

Green Party Urban Development Policy



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1. Policy

1.1. Introduction

The pace and high level of development in the country during the property boom caused 'pressure points' to emerge that have serious implications for the future sustainability of urban areas. Urban sprawl, time poor communities, rising environmental emissions, critically overloaded infrastructure, community alienation and social fragmentation are all daily manifestations of policy failure in the management of Irish urban development. Unfortunately, the property bubble and the austerity measures required by the troika have meant that the problems of the boom still persist today, and in many cases austerity has exacerbated these problems.

The current urban planning framework is disjointed. It fails to make the connections between land use and transportation planning, and the real living and social needs of people in the design of new residential areas. It fails to tackle the issue of recouping the costs of service infrastructure from those who profit from development. Moreover, the sheer complexity of Irish Planning legislation has been well documented. This legislative complexity caused by the large number of Acts and Statutory Instruments prevents citizens from understanding the planning system. This legal morass is hindering access to justice and the opportunity to participate in planning and environmental decision-making that affects them.

Planning in Ireland is grounded in policy rhetoric on 'Sustainable Development' that says that development should marry economic, social and environmental goals without diminishing resources. Yet the Government continues to set the agenda for a property-led approach to planning that ignores the social, economic and environmental consequences of rising private transport dependence and energy consumption. Indeed, in many cases the Fine Gael-Labour Government has undone the steps taken by the Green Party in Government to shift away from this property-led approach. The model does not provide for the educational or social needs of new communities. Critically, because of the spread of urbanisation, quality of life and connectedness within communities has declined and a new time poor society has emerged.

1.2. Urban Policy Failure

Historically, urban development in Ireland has taken place largely in the absence of a coherent and linked policy framework. Urban policy per se has been formed by a series of piecemeal actions.

(a) A successive programme of area and site-based tax incentives has led to the formation of pockets of redevelopment within towns and cities, many of which are too large by comparison with the scale of existing areas. They have only provided for the short-term needs of residents. Many areas have not had the corresponding increases in local community, leisure and educational facilities. There has been little integration between old and new communities and, as a result, long-term community formation has not occurred in these areas. (Urban Tax Renewal Acts (beginning 1986))

(b) Higher density housing, apartment development and infill housing are now prominent features of Irish town and city planning. This is in line with the principle of Sustainable Development to make efficient use of land. However, the quality of the housing stock produced is questionable. Many new urban zones contain schemes where individual units are too small to provide for the needs of people who wish to raise families. Many contain fashionable hard landscaped open space areas that are not designed to cater for the needs for social, play or community interaction. (Residential Density Guidelines 1999)

(c) The planning system, initiated by the Planning and Development Act, has placed limits on public participation that did not exist under previous legislation. New strict administrative, timing and cost requirements for planning submissions have made it difficult for people to freely take an active role in planning cases of concern, either locally or nationally. This has resulted in real distrust in the planning system. (Local Government (Planning and Development) Act 2000)).

(d) Regional Planning Authorities responsible for the NSS delivery failed to call in planning authorities who exceed commercial zoning requirements and give planning approval for large-scale developments in towns outside the 'designated growth centres' laid down in the NSS. The NSS was not being reinforced at county level so that the goal of achieving Balanced Regional Development (BRD) was not being achieved. The impact of having a succession of piecemeal measures without an overarching framework has led to a property-led approach to planning in Ireland. The current Government announced the scrapping of the National Spatial Strategy in

February 2013. However, despite this decision, Government has yet to replace the NSS with a new Strategy for Development in Ireland. (National Spatial Strategy (2002) and Regional Planning Guidelines (from 1999))

There is evidence that the quality of life in Ireland has declined as a consequence and a series of 'pressure points' have emerged that have serious implications for the future:

1.3. Urban Sprawl

The increased spread of towns and cities with new residential and commercial areas located at edge of towns and cities - and the knock-on impact on travel patterns, seepage of commercial activity from older areas and community integration.

1.4. Time Poor Communities

The increased travel to work time associated with distant commuting – and the knock-on effects in relation to quality of life as a result of reduced 'downtime' (e.g. less time for community or family involvement and voluntarism and correlated health impacts such as rising heart disease and obesity).

1.5. Rising Emissions

Lack of adequate and efficient public transport - leading to over-reliance on private car transport, longer travel to work times, and increased energy use and CO2 emissions.

1.6. Infrastructure Deficiencies

Over-expansion of urban areas in the absence of a parallel increase and delivery of municipal, transport and social services - resulting in infrastructure service capacity constraints in older areas, and problems of service provision and access in newly developed areas.

1.7. Community Distrust in Planning

Growing concern amongst residents' groups in relation to newer planning approaches to maximise land efficiency and use of higher density, infill and high building policies, resulting in increased

levels of community distrust and frustration in the planning system. This distrust is compounded by the complexity of planning law, which impedes access to justice for citizens.

1.8. Social Fragmentation

Changing social fabric of towns and city centre areas, with the emergence of new dormitory residential clusters, socially isolated high-density developments and a high level of transient private rental dwellings, resulting in a loss of community and potential for social fragmentation.

The Green Party have been at the forefront of raising concern about how planning works in Ireland and how it impacts on the quality of life of all Irish residents. The current government is remote from the daily problems of residents and communities. It has consistently failed to tackle these problems head-on, although numerous advisors and economic experts have stated that if these areas are not addressed quickly, Ireland will decline both economically and socially and will face an energy supply crisis in the very near future.

In fact, recent government policy has focused on watering down existing standards in planning to facilitate speedy development rather than pursuing the sustainable approach suggest here. The Green Party believes that a major review of the planning system is required if the mistakes of the previous property bubble are to be avoided.

1.9. Green Party Proposals

In Government, the Green Party proposes to fundamentally change this model. We will establish a new sustainable urban planning framework that makes clear connections between:

- Land-use planning and transportation
- People and planning
- Development and service provision
- Development and the environment

We propose to give local authorities the power to raise revenue from developers that benefit from increased property values in areas benefiting from public sector investment.

At institutional level, we propose to establish two new bodies, one to coordinate land-use and transportation planning and another to facilitate better public participation in planning.

A new unit will also be established within the Department of Education and Science to ensure the timely delivery of educational facilities in new areas. Also, current schemes to encourage energy efficient retrofitting of existing buildings need to be revised and revitalised with new grants.

The Green Party will deliver the policy by:

1.9.1. Replace the National Spatial Strategy with a new Strategy for long-term planning sustainable development for the next twenty years.

The current Government scrapped the National Spatial Strategy in February 2013, citing a failure of implementation. However, no replacement for the NSS has yet been put in place. The Green Party would address this issue by commencing an extensive consultation process to produce a replacement for the NSS to provide a proper framework for development for the next twenty years. The new NSS would place an emphasis on facilitating the necessary transition to a low-carbon economy.

1.9.2. Mobility Management Plans (MMPs)

Introducing a Sustainable Transport Programme that will ensure that the bias of public spending will shift from private to public transport. Under the programme, local authorities will have more funding for transport investment in growth areas and will deliver local sustainable transport plans with corridors for cycle and walkways along existing rail, roads and waterfronts. Businesses will be obliged to take responsibility for their own transport problems with Mobility Management Plans (MMPs) becoming a key requirement for planning approval in all urban areas.

1.9.3. Linking Transport and Planning

Establishing a National Transport and Planning Agency to coordinate transport and land-use planning, and ensuring that local planning approvals are not given to badly located traffic generating developments.

1.9.4. Listen to people's needs

Putting people at the heart of planning in the design of residential areas and in the promotion of more public participation in the planning system. The Green Party will ensure that the focus of urban residential planning is to create long-term sustainable communities.

1.9.5. Urban Design Guidelines

Producing new Residential Guidelines based on good Urban Design principles to ensure that areas are designed to cater for the lifetime needs of people. Local authorities will set down new standards so that developers will produce a greater number of styles within schemes. All areas will have units for single people, young couples, growing families, single families and older people.

1.9.6. Green space and playgrounds

Revising the Open Space Standards so that all green spaces provide both social and ecological benefits. Green Spaces will be designed to promote active use as meeting places, spaces for community events and designed with needs of children's play and observation in mind. Urban micro-forests must be planted, landscaping plans must enhance biodiversity and space must be provided for allotments within new residential schemes. The new planning code will require mandatory *green infrastructure* planning to be integrated into traditional planning and implemented in all urban and rural development.

1.9.7. Create a Sustainable and Affordable Housing Sector

The Green Party will ensure the creation of a sustainable and affordable housing sector via private, social and rented housing, through the implementation of the measures set out in our Housing and Homelessness Policy.

1.9.8. Increase public awareness

Establishing a new National Planning Advisory Agency as a counter balance to the Strategic Infrastructure consent regime. The agency will inform the public about large planning applications in their local area and will have a role in providing technical services on national and local planning policy to the public.

1.9.9. Increase public participation in planning

Ensure that Planning Participation Fees and administrative rules do not act as a barrier to open participation in the Irish planning system

1.9.10. Factor in the environment

Making it an explicit element of the Irish planning framework that environmental resource consequences must be factored into decision-making. Local authorities will be required to produce environmental accounts for the consequences of individual policies within Development Plans and for any subsequent zoning decisions. Planners will be required to map out local land-use issues against site sensitivities that must be considered within the context of setting out new County Development Plans.

1.9.11. Consolidate Planning Law into an Easy to access Planning Code

In order to understand Planning law in Ireland, one has to consult myriad legislation. An example of the scale of the problem is the fact that Planning and Development Act 2000, the primary legislation concerning planning in Ireland has been amended over 100 times. This situation hampers access to justice and has created a situation where even prominent planning lawyers admit that they find it difficult to find out what the law is. For the lay-person it is all but impossible to understand Irish Planning Law. The Green Party would address this issue by directing the law reform commission to consolidate all planning legislation in one planning code. This action would remove one of the major obstacles to good planning in Ireland: unnecessary legal complexity.

1.9.12. Re-introduction of the tax on Windfall Profits from Land Rezoning

The Green Party would re-introduce the tax on windfall profits from land re-zoning scrapped by the Fine Gael-Labour Government in Budget 2014. This tax was introduced during the Party's last term in Government to disincentivise the type of property speculation that led to the bubble of the mid 2000s and contributed in large part to the bust.

1.9.13. Reform of the Derelict Sites Act

The Green Party would tackle the under-use and hoarding of derelict land by the state, semi-state and private sectors by reforming the Derelict Sites Act to make available such lands available for

self-build and other forms of affordable housing. This will be done so that densification and sustainability in any development of such sites is prioritised.

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