

**EXTERNAL WORKING GROUP
MAJOR REVIEW OF THE REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY
WEDNESDAY 4 JUNE 2008 AT 10.00 AM**

RADISSON HOTEL, BELFAST

Present:

Min Conor Murphy MP, MLA	-	DRD
Stephen McGlade	-	Special Advisor
Teresa Canavan	-	Rural Development Council
Sue Christie	-	Environment Link
Jim Kitchen	-	Sustainable Development Commission
Nigel Smyth	-	CBI
John Dempsey	-	Rep North East Group of Councils
Stephen Huggett	-	Rural Community Network
Nigel Lucan	-	Construction and Employers Federation
William Poole	-	IBEC-CBI Joint Business Council
Claire Murray	-	Community Places
Diane Ruddock	-	National Trust
Marie-Theresa McGivern	-	Rep BMA Group of Councils
Eamon Molloy	-	NWRCBG
Tim Cunningham	-	Equality Coalition
John McGrillen	-	Rep South East Group of Councils
Prof Alastair Adair	-	University of Ulster, Jordanstown
Aidan Gough	-	Inter Trade Ireland
Seamus McAleavey	-	NICVA
Danny McSorley	-	Rep Rural West Group of Councils
Patricia McKeown	-	ICTU
John Driscoll	-	International Centre for Local & Reg Dev
Peter Bunting	-	NI Council of Irish Trade Unions
Councill Frankie Donnelly	-	ICBAN
Frank Gaffikin	-	Queen's University
Jake MacSaicais	-	Forbairt Feirste
Mike Thompson	-	Director, Reg Planning & Tran Div, DRD
Jim Hetherington	-	Reg Planning & Tran Div, DRD
Mike Warnock	-	Reg Planning & Tran Div, DRD
Michael McSorley	-	Reg Planning & Tran Div, DRD
Pauline McParland	-	Secretariat, Reg Planning & Trans Div, DRD

Apologies:

Colm Bradley	-	Community Places
Pamela Arthurs	-	East Border Region
John Cleland	-	Royal Town Planning Institute
Mick McGuckin	-	Rep North West Group of Councils
Michael McCullough	-	Ulster Scots Agency

1. Introduction and Apologies

Minister Conor Murphy welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made. Apologies were recorded as detailed above.

2. Welcome by Minister

Minister Conor Murphy explained that while Mike Thompson will chair meetings of the External Working Group he wished to attend the first meeting and to thank everyone personally for agreeing to participate in the Group.

The Minister emphasised the importance of the major review and how he and his Department are committed to producing a revised RDS which will take forward the spatial aspects of the Programme for Government and its key objective to promote economic development. He wishes it to reflect key strategies such as the Sustainable Development Strategy and the Regional Economic Strategy and to set the framework for the next generation of plans. It will also provide strategic guidance of relevance for the next Investment Strategy.

As it is an overarching strategic document its importance was recognised by all Ministers at an Executive meeting in April. The Executive also endorsed the setting up of an Executive Sub Group to assist in taking this work forward.

During the period of direct rule, a 5-year review of the Strategy had been undertaken which resulted in minor adjustments being made to the Strategy. These adjustments will be published in late June. However, it was obvious a more fundamental review was required. Some aspects of the original RDS are no longer relevant and it will be important to put the stamp of the Executive on what needs to happen over the next 20 years. One of the weaknesses was that it did not get buy-in. The RDS is not a DRD document as it deals with a range of issues which impact on all Departments. Implementation of the Strategy will therefore be important. The revised Strategy should have teeth and be able to impact on other Departments. It will also impact upon development both here and in the South.

3. Presentation by Mike Thompson on Issues for Major Review of the RDS

Mike Thompson presented an overview of what had and had not worked in the Strategy. He highlighted the changes that had taken place since the Strategy was first produced and trends in relation to demographics, housing, economy, employment, the environment, and transport. He identified issues that now needed to be taken account of, such as growing and changing population, regional balance, urban regeneration, education, health, RPA and better alignment of government programmes. He emphasised the importance of external linkages between the north and south of Ireland and between east and west.

4. Discussion by Group

The Minister opened the floor for discussion.

William Poole stated the All Ireland linkages are well known and bought into by the business community. He queried whether there is a better way to liaise with colleagues in the South of Ireland and Scotland.

Conor Murphy responded that there had been high level discussions with senior officials from Departments in the South of Ireland and Scotland and an undertaking given to work together. There is now a recognition that the north has to develop and there needs to be co-operation not least because of the huge investment in infrastructure.

John Driscoll endorsed the importance of looking at the future. He highlighted that the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) is linked to the Investment Strategy and that the National Development Plan and the NSS are on the same investment cycles. In order for the RDS to make an impact it has to be linked to investment. The timing of the major review is excellent but a lot more needs to be done on an All Ireland basis.

Aidan Gough stated that implementation was the main problem. This is not surprising considering it is such a large document and the vision is too wordy. It was right to look at the regional balance but it was also necessary to look at the All Island balance. He pointed out the deprivation index showed blue across the west of the north. There is now a window of opportunity that is timebound therefore a revised strategy needs to be in place quickly.

Danny McSorley welcomed the major review and commented that there was a huge amount of deprivation in rural areas. The biggest failure of the RDS is that it has been ignored by Departments therefore the revised Strategy must have relevance to them. The timing of the review was politically and economically right. The scoping carried out to day by the Department of the key issues that had been highlighted in the presentation was excellent.

Jim Kitchen pointed out that climate change had been recognised in the RDS. Predictions are that in 50-70 years there will be increased rainfall in west and decreased rainfall in the east yet more people will be living in the east. This has implications for infrastructure. The Sustainable Development Strategy is to be revised and this is very timely as there is strong synergy between the RDS and SDS.

Minister Conor Murphy had to leave the meeting at this point due to another engagement (11.00 am)

Patricia McKeown agreed that the review was timely and she welcomed the recognition being given to equality issues. There needed to be joined up economic strategies between the north and south.

Tim Cunningham said he was pleased to see the multiple index tables as the Equality Coalition are interested in regional inequalities. He highlighted the east west regional imbalance yet there are economic pockets of deprivation in the centre of Belfast. He will be interested in seeing how the EQIA will be taken forward.

John McGrillen was of the opinion that when looking at the economy different sectors needed to be considered and also where inward investors wanted to invest. Some hubs seem to be working, while others are not, eg Armagh. Investment can influence where people will live and employment should be used as an economic development tool. When comparing Belfast with Edinburgh or London the suggestion is that there is an over-emphasis of public sector jobs in Belfast. The relocation of public sector jobs could assist regional imbalance.

Mike Thompson informed the Group that the Department has appointed consultants to look at all of the Settlements and the results of this should be available at the end of the summer.

John McGrillen indicated that some Councils had already undertaken this type of exercise and they would be happy to assist with this if necessary.

Professor Alastair Adair said it was important to focus on a high level strategy and to look at the future as well as looking at past trends. Best practice in other areas can assist along with learning from some of the mistakes made in the south of Ireland eg infrastructure. There must be a clear understanding of the market as the market is the people and they respond to what people want. Housing indicates the dynamics of the market and as house prices rise in one area people go to other areas. People now want a better quality of life. It is important to focus on people and the market.

Mike Thompson agreed. He added that with the speed of change it was important to develop a Strategy that has flexibility and capacity to be able to respond to changes as they happen.

Sue Christie said it was important to consider the global impact eg the price of oil and its consequence. While climate change is important and must be considered economic drivers also need to be looked at which can also address equality issues.

Peter Bunting was concerned at the impact that other departments and agencies would have on the RDS eg the selling off of the Stormont Estate, the Bain Review etc. He was of the opinion that a coherent development Strategy was required and the review needed to be shortened.

Mike Thompson shared these concerns as decisions are being taken by Departments on a daily basis. The objective is to get the RDS aligned with the next Investment Strategy and the Comprehensive Spending Review. It is important not to have a Strategy that is out of date the day it is published.

John Dempsey said the RDS is seen very much as a command model, which has not worked. The housing growth indicator figures have been a problem along with the non delivery of area plans. The RDS needs to move from being a Command Driven Strategy to an Enabling Model. It is difficult to see how people can be directed to live in certain areas. Car ownership will soon become a love/hate relationship as costs increase but there is no alternative to the car for some people. There is a need for an Economic Corridor Study. While a good road and rail network is important another important area is education. Economic growth cannot be looked at without looking at education as illiteracy has to be tackled.

Diane Ruddock agreed with the comments already made. She said it was important to have an Enabling Model rather than a Command Model and that the protection of the countryside was important.

Marie Theresa McGivern generally welcomed the review and hoped it would not be dragged out as long as BMAP. She highlighted a number of key issues. In terms of population, trends will change and Belfast is no longer in decline. This is largely attributable to migration and this follows the patterns of other cities such as Liverpool. In terms of GVA, Belfast is the biggest driver that, and that should not change. The north continues to have woeful infrastructure yet the south has a motorway from Dublin to the border – we are only tinkering with roads. Public transport provision is also inadequate. The current proposals for public transport is too little compared to elsewhere and to try to retrofit in future will be more expensive. People still need their cars therefore there should be more park and ride facilities.

Nigel Smyth commented that the targets in the Programme for Government were challenging. It was important to implement them well and quickly and to build on the strengths and address weaknesses. There are now key changes happening that had not been anticipated, eg the economy and the importance of this on housing, the environment and climate change, and transport.

Stephen Hugget was of the opinion that the rural area was going to have to be given more focus in the revised Strategy. Fermanagh District Council is now taking about park and ride for Enniskillen. He questioned how long Enniskillen is going to be allowed to sprawl. The Minister promotes rural transport issues yet public transport is a very big problem. Deprivation is of a different nature in rural areas and a vast waste of value where educational deprivation is so marked.

Seamus McAleavey said that the original RDS was to have sat above a number of other Strategies yet this did not happen because of conflict between Departments. Having a car in rural areas is not a sign of affluence but an essential. Public transport has not been properly addressed.

Frankie Donnelly also queried whether the revised Strategy would be an Enabling Strategy or a Command Strategy and whether the market is ahead of us. The rural west should be looked at in terms of where growth has not been delivered, this is particularly relevant to border areas.

Jake MacSaicais agreed with the points already made. It was important to look at influencing the economy and also society, especially inner city deprivation and the divide between rural and urban.

Peter Bunting explained that he had been involved in the South of Ireland since 1972. There is no such thing as a competitive transport system. It is important to realise public transport systems cost a huge amount of money and does not work without a high density population. Railways are wonderful but cost a lot more money than bus transport. Dublin bus lanes operate 24 hours per day and are well publicised. Rural transport does not have sufficient quantities of passengers and this inhibits education, social integration etc. Here yellow school buses are left unused for most of the day and these could be better utilised during the day when not being used by schools.

Teresa Canavan said that rural areas are changing rapidly and more life style changes are being made. People have to commute but cannot afford to and low quality jobs are mainly in rural areas.

Frank Gaffikin said that he had been involved in the original RDS and an incredible amount of work and effort had gone into it. There had been an extensive amount of consultation and it was seen across Europe as a seminal document. He was worried that the Department was going to 'throw the baby out with the bathwater'. Northern Ireland used to be a place that launched ships now it is a place that launches strategies. There is a temptation to dilute the Strategy and the problems on implementation are going to remain. Effort was made to buy in commitment by other Departments but egos came into play particularly with the wording 'have regard to' and 'to be consistent with' in the legislation. He still questioned the commitment to an integrated approach. If there is no commitment then it will go nowhere. The south of Ireland has the same problems. The market will play an important part but if it is left for the market to decide there will be more deprivation. He questioned whether the strategy had done what it was suppose to do.

Mike Thompson thanked everyone for their contribution. He said it was important to get cross cutting support not only in central government but also in local government along with the private sector.

5. Process Arrangements

Mike Thompson explained that Minister Conor Murphy would be making a statement to the Assembly the following week. He would also be chairing an Executive Sub Group of Ministers before the summer recess. Two consultancy exercises are also being taken forward, a Key Settlement Study and a Business Land Need Study. These exercises will be completed by the end of the summer. A draft revised strategy will be ready by April of next year and will then be out for public consultation, with the intention of having a final document in 2009/2010.

The Department wishes to have active engagement with key stakeholders in the lead-up to the draft document. After the consultation period the Department will be keen to re-engage.

Discussion centred on how the Group should be structured to make it work more effectively. As the size of the Group is large the value of having smaller groups to look at specific areas was discussed. One suggestion was that small groups should look at specific topic areas with the large group coming together for full discussion. It was also suggested that an earlier start and later end time for meetings would help for fuller discussion. It was also suggested that the next meeting of the Group should be outside of Belfast,

The Chair agreed to consider the arrangements for the next meeting/meetings and to inform members of the Group the arrangements.

PAULINE McPARLAND
Secretariat

21 October 2008