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The National Spatial Strategy: Lessons for implementing a National Planning Framework

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Abstract

The Irish Government is in the process of developing a National Planning Framework (NPF). This will replace the *National Spatial Strategy for Ireland 2002–2020* (NSS). The NSS is generally considered to have been unsuccessful, mainly due to a lack of implementation driven by shortcomings in governance. This paper explores these shortcomings, and suggests ways to prevent similar difficulties with the NPF. The paper concludes that the political process needs to be at the heart of the preparation and adoption of the NPF. There is the danger that the NPF will fail if the political environment remains embedded in traditional approaches to planning across the state.

Keywords: National Planning Framework, local government, National Spatial Strategy reform, institutional structures, Ireland

Introduction

The launch of the *National Spatial Strategy for Ireland 2002–2020* (NSS) (Department of the Environment and Local Government,

2002) was a significant milestone in the development of Irish spatial planning. In the context of severe developmental pressures brought about by the Celtic tiger, the strategy provided a framework for a coordinated approach to planning at different geographical scales, which sought to facilitate a transition to plan-led rather than demand-led patterns of spatial development. The NSS represented the first integrated spatial strategy of Ireland, taking a holistic perspective of changing geographies of population, settlement patterns and the distribution of employment opportunities. The implications of these changes led to the proposition of a twenty-year framework designed to achieve a balanced approach to social, economic and physical development and population growth between regions. The strategy provided a context and strategic planning guidance for planning of transport, housing and industrial development at the local, regional and national government level.

The implementation of the NSS encountered many challenges as the context for economic and social planning and development changed dramatically – for more detail, see Meredith & van Egeraat (2013). In February 2013 the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government announced that the strategy had failed and would need to be replaced by a new framework (O'Brien, 2013). It may be argued that the minister's assessment was not supported by any documented evidence and may well have been premature. Nonetheless, in December 2015 the department published a road map for the delivery of the National Planning Framework (NPF) (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2015b). Like its predecessor, the NPF will be a twenty-year development strategy for Ireland in terms of economic activity, social progress and environmental quality, through coordinated policy, investment and action at national, regional and local levels. The NPF will be a statement of the government's objectives for Ireland's spatial development and it will form the top tier of the planning policy hierarchy. As such, in Ireland's restructured system of local government (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2012), the NPF will inform regional spatial and economic strategies, and will be informed by city and county development plans, local economic and community plans, and local area plans that are now in place following the recent reforms to both the planning code and the reconfiguration of local government in 2014. Over time, therefore, Ireland should have an iterative planning

hierarchy not unlike those in most of the OECD member states, where national policy direction is underpinned by local understanding and expectation.

A cross-departmental team was established in 2016 to be responsible for the day-to-day preparation of the NPF. In mid 2016 the strategy was in its development stage, drawing together key information and viewpoints from the public and interested groups, as well as from relevant public bodies and experts. This information will feed into the formulation of a recommended strategy by 2017. It is in this context that the Regional Studies Association, Irish Branch, focused its 2016 annual conference on national spatial planning.¹ This issue of *Administration* contains three contributions that all deal with the crucial issue of strategy implementation and governance.

This first paper explores the lessons we should learn from the NSS. The strategy can be criticised on multiple grounds, including the internal logic of the document, the selection of specific gateways and hubs, and the lack of alignment to infrastructure development given the timing of the EU-resourced *National Development Plan* at the time. But arguably the main issue responsible for its lack of success lies in a lack of implementation, driven by shortcomings in governance, including an overly optimistic expectation that local government reforms would underpin the strategy. The paper explores these shortcomings, and suggests ways to prevent similar difficulties with the NPF. The following section provides the background and context of the NSS, focusing on the governance structures at the time and governance provisions included in the strategy. It continues with an account of the implementation of the strategy, again focusing on governance reform. The paper finishes with an overview of the lessons that can be learned from the NSS as the NPF is prepared.

The next paper in this issue provides an international context. Professor Leonie Jansen-Janssen, of Wageningen University, The Netherlands, provides a surprising account of the planning system of the Netherlands that, to an extent, debunks the myth of a very efficient and successful planning system. National planning strategies have suffered from a lack of implementation and many of the problems can be brought down to governance. In addition, the current neo-liberal government has partially dismantled the national spatial planning policy in the Netherlands. The planning systems of Ireland and the

¹ *Planning for Regional Development: The National Planning Framework as a Roadmap for Ireland's Future?*, annual conference of the Regional Studies Association, Irish Branch, National University of Ireland, Galway, 9 September 2016.

Netherlands are, in a sense, converging somewhat and there may be a need to be cognisant of the good and weaker elements of the Dutch system.

The third contribution comes from Professor Markku Sotarauta, of Tampere University, Finland. He argues that strategy implementation and the successful development of places crucially require 'place leadership'. The paper explores the key relation between governance and place leadership. There is a growing recognition in Finland of the need to reinsert questions of agency formation and accountability in developing an understanding of regional and local performance. National spatial planning systems, from a Finnish perspective, could provide the arena for political power struggles which ultimately should deliver for 'place leadership'. A good understanding of place leadership in the context of the development of a national framework for Ireland could therefore benefit the implementation and success of the national planning strategy.

Background and context of the NSS

A comprehensive overview of the NSS is provided in Meredith & van Egeraat (2013), and is therefore not examined in detail here. Nonetheless, it is important to note that, at the time of preparation of the NSS, local government responsibilities for local planning were driven largely by the professional staff and management of local authorities spread across eighty-eight planning authorities in four different types of local authorities (county councils, city councils, town councils and borough councils) with different functional remits. While local government had the primary role in planning policy, its general mandate and level of responsibility was, and remains, far more restricted than in other local government systems. Local authorities could make provision for developments in the development plans through zoning, but in general had no access to the resources to make these developments happen. The required resources were, and still are, largely controlled by central government departments and their agencies. In addition, most of the planning authorities were primarily focused on needs and expectations internal to their boundaries. Local elected members, as a rule, focused on immediate concerns such as individual planning consents, particularly in regard to once-off housing.

The regional tier was made up of eight regional authorities and two regional assemblies. The regional authorities were set up in 1994

under pressure from the EU to create a regional tier of government that would have a role in monitoring the spending of EU Structural Funds at the regional level. At a later stage, the regional authorities were given the power to develop regional planning guidelines, which were to be potentially an important platform to implement the NSS. However, as one commentator put it, ‘the hasty and *ad hoc* establishment of monitoring committees for ill conceived regions to oversee the drawdown of EU Structural Funds appeared to have been almost designed so that they could not function effectively’ (Walsh, 1999, p. 15).

The regional authorities’ membership was made up of delegates from the local authorities within each region. Although the regional authorities had been given statutory responsibility for their planning role, they were unable to perform it effectively, mainly due to a lack of coordination capacity at the regional level. The evaluation report of the second Community Support Framework identified how, due to the make-up of their membership, the regional authorities had very little actual power (Department of Finance and European Commission, 1997). Delegates saw their function as representing their local interests and failed to articulate a coherent voice for the region. The central government departments also showed limited respect for the regional authorities. Lack of spending information from these departments in combination with the limited staffing of the authorities and restricted technical assistance meant that the regional authorities were largely unable to monitor public spending (Walsh, 1999).

In terms of the broader range of actors in the arena of regional governance, Ireland was characterised by an extremely fragmented geography of regional structures of government, state agencies and other bodies (Shannon & van Egeraat, 2013). During the period from the 1960s to the late 1980s, a number of separate regional administrative structures and agencies were established, including regional tourism authorities, IDA regions, regional health boards and the planning regions. The boundaries of the regions were not consistent with this fragmented environment (Laffan, 1996).

It was in this context of local and regional governance that the Department of the Environment and Local Government prepared and launched the NSS in 2002. Recognising that the success of the strategy would depend on the effectiveness of implementation, the NSS included a range of institutional structures and legislative measures. The Minister for the Environment and Local Government would lead

the strategy's implementation. All government departments and agencies would embed the NSS in their programmes. A Cabinet Sub-Committee on Housing, Infrastructure and Public Private Partnership would monitor the strategy's implementation. The Department of the Environment and Local Government would establish a committee representing all relevant departments to support implementation. The NSS would be given any statutory support it required and the Department of the Environment and Local Government would consider the need for legislative provision to require consistency between the NSS and other relevant plans and programmes, including those of regional and local authorities.

From the outset though, statutory support would rely on the current provisions included in the Planning and Development Act, 2000. This included the requirement that the strategy was reflected in the regional planning guidelines. Local planning authorities, in turn, would 'have regard' to current regional planning guidelines (Department of the Environment and Local Government, 2002, p. 122). Without the development of further legislative provision, this phrasing meant that the coordination by the regional authorities could be interpreted as guidance and therefore subject to interpretation as appropriate to local circumstance by the individual planning authorities. In hindsight there may have been an over-expectation that the strategic objectives of the NSS would be assimilated into local development plans and policies.

Limited statutory provision was included to ensure horizontal coordination between local authorities. In relation to this, the NSS merely called for collaboration and the creation of partnership between local authorities (see, for example, Department of the Environment and Local Government, 2002, p. 124). This ignored the severe difficulties in attempting to secure consensus on regional priorities in the context of a strong tradition of inter-county rivalry (Breathnach, 2014; Walsh, 1999).

The NSS acknowledged the importance of vertical coordination between local authorities and the government departments in allocating centrally controlled resources in accordance with the regional and local plans. The limited resources of the local authorities meant that planning authorities needed to have a shared agenda with other public bodies to ensure implementation of actions and achievement of objectives set out in local and county plans. While promising substantial statutory support and provisions, for the meantime the document merely stated that 'partnership between local

and national governments should be established' (Department of the Environment and Local Government, 2002, p. 119).

Implementation of the strategy

Notwithstanding the above it would be misleading to suggest that implementation of the strategy was a complete failure. The NSS has provided a badly needed evidence base of spatially referenced data that has gone some way to developing an understanding of the dynamics of local communities and the conditions they operate within.² Such knowledge was not available at the time of drafting the NSS. As a result of the reconfiguration and expansion of the range of data and the online availability of mapping tools via the All-Island Research Observatory, on behalf of the Central Statistics Office, there is now a greater understanding of local social and economic characteristics. The acknowledgement of how and where people travel to work is also allowing for the development of a greater understanding of how areas across the state function (Central Statistics Office, 2011).

Much of the strategic thinking in the NSS was driven by the objective of developing the socio-economic potential of areas across the state. This was a significant conceptual innovation in the NSS, replacing the more traditional perspective of balanced regional development. But it proved to be very difficult to translate this into practice (see Walsh, 2013, for a more detailed discussion). The strategy focused on a perceived functionality of non-statutory areas, which meant little to the national political body as they, not unreasonably, were familiar with functionality as expressed in the form of a local government system dating back to an earlier century (Callanan & Keogan, 2003). It is the local political environment which enables national political figures to reach their national political role, thanks in large measure to the electoral system in Ireland. Therefore, it was probably asking too much to expect political figures to think beyond their focus on electoral areas and constituencies, which had no relationship to the functionality of the NSS.

Therefore, a key lesson to be learnt was that if spatial policy direction was to be driven by the concept of achieving potential based on how people live, work, educate and recreate, there would be a need

² For example, the data platform allowed for the publication of *Our Cities: Drivers of National Competitiveness* by Forfás and the National Competitiveness Council in 2009.

to understand the relationship between political identity and the reality of how people and communities function under twenty-first century conditions. This point will be returned to below but it is important to acknowledge that, as a result of the lessons from the original NSS, there is now a clearer understanding of the trends, positive and negative, which influence social and economic characteristics of the Republic, while appreciation of the natural environment and cultural context is also well established and increasingly reflected in national policy development as a result of the NSS. In achieving this alone, the NSS has left a positive legacy.

Arguably, the greatest weakness in implementation came from the non-alignment of the strategy with that of the reforms to the local government system under *Better Local Government* (Government of Ireland, 1996), which was issued under the previous government but adopted by an incoming government (Government of Ireland, 1997) in which Noel Dempsey, TD, was Minister for the Environment and Local Government. Dempsey, given his clear leadership role, would be critical in the move to reform local government structures by introducing a coordination structure such as the county/city development boards, as well as originating the development of the NSS. However, by the time of the strategy's adoption he had moved to the Department of Education (Callanan & Keogan, 2003) and his political leadership was lost just as the reform process was beginning to advance. The momentum created by the reforms slowed under succeeding ministers and limited attention was given to the integration of thinking between the objectives of the NSS and *Better Local Government* at national level, notwithstanding the central role which local government planning has for both the local authorities and the national authorities.

The failure to fully integrate the objectives of the NSS with the reform objectives for local government under *Better Local Government* simply served to underpin the long-standing focus on the internal political dynamics of each local authority by the elected members. The regional perspective was limited to the adoption of regional planning guidelines, which, only over time and as a result of legal review, became embedded into local policy perspective. This, in turn, was matched by a high level of silo thinking at national level, given the highly disaggregated nature of national government organisation, and efforts to embed New Public Management thinking through the then Strategic Management Initiative. As a result, there was limited effort to integrate national policy direction with the objectives of the NSS

(O’Riordáin, 2013). With the possible exception of industrial policy, which was largely driven by foreign investment decisions, there is limited evidence to suggest any radical change in national public service reforms. This is evidenced by, for example, decisions around the reconfiguration in 2013 of vocational training and education into a regional structure, now called the education and training boards. Such restructuring was not aligned with the objectives of the NSS. The same might be argued in regard to the reconfiguration of justice and defence policy with a clear absence of regard to the underpinning of gateways and hubs (such as decisions regarding closure of military barracks), while health policy, given that it is largely responsive historically to localised political influences, did not contribute to underpinning the NSS. Had it done so, there might have been a more substantive argument regarding the placement of centres of excellence for the treatment of cancer in centres identified as gateways, such as Sligo.³ This did not happen. Of course this is all too understandable given that, not long after adoption of the NSS, the then Minister for Finance launched a ‘decentralisation’ programme,⁴ which had the effect of both demonstrating to political and senior public service management that the NSS could be disregarded, and providing a rationale for not delivering public services through the spatial priorities of the NSS.

A further key gap arising from the NSS and its non-alignment to local government reform arose in the fact that much of the reform process under *Better Local Government* was focused on increasing local efficiencies and effectiveness. While clearly, with New Public Management in mind, this was a natural part of any public service reform process at the time, and generally applied in other NPM-influenced countries such as New Zealand, Australia and the UK, it failed to fundamentally appreciate the *raison d’être* of local government – i.e. to be the principal democratic platform at local level (Lyons, 2007). As a result, local councillors did not fully align with the thinking behind the NSS at the time. Indeed, some at local elected level would have argued that they had been excluded from the process and had a limited, passive consultation framework with which to engage as the NSS was prepared. This largely resulted, on the part of the general body of elected members in both county and urban

³ There is no reference to the NSS in the National Cancer Strategy, *A Strategy for Cancer Control in Ireland*, published in 2006, for example, even though it was the intention of the strategy to seek delivery of healthcare services on a regional basis.

⁴ Budget Statement, 19 June 2003.

authorities, in a continued unwillingness to accept national policy in reform and spatial planning. Elected members generally considered both local government reform and the NSS as efforts to restrict their role. As a result, even where officials at local level did seek to integrate planning policy into a regional context through the regional authorities and regional planning guidelines, there was considerable resistance on the part of the elected bodies, which resulted in ongoing overruling of executive decisions in regard to planning, particularly through the use of direction by what was known as Section 4 motions.⁵

Therefore, there is a critical need to underpin development and implementation of an NPF with having a clear role for local elected representatives.⁶ This has to be the case, given that the elected member is at the heart of local planning, rightly or wrongly. As a result, local councillors need the capacity to think in policy terms with a clear understanding of both local expectation and meeting that expectation (which is, after all, what gets them elected), and of the direction now required in the state as its population grows. This was not the case when the NSS was first put in place. The introduction of statutory recognition of the strategy came too late in the lifespan and this also proved to be a barrier to at least partial enforcement of a nationally driven spatial perspective.

The publication of *Putting People First: Action Plan for Local Government* (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2012) in October 2012 set the policy agenda for the overall reconfiguration of the local to national policy relationship. The reforms, given statutory standing in 2014 (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2014), have brought greater structural consistency, particularly with the integration of town government into the county structures and their partial replacement with a comprehensive coverage of the state with municipal districts. Having said that, however, these districts do not have corporate standing and the county structures largely remain unchanged since before the foundation of the state. Given the importance of identity with these structures, the scope for reforming county structures to reflect twenty-first century configurations is, and will be, limited. So, alternative arrangements may be necessary, as this

⁵ They are commonly known as Section 4 motions, but are actually Section 140 motions under the reforms associated with *Better Local Government*.

⁶ For a recent useful perspective, see www.aillg.ie. For councillor perspectives on housing and planning in their submission to the Special Oireachtas Committee on Housing and Homelessness, see Association of Irish Local Government (2016).

was a critical barrier to implementation of the strategy, particularly in urban centres and the city regions in the Republic. This will be a critical factor in whether the NPF is a success.

Notwithstanding the above, some moves to amend boundaries of counties have been a feature of local government change in recent years. In the cases of Limerick City and County,⁷ Waterford City and County, and Tipperary North and South Riding it might be argued that, as these were essentially within a recognised county boundary, there would have been limited exposure to concerns about identity. However, as this process has developed with clear implications for long-standing county boundaries in Cork,⁸ Roscommon and Westmeath, Kilkenny and Waterford, and even Laois and Carlow, and Meath and Louth, there seems, unsurprisingly, to have been a public reaction against interference in local identity, even if it is mainly related to cultural and sporting matters and not necessarily to having efficient and effective governance, as it is based upon a largely nineteenth century structural platform. In light of this local perspective on seeking to change local boundaries, or at least those at county level, suspicions around advancing reforms have increased, judging by the numbers of people supporting the status quo. So can planning on an integrated basis provide the state and local authorities with the possibility of meeting twenty-first century needs while respecting historical and sporting concerns? The NSS did not address such matters. It could not have been expected to at the time. But in light of the experiences from both local government reform and the implementation of the NSS, can the forthcoming NPF avoid addressing these issues, so clearly central to those communities potentially impacted?

Alternative models of governance would seem to be called for (see English, 2016). Such models would have to necessarily acknowledge the sense of local/county identity while allowing for greater integration across the organisation of both local government and national policy development. It is therefore no small matter of irony that such models might well have already been in place in Ireland with, for example, the approach to regional planning under the now defunct regional authorities. It is ironic in the sense that the authorities were replaced just as the statutory platform was strengthened. Fortunately, however, this seems to be appreciated in the approach to the drafting of the

⁷ See Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (2011).

⁸ See Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (2015a).

NPF, which acknowledges the need for special planning areas within the overall planning hierarchy. This, it would seem, might provide the basis for bridging the gap between sustaining local identity and the expectations that go with such structures and the need for a wider strategic view in the form of the regional assemblies. However, there is a lurking question on whether the members of the assemblies – who, after all, will ultimately adopt the forthcoming regional spatial and economic strategies but are actually drawn from the member local authorities – will see themselves as regional or local policymakers.

There is also the question of whether national policymakers in the form of the Oireachtas members will apply a similar perspective. The NPF will be subject to overall approval by the Oireachtas whereas the NSS was simply approved by the government on the recommendation of the Minister for the Environment and Local Government. It was seen as largely a Department of the Environment and Local Government responsibility with little buy-in from the minister's colleagues, most notably the Minister for Finance, at that time. So given the decision set out in the *Programme for a Partnership Government* (Government of Ireland, 2016) to have the planning framework approved by the Oireachtas, the democratic input into the NPF is undoubtedly strengthened relative to that applicable with the NSS. How this might actually be worked through remains, however, a significant challenge given the current developing role of 'new politics' in the Oireachtas. Is there a willingness to think in terms of increased urbanisation and the setting of investment priorities in hospitals, roads, communications, public transport, etc., which may be required if the Greater Dublin Region is to become a First World competitive city region? Indeed, could the same be held in regard to, say, the Cork–Limerick–Galway Economic Corridor?

Other critical influences: Impact of the economic collapse

Implementation of the NSS in the latter half of its programme period was also crucially influenced by two further key and overriding factors. Firstly, the unabashed growth associated with the Celtic tiger era, where any effort to restrict inappropriate developments in non-designated towns and rural areas was limited to efforts by local management and the department to prevent the worst excesses of decisions to allow for a disassembled development model across the state. The scattergun approach to implementation of local planning policy, involving a variety of institutional platforms from local to

national government, became a central feature of the collapse of the Irish economy and the banking system from 2008 onwards. The excesses of developer-led planning, enabled by the banking system, contributed to the collapse of the Irish economy. This reality clearly was at odds with the strategic objectives of the NSS. What followed was a housing and economic crash which put the final nail into the strategy. This was to be the second key factor.

The effect, of course, is important in terms of understanding the nature of the drivers for investment in Ireland. Housing development, for example, as occurred during the Celtic tiger era and which, given current levels of housing, still sees over 30 per cent approvals for one-off delivery, needs to radically alter if the country is to adequately cope with the likely level of population growth over the next twenty years. If this is not the case, then any strategic objective to advance development in and around the main urban centres will not be achieved.

Alongside this is the need to sustain an ongoing public capital investment programme that can meet current and future needs. As Morgenroth (2016) suggests, however, the Irish investment model since the 1970s shows a remarkably inconsistent spread of investment levels, reflecting the changing priorities of successive governments and the impact of using the national investment programme as the first port of call for cutting public expenditure. Such approaches to investment decision-making were clearly at odds with the objectives of the NSS and, indeed, the national development planning associated with EU resourcing of the state.

As a result, and in the event of a non-alignment of national investment planning alongside a possible continuation of local planning decisions based upon short-term political priorities, there is every possibility that the implementation of an NPF will fail. Experience with the implementation of the NSS suggests that this might be the case (Callanan & Keogan, 2003). If, however, this non-alignment is understood, then the potential for a successful roll-out of the objectives of an NPF, seeking to bring balanced regional development alongside meeting investment needs to cater for a much larger population, could be very real.

Lessons for a National Planning Framework

Under the governance arrangements established through both local government reform and national public service reform in the latter half of the 1990s, it could be suggested that putting in place county/city

development boards, regional planning guidelines in the 1990s and a national spatial strategy in 2001 is worryingly similar to what is envisaged under the NPF – i.e. local community development committees (with local economic and community plans), regional assemblies and a national planning framework. The key difference between then and now is that, as a result of the learning associated with the implementation of the NSS, there is, at least in statutory terms, a greater understanding on the part of policymakers of the iterative nature of preparing spatial plans such as county and city development plans within a national planning policy framework. Local planning needs and expectations are a central characteristic to national planning, and vice versa. Therefore, there is a need to integrate local planning effort through a reformed planning framework (which is now finally in place) into a regional dimension that in turn informs a national understanding which can then drive direction in an integrated national policy context. This was missing with the original NSS but is now largely in place with the reforms of the Local Government Reform Act, 2014, and related planning legislation, most notably the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act, 2010, and, if adopted, the Planning Amendment Bill 2016, which is currently before the Houses of the Oireachtas.

In broad terms, nonetheless, it is possible to envisage the NPF as being as unsuccessful in influencing the development of the state. This, in part, may be due to the new approval arrangements envisaged through the Houses of the Oireachtas. A failure to fully involve the political process will not bring with it the necessary change in political culture which is required if a more coordinated policy framework is to be put in place.

In addition, there is the risk of the NPF failing if governments over the coming two decades fail to ensure that planning policy is fully aligned to economic policy. In part, this could be due to conflicting development demands between rural and urban centres. If this is the case, and without substantial institutional reform on the part of those decision-makers, it is entirely possible to conceive of a policy platform that will simply be a repeat of the NSS. However, there is some hope that such an outcome might be avoided. Conditions are not the same as in the late 1990s/early 2000s. Assuming current growth levels are sustained, Ireland could see further population growth over the next twenty to thirty years to bring the island overall towards, if not surpass, the population pre-famine. Current projections presented to members of the Oireachtas suggest growth to 5.5 million people in the Republic

over the next twenty years. Implementation of national planning priorities on where people can live, work and recreate, and the development of enabling social and economic infrastructure, will require a fundamental shift in political cultures and in the organisation of state and its local institutions if such growth is to be sustainable. So bridging the gap between population growth and the need to plan for the increased public services requirements arising from such growth, while accepting the need to respect local identity and local government structures, is the central issue that must be addressed in the forthcoming NPF.

At the national level will it be possible to develop a framework that is fully embedded into both policy development and business planning across government departments and the state agencies/arm's-length bodies operating under their overall mandate? Experience from the NSS would suggest that, if this is not fully appreciated, the possible demise of the NPF would be a real possibility. The NSS failed to acknowledge political realities at local and national level. And there has to be a question mark over the capacity of the Irish political system to fully enforce the objectives of a policy statement which sets priorities for locations across the country when it comes to decisions on investment and the provision of citizen-centred services, particularly as society on the island becomes more urbanised and concentrated in areas identified as growth centres or city regions.

Conclusions

It would be wrong to write off the experience garnered over the past decade and a half in regard to the NSS. But this experience is not wholly positive. The extent to which the strategy was not fully embedded into national as well as local policy is now fully acknowledged. That is a lesson in its own right. More important is the level of data now available to enable an evidenced-based approach to making the forthcoming NPF. Most significant, however, is the conclusion that the political process needs to be at the heart of the preparation and adoption of the NPF. There is the danger that, given the electoral cycle and current political conditions, addressing the challenge of having potentially up to one million more people in the state over the course of the plan will fail if that political environment remains embedded in traditional approaches to planning across the state. This is a hugely demanding challenge given that it goes to the heart of the Irish political process.

The old adage that policy never got anyone elected cannot be allowed to remain the case. Policy as significant as determining where such population growth will live, work, recreate and receive public services is going to be central to a successful, and likely urbanised, Ireland in 2035. In the following two papers this will be explored in the context of both the Netherlands, often quoted as an exemplar for the Irish Planning System, and Finland, another exemplar for Ireland given its highly decentralised approach to local government.

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