

SHAPING OUR FUTURE

**TOWARDS THE STRATEGY
FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE REGION**

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'SHAPING OUR FUTURE' - TOWARDS THE STRATEGY FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE REGION

Introduction:

The purpose of my presentation is to outline the contents of the Discussion Paper we have prepared on the above subject to assist the Conference discussion and the wider debate which will follow. The Discussion Paper is a consultative document. It highlights a number of the key challenges confronting Northern Ireland. It begins to outline a possible shape for a planning framework for the future development of the Region. It is only an outline and it is not set in stone. Long term planning for the Region is a complex task. It is essential, therefore, that there is maximum participation in working up both the Draft Strategy and the final version.

In my presentation, I aim to deal with three main topics:

1. Taking Stock: Northern Ireland in a Changing World
2. The approach to building the Strategy
3. Outline a Possible Shape for the Regional Strategy

1. TAKING STOCK:

What has actually been happening in Northern Ireland over the last 25 years? I will try and briefly describe some of the main changes in the Region with a few key facts and some statistical trends.

Population:

The population of Northern Ireland continues to grow and has for the first time surpassed the 1841 pre-famine high. It is the third fastest growing UK Region, achieving 8% growth since 1981.

Northern Ireland has an in-built growth dynamic with one of the highest live birth rates in Europe at 14.5 births per 1,000, one of the lower death rates, resulting in a higher natural population increase than any EU country. It has a high proportion of children, with 24% in the 0-14 years age group. Over the next 25 years these children will make up the teens to 40s age group, our new young adults - a major human resource for the future. Over the same period, significant growth in the over 65 age group is expected.

Modest in migration has replaced the high level of out migration which occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. All of this points to a growing population which will place a variety of demands on regional services.

Distribution of Population:

Broadly, the population of Northern Ireland lives in three main types of area, each containing about ½m population. They either live in the Greater Belfast Conurbation stretching from Belfast to take in Bangor, Carrickfergus and Lisburn - our largest urban complex with 570,000 residents. Secondly, they live in the main towns of the Region or, thirdly, in the rural area consisting of a dispersed pattern of villages, townland groupings and houses in the countryside. It is about $\frac{2}{3}$ urban/ $\frac{1}{3}$ rural.

Changes in the pattern of distribution of population have not been even over the past 25 years.

In the Belfast area the main trend has been the loss of population from the City of Belfast in the 1970s and 1980s with strong outflows to the towns of Carrickfergus, Bangor, Newtownards and Lisburn.

These trends have tapered off in the 1990s and the population of Belfast is now increasing after a long period of decline.

The main towns of the Region have experienced steady growth over the past 25 years and the City of Londonderry has grown strongly in the 1990s. Some smaller towns near the larger urban centres have grown rapidly as residential dormitory centres.

In the rural area the long term decline of rural communities up to 1971 has been replaced by steady population growth. Numerically the largest growth of all in the past 25 years has taken place in the rural area. It has experienced a growth of population larger than that which took place in the City of Londonderry, the main towns and the smaller towns all put together.

Housing:

Turning to housing, there has been a substantial success story with 230,000 new dwellings built in the past 25 years, with the result that the unfit levels have fallen to 9% of total stock. There has been an upsurge in private housebuilding, with the result that owner-occupancy has increased to make up 70% of the total stock. The demand for new houses is being largely driven by a growing number of households. For example, the number of small households of one or two persons has doubled since 1971 increasing to over 300,000, out of a total of about 570,000 households.

The Economy:

In terms of employment, the total number of people in jobs has increased by 13% since 1971, ie above population growth rate. Female employment has increased by 30%. With GDP rising recently at between 2.5% and 3.0% each year unemployment fell to 8% in 1997, the lowest for 20 years. However, long term unemployed counted for just over half of the total unemployed.

Two key trends are the decline in the number of manufacturing jobs and the growth of the services sector which now provides seven out of ten jobs. Compared to other regions in the UK, there is a higher dependence on the public sector for jobs.

Environment:

What is the quality of our air and water?

During the past ten years there has been an improvement in air condition in terms of decreasing concentrations of smoke and sulphur dioxide. 45% of our rivers are defined as having good or very good chemical water qualities while 43% are fair or fairly good.

In terms of conservation, substantial progress has been made over the past 25 years. Many new designations have been introduced to protect the environmental assets of the Region. 20% of the Region and 70% of the coastline is designated, rightly, as an area of outstanding natural beauty reflecting our success in preventing the urban spoilation seen elsewhere.

Transport:

The major feature in the past 25 years has been the growth in car ownership and car usage. There are about 500,000 cars in the Region. The numbers have almost doubled in the past 25 years with approximately 10,000 cars and light vans being added per year. 70% of households have a car.

On the other hand, nearly one-third of households do not own a vehicle and are largely dependent on public transport. With the growth in car usage, the number of journeys by public transport has almost halved in the past 25 years.

These are just some of the facts and figures which can help to give us a feel for how the Region has been changing as we look to the future.

Driving Forces for Change:

In taking stock, we also need to read the signals of change in the world around us while we have achieved much as a region and have a big resource in our human capital - our people, Northern Ireland lives in a competitive world. We are competing with other European Regions. It is important to understand the wider national and international driving forces which are changing this world. They will influence change here. These changes include:

Technology: Advances in information and telecommunications technologies are transforming the developed world from an industrial to a knowledge economy. It has been well said that electronically the world is now half a second wide. Economic activity is becoming more mobile and many businesses are increasingly footloose. Northern Ireland has the opportunity to plug into this global network of opportunity.

Economic Competitiveness:

There is increasing competition between regions and investment migrates easily across borders. Competitors can enter the local arena and shake the local economy.

Social Trends:

Changes within society are producing more and smaller households with a growing requirement for new dwellings. Technological and social change are producing dispersal forces, based on high levels of car ownership, which are generating increasing pressure on the environment at a time when there is a growing public demand for the protection of the same environment. Long distance commuting is a sign of the times.

Strategic Regional Challenges:

What are the Strategic Regional Challenges? When we take the Regional Trends and the Driving Forces for Change together, we begin to see a number of Strategic Challenges facing Northern Ireland. I will quickly list some of the critical challenges by posing a few questions:

◆Divided Society

-How can regional development decisions respect the sensitivities of the divided and polarised nature of the community? Such decisions certainly should not make the situation any worse and ideally should contribute to the healing of community divisions.

◆Equality of Opportunity

-How can we improve accessibility for all the people in the Region to the full range of services, and employment opportunities?

◆Housing Demand

-Where should the increasing number of households be located and in what form?

◆ **Economic Growth**

- What will be the nature of the Region's economic growth over the next 25 years and what is the infrastructure required to support economic growth?

◆ **Transportation**

- How can we achieve optimal co-ordination between transportation and the whole range of land uses? Should major new nodes for development be adjacent to public transport routes?

◆ **Environment**

- How best can we reconcile economic growth with management and conservation of our **excellent** environment assets?

◆ **Settlement pattern**

- Where should the next wave of new development be located?

◆ **The rural community**

- What models of sustainable rural development should feature in the Regional Strategic Framework?

2. **BUILDING THE STRATEGY:**

One of the first steps is to develop an agreed vision for the development of the Region. In response to a changing world and the current regional challenges, we need to establish the community's view on three key questions:

- What do we want our Region to be like in the year 2025?

- What are the accompanying regional goals which should give expression to the vision?
- How can this vision and these goals be turned into a long term spatial development strategy for Northern Ireland?

Vision and Regional Goals:

To assist the debate the Department is presenting for discussion an outline of how the vision and its regional goals might look. The overall vision which we suggest is 'A Better Quality of Life' now and for future generations. We can achieve this by a sustainable approach to growth and development based on valuing people, building prosperity, caring for the environment and improving communications.

By the end of the consultation exercise and public debate, the regional vision might look something like this:

The regional vision is important because it will provide the basis for setting long-term goals. A goal-led approach is important because it focuses attention on what it is that society wants to achieve in the future rather than being solely driven by present day problems or current trends.

We have set out in the Discussion Paper detailed sets of interdependent goals under the four main headings. By way of illustration here are samples of the sort of regional goals we might adopt.

**3. OUTLINING A POSSIBLE SHAPE FOR THE REGIONAL STRATEGY:
Future Growth in Northern Ireland:**

With our vision and possible regional goals in mind, what can we expect looking to the future? Extensive changes in development are inevitable over the next 25 years. Substantial regional growth can be expected to take place. This will flow from a rise in population reaching 1.75m persons by 2025 and from the growth generated by an expanding economy.

The underlying purpose of the Regional Strategic Framework is to set a direction which will reconcile the need for growth and change with a desire for a more prosperous, equitable and sustainable region. Future change must be planned and managed.

Spatially, in terms of physical development, the pattern of growth over the next 25 years must be directed to:

- * accommodate up to 200,000 new households (another Belfast!);
- * to facilitate job creation to meet the needs of a growing population;
- * strengthen the main transport network; and

- * accommodate supporting infrastructure and community services.

Difficult Choices:

In spatial terms, the growth of most urban areas is housing led reflecting the reality of population and household growth, making residential development the dominant land use in towns. However, one of the main problems flowing from high car ownership, has been the greater disaggregation of housing and economic activities. Many more people opt to live in one area and commute over growing distances to work in another locality.

If we are to be fair to the next generation, we will have to make some hard choices about future development:

Where?

How Much?

What Type?

Speed of Growth?

Some towns are concerned to have enough development. Others may worry about their town or area being swamped beyond recognition by too much development.

It is important that every town continues to receive some housing development and generates new employment opportunities in order to renew itself and maintain its vitality and vibrancy as a local centre. Some of our towns are free standing with relatively self-contained catchments and their level of future growth will reflect well established trends and the internal dynamics of the town. By contrast in more urbanised areas such as the Belfast/Londonderry City Regions where there is widespread commuting and a significant mobile housing

market, difficult choices will have to be made about the capacity and suitability of centres for accommodating urban development.

Similarly, in relation to the rural areas, difficult choices will also have to be made. Some small rural towns and villages have grown rapidly and their original identity and character could be lost under large scale development. Equally important, is the need to maintain a strong and vibrant rural community and at the same time to achieve a sustainable pattern of rural development not building up long term problems in relation to loss of good agricultural land, farm fragmentation, pollution or rural traffic.

Regional Strategic Guidelines:

How can we make these difficult choices in a way which will best serve succeeding generations? We are suggesting Regional Strategic Guidelines which will provide a framework for making difficult choices about the location, scale and type of future development. They would help us to test the capacity and suitability of towns and villages to absorb development

In making choices about allocating development to specific locations, we would ask various questions like - does this make the best use of existing community assets and infrastructure? does it reduce the consumption of natural resources? has the location the environmental capacity to absorb the development?

A **fundamental test** we are suggesting is the **transport test**. Can we integrate transport and other land uses so that people can make use of forms of transport other than private cars? These are some of the tests suggested to help us make decisions about which centres and locations should take larger or smaller amounts of development.

Once the difficult locational choices have been made at the regional level, it is important that the urban development which results carries the sustainable approach through to the local level. In order to build sustainable and equitable local communities we are suggesting that urban development should in future conform with a set of Sustainable Urban Development Principles.

The first three principles will be particularly important to the development industry. The proximity principle places a strong emphasis on mixed use developments bringing people, jobs and other facilities together. The accessibility principle emphasises the importance of developing a multi modal system of urban transport which would enhance accessibility for the whole community. The vitality principle places a strong emphasis on renewing the urban fabric of towns by a greater re-use of urban sites than has taken place in the past. This will require a detailed examination of the urban capacity of towns.

Generating a Sustainable Regional Dynamic:

With these principles or 'ground rules' in mind, what sort of physical framework should we build in the Region for the next 25 years? We must build a physical framework which generates a sustainable growth dynamic to support a population growing in numbers and expectations. We do not propose to generate a whole series of 'grand design' options which would only prove to be theoretical. We must generate realistic options which accept and build on the reality of the inherited development pattern - what is here today. Most of it will still be on the ground in 25 years.

We believe the most practical approach to take is to look at how the existing structure of the Region works and to play to its strengths but in a sustainable way

which cherishes our rich inheritance. What we have already is a complex Regional Development Network with many interdependent parts contributing to the wealth of the whole Region.

Regional Development Network:

Functionally, it is a network of:

- Gateways** - Ports, airports and land entry points.
- Hubs** - Urban centres of employment and community services.
- Corridors** - The main roads, rail and telecommunications arteries.
- The Rural Resource** - Comprising the rural resource of the countryside and its services.

Each of these components has its own development impetus and range of development opportunities.

The Department is suggesting that the network of gateways, hubs and corridors could form a realistic spatial framework and that new development could be focused at key locations on the network with imaginative developments making best use of an enhanced transportation system. The sustainable guidelines I have outlined could help us to select the key locations and determine the scale and type of development to be located there.

This approach has the potential to enable us **to grasp regional development opportunities** which could generate additional wealth and employment and contribute to dealing with social need. The business sector has many factors to take into account in locating new development. It is our experience that those locational choices are usually made with great care taking into account

operational factors, accessibility to markets, skilled labour forces, supporting services and so on. We believe the business community is already alert to the different potentials of gateways, hubs and corridors and rural environments.

It is an approach which is in tune with emerging European thinking, for example in the European Spatial Development Perspective - a broad development strategy for the member states of the European Union. This recognises the potential of transportation corridors and gateways, the value of transnational and transregional initiatives not just in trading and tourism but in spatial development planning - both urban and rural - spanning borders, river basins and even seas. It acknowledges the need for co-operative relationships between urban areas reflecting their different roles, strengths and niche markets - and the need for urban/rural partnerships.

We consider, therefore, that the regional network has a fundamental role to play in achieving the goals relating to social progress, economic development and sustainable development. **The network of transport corridors provides the skeletal framework** for the whole urban system, connecting all the hubs together. It has a cohesive role contributing to social and economic wellbeing.

At this early stage in the process **the Department takes the view**, on the basis of its research and the public comments expressed to date, **that the transportation network is a basic building block for the regional development strategy**. The efficiency and effectiveness of the main transport corridors will need to be improved in the interest of the regional economy and to provide a high level of accessibility to combat social exclusion. The type of transport system which should be developed by 2025 will be a matter of further debate and study. You will find the Discussion Paper outlines some early thinking.

If we adopt the network of transport corridors as the skeletal framework for the region, it follows that the towns in the main corridors would be well placed to take larger portions of future development subject to testing their capacities in detail.

Future Growth on the Regional Hubs:

We have also begun to look at the scale of urban growth appropriate for each town. This has been the subject of a preliminary assessment taking into account the Regional Strategic Guidelines.

The Regional Strategy can provide a planned framework of opportunities and indicate a target population range for towns. It cannot, however, dictate the precise scale of growth of individual towns in terms of future population and employment levels.

Ultimately the growth of a town will depend on the complex interactions between opportunities, constraints and the local response in terms of political drive, entrepreneurial activity and community initiative. Local initiative to win

business investment can enhance the position of a town beyond its natural endowments.

In assessing future urban growth, you will appreciate we have done more work on the Belfast City Region where study began last year. This will now be settled in the context of the Regional Strategy next year.

In relation to the single largest urban area we have, however, begun to paint a picture of what a strong Greater Belfast Conurbation should look like by 2025.

A strong conurbation will display:

- * an international city image;
- * a prosperous city centre helping to diversify and consolidate the economic structure through continued encouragement to national and international service expansion;
- * thriving town centres providing complementary economic and commercial growth;
- * clusters of industrial/commercial enterprise and innovation;
- * revitalised inner areas successfully tackling social disadvantage and long term unemployment;
- * a network of urban communities each providing a sense of place and a focus for local services;
- * an efficient transportation system providing access to regional corridors and international connections; and
- * a good quality urban environment.

In relation to both the Greater Belfast Conurbation and the Belfast City Region, you will find 30 or more clear pointers in the Discussion Paper on the way ahead.

Similarly, although much more has to be done in relation to other urban centres and the rural area, we have outlined a range of important issues to set an agenda for further discussion. In the Discussion paper you will find a major section dealing with problems of rural communities and the need for ongoing rural regeneration and diversification.

So far as the towns are concerned, on the basis of the preliminary study to date, the **urban growth** potential of the regional hubs has been assessed on the basis of the following categories:

- * High
- * Medium
- * Low

summarised as a Preliminary Scenario on this map. This assessment reflects a first study of growth rates, environmental capacity and an application of the guidelines previously referred to. We invite comment on this initial assessment. We need to build a consensus about the future development of Northern Ireland.

I trust this outline will begin to open up the content of the Discussion Paper for debate. It only remains for me to indicate the overall timetable:

Next Steps:

Consultation to March 1998

Draft Strategy - June 1998

Examination in Public - October 1998

Final Strategy - December 1998

As I said previously, long term planning at a regional scale is a complex task. We welcome and look forward to your positive participation in drawing up the Regional Development Strategy.