft Regional Strategic Framework has been prepared in accordance with the Department of the Environment's statutory function for securing the orderly and consistent development of land and the planning of that development under Article 3 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991.

The contents of the Final Regional Strategic Framework will be taken into account in the preparation of development plans by the Department, and will be material to the decisions in individual planning applications, including major applications considered under Article 31 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, and appeals.

Government Policy:

National policy statements by the Government provide an over-arching policy framework of guiding principles and objectives in relation to spatial development which apply throughout the United Kingdom, and which embody wider European and International obligations. Within this national context, different parts of the

United Kingdom are responsible for implementing national policy in ways which would reflect their particular circumstances.

In Northern Ireland, in fulfilment of their responsibility to implement national policy, the Department of the Environment has prepared the Regional Strategic Framework. It provides an over-arching locational framework for the preparation of development plans within the Region, and includes Strategic Planning Guidelines, which set a regional policy framework.

The Broad Approach:

In drawing up the Draft Regional Strategic Framework, it was recognised that Northern Ireland, in common with other Regions throughout Europe, is faced with **the key challenge of providing a high quality of life for all its citizens.**

The approach taken to preparing the Draft Regional Strategic Framework is:

Long-term – it offers a long-term perspective development of the Northern Ireland up to the year 2025.

Strategic – sets broad directions for the location of development at the regional level

Spatial – it is mainly concerned with the future distribution of development

Beyond Land Use – recognises that policies for physical development have an important bearing on other matters, and that social, environmental and community issues are relevant to achieving sustainable development and social cohesion in Northern Ireland.

Trans-Regional – this strategy does not stop at the edge of the Region but recognises the important spatial relationships and linkages with nearby regions in Scotland, England and the Republic of Ireland.

European – seeks to reflect the integrated approach of the European Spatial Development Perspective in relation to the 3 inter-related goals of:

Economic and Social Cohesion;
Sustainable Development; and
Balanced Competitiveness.

Fundamentally, the Draft Regional Strategic Framework has been prepared within the context that the Government is committed to achieving a strong spatially-balanced economy, a healthy environment and an inclusive society which tackles inequalities relating to health, education and living standards. The promotion of sustainable development is a key objective, along with social and economic cohesion, and the Government is committed to putting the environment at the heart of all its policies.

Achieving Consensus:

Long-term planning for the Region is a complex process. Reaching agreement on the most appropriate Regional Strategic Framework involves difficult choices and decisions affecting the whole community. The participation of regional stakeholders is recognised nationally as good practice in helping to produce a better and more representative strategy and in encouraging a shared responsibility for implementation. Community involvement has, therefore, been central to the process of developing the Framework.

While various social, economic and environmental trends have to be taken into account, such as the Driving Forces for Change set out in the draft document, a key aim has been to attempt to shape a new vision for Northern Ireland. Accordingly, one of the most extensive rounds of consultations ever undertaken by Government has been carried out

In the course of the consultation exercise, meetings were held with all District Councils, topical workshops were held around 100 groups, and the university-led community consortium held conferences involving around 400 community groups across the Region. Separate conferences/seminars were held on themes relating to the economy, rural issues and youth. In addition, many meetings were held with individual Departments, Agencies and a wide variety of groups as well as individuals. Extensive use was made of the media.

All key publications were distributed to each MEP, MP, District Councillor and latterly to Assembly Members.

The Government is very grateful to all who have contributed by responding throughout the consultation process. From this extensive public consultation process a number of important guiding principles emerged and are set out in full in Chapter 3 of the Draft Regional Strategic Framework. These Guiding Principles are:

- a people and community focused approach;
- a sustainable approach to development;
- achieving a more cohesive society in the Region;
- achieving competitiveness; and
- an integrated approach to regional development.

This set of Guiding Principles was taken into account in drawing up the proposed Strategic Planning Guidelines for the future development of the Region.

The Draft Regional Strategic Framework is not set out in the form of a fixed blueprint or master plan. Rather, it is a framework or broad planning strategy, set out in the form of Strategic Planning Guidelines which set long-term policy directions for the future development of the Region. It sets out an agenda for the

future development of Northern Ireland which will require the involvement of the whole community.

In relation to other Government strategy documents, it is not the role of the Draft Regional Strategic Framework to redefine the Strategies of other Departments for their specific areas of responsibility, which have been developed within their own statutory remit and through specific consultation exercises. Rather, the Draft Regional Strategic Framework seeks to provide an over-arching and co-ordinating spatial framework to facilitate and guide the public sector in respect of those elements of their strategies which have a spatial development perspective.

In order to ensure that a co-ordinated spatial framework was proposed, the Department had extensive and close consultation with all other Government Departments throughout the Regional Strategic Framework project to facilitate consultation and to discuss cross-cutting themes.

Public Examination:

This is the first Public Examination of this type to be held in Northern Ireland. The Department welcomes the participation of the various interest groups which will be represented throughout the Examination and views this exercise as a further opportunity to help build consensus on the way forward for the future development of the Region. The Public Examination affords the Department an important opportunity to hear and consider the latest thinking of a wide variety of interests across the Region on these important issues. The Department considers that the Public Examination and the assistance of the Independent Panel, will enable the Regional Strategic Framework to be further improved and strengthened in the best interests of the future development of the Region and the whole community.

Next Steps:

After completion of the Public Examination, the Independent Panel will submit a report to the Department. The procedural steps for consideration of the report in preparation of the final Regional Strategic Framework would, on devolution, be a matter for the Assembly, including publication of the Panel Report.

12 October 1999