

**THE NATIONAL SPATIAL STRATEGY:  
ITS APPLICATION IN THE BMW REGION**

**Draft Response From  
The Border, Midland and Western Regional Assembly  
To The National Spatial Strategy**

**February, 2003**

## 1. Introduction

The Border, Midland and Western (BMW) Regional Assembly broadly welcomes the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) and recognises it as a unique opportunity to plan for balanced regional and spatial development of the country over the next 20 years. It provides the potential to limit the accelerated growth of the Greater Dublin Area and to build up the attractiveness of other cities and towns as places in which to live and work.

The BMW Regional Assembly prepared a submission<sup>1</sup> in response to the Public Consultation Document in which it made a number of key recommendations to the Spatial Planning Unit in the preparation of the NSS. The majority of these recommendations appear to be covered in the Strategy, but there are still a number of outstanding issues that the Strategy fails to address. The purpose of this paper is to review the National Spatial Strategy in light of the submission made by the BMW Assembly and to make recommendations for the effective and meaningful implementation of the Strategy.

## 2. Key Recommendations made in the Submission

The BMW Assembly compiled a comprehensive submission to the Strategy after extensive consultation with relevant stakeholders. The key recommendations made in the submission are summarised as follows:

- (i) The Assembly called for a **clear implementation strategy** with similar reporting and monitoring arrangements to the National Development Plan and which report explicitly on indicators of regional balance and convergence
- (ii) The BMW Assembly recognised that spatial planning is a **key driver of economic growth**, but it is important to stay focused on the other key drivers, such as FDI, natural resources, indigenous investment etc.
- (iii) The Assembly feared that the outcome of a policy of infrastructure ahead of demand, focused on large centres could lead to the **neglect of smaller towns and villages**. It recommended that the NSS should define a role for rural communities and set out a framework for rural development

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<sup>1</sup> Submission to the Department of the Environment and Local Government on National Spatial Strategy Consultation Paper

- (iv) The concept of a **Functional Area** needs to be more clearly defined and broken down into more meaningful and smaller geographical units with smaller commuting spaces
- (v) Various recommendations were made in relation to **infrastructure**, including a higher level of service on the N2, N3, N4, N5, advanced ICT for the BMW Region, increased electricity generation, extension of the Corrib gas pipelines, encouragement of investment in renewable energy sources, the development of commuter rail services and an examination of the feasibility of the Western Rail Corridor
- (vi) The Assembly recommended overall that **the growth of the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) should be constrained** and that there should be a diversion of activity out of Dublin towards structurally weaker areas.

### **3. Response to the NSS**

#### **3.1 Drivers of Economic Growth**

Whilst the NSS does recognise the need for “entrepreneurship” to drive economic growth, there is also a very strong emphasis on strong cities and towns as a support for a competitive business environment. It is important in the implementation of the NSS that the focus remains not only on spatial planning, but also on the other drivers of economic growth as identified in the NDP. This is of particular importance for the BMW Region where the urban structure is relatively weak coupled with low investment and access to financial capital, poor R&D, a low incidence of high value added and knowledge based activities and a significant “brain drain” from the region. It is therefore important that these other factors are not neglected and are integrated into national and regional spatial planning.

#### **3.2 Role of Rural Areas**

The NSS also recognises the need to strengthen and maintain rural areas, which it has divided into five broad types. This represents an improvement from the public consultation paper *Indications for the Way Ahead*, which placed much more emphasis on developing towns and cities and much less on rural areas. The Assembly welcomes the attention paid in the NSS to rural issues and the recognition of the differences in rural areas, including those that are strong, in transition, weak, remote and culturally

distinct. It also recognises the interdependence and linkages between rural and urban areas. Some of this however could be seen as slightly aspirational and it is not clear how rural communities will be strengthened in practice. It is essential that the commitments laid down in the 1999 *White Paper on Rural Development* should be adhered to in conjunction with the NSS and that any commitment towards strengthening rural areas is backed up with sufficient and appropriate infrastructure, such as transport, energy and ICT.

On the issue of rural housing, it is not entirely clear from the strategy the circumstances in which the practice of one-off rural dwellings will be allowed to continue. The NSS recognises that rural housing can raise difficult land use issues, but does not specifically address the issue. It is important that the issue of rural housing is dealt with in a way which promotes sustainable use of the environment and landscape whilst still maintaining the social and economic fabric of rural communities.

### **3.3 Role of Gateways and Hubs**

One of the concerns of the BMW Assembly prior to the publication of the NSS was the lack of clarity relating to the functional areas. The concept has many limitations, that we pointed out in the submission. We were pleased that the concept of a functional area is no longer specifically mentioned in the NSS and the country is not divided up into the areas as suggested in the public consultation document. The delineation of areas under the sphere of influence of gateways and hubs is not entirely clear. Whilst more emphasis is put on rural areas, the linkages between rural and urban centres and the exact sphere of influence or what was referred to as a functional area are not specified in the NSS. The Strategy is also relatively quiet on the role of county towns and how they link with the gateways and hubs.

Many rural areas are outside the sphere of influence of either gateways or hubs and a number of counties within the BMW Region (Longford, Laois, Roscommon and Leitrim) have been designated neither. Whilst there are existing towns in these regions, they have not been given any particular status in the NSS and it is essential that they do not suffer from a lack of investment in infrastructure and other resources, which could lead to a subsequent decline of these areas. These are some of the areas

that have historically suffered the highest levels of out-migration and under-development.

### **3.4 Implementation**

The success or failure of the NSS will depend on the manner in which it is implemented. The BMW Regional Assembly welcomes the publication of the NSS and agrees that it is an important tool in bringing about more balanced regional development. In order for it to succeed as a relevant planning tool, it needs to be given adequate weight across the public sector planning process and be allocated appropriate resources for its implementation.

The BMW Regional Assembly agrees with most of the priorities set out in the implementation strategy, but would propose that more definite timetables and specific actions need to be set out. The NSS is an essential tool for regional as well as national planning and the BMW Regional Assembly therefore proposes that it should play a pivotal role in its implementation. We would suggest once again that an implementation strategy with input, output and impact indicators similar to those of the National Development Plan should be adopted as an integral part of the strategy.

The timetable provided for implementation of the NSS is relatively vague, particularly for the period 2003-2006 during which time “the process of integrating the NSS approach into other plans and programmes will be completed”. We would suggest that a more detailed implementation strategy with a statutory backing should be drawn up, with clear and detailed roles and responsibilities assigned to various agencies and the appropriate resources assigned to them. We welcome the nomination of the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Housing, Infrastructure and Public Private Partnerships as monitoring agency for the NSS and we would suggest that it should be monitored in conjunction with the Regional Assemblies at NUTS 2 level. We welcome the proposal to incorporate the NSS immediately into the Strategic Planning Guidelines at NUTS 3 level and the County Development Plans at county level. It should also be integrated into the County Development Board Strategies.

In the implementation strategy of the NSS, it is stated that it will be a key input into the 2003 Mid-Term Evaluation of the National Development Plan, focusing in particular

on the development of the identified gateways. We, as Managing Authority for the Regional Operational Programme would be happy to receive further clarification and guidelines on how exactly it can input into the Mid-Term Evaluation and in particular how we can incorporate it into the Mid-Term Evaluation of the BMW Operational Programme, which has recently commenced. The consultants awarded the contract to conduct the evaluation have been asked to include the NSS in setting the context for the evaluation. The Assembly recognises that the ESIOP in particular should be reviewed immediately in light of the NSS.

### **3.5 Infrastructure**

The provision of adequate and sustainable infrastructure is a key component in ensuring the success of the Strategy, in particular if growth is to be encouraged in areas outside the Greater Dublin Area, which have a considerably weaker level of infrastructure.

#### *3.5.1 Telecommunications*

In the current information society, telecommunications infrastructure and services are of key importance in economic growth. In order for gateways and hubs to succeed as centres of national and regional importance, they will need affordable always on broadband infrastructure. The recent Western Development Commission update on Telecommunications in the Western Region indicates that whilst there is a relatively reasonable infrastructure (existing and planned), there is much spare capacity and problems of access and affordability. Whilst backbone networks may exist in some regions, they are often offered at a price that is too high to make it financially viable.

Many areas of the BMW Region are distant from the fibre backbone and are therefore disadvantaged in terms of their ability to attract and retain businesses with high data transfer requirements. The costs are often higher in peripheral regions as the users of ATM (Asynchronous Transfer Mode) are charged on the basis of distance from an ATM node and the costs rise the further the distance. We would recommend that the WDC report be taken into consideration in the implementation of the NSS and that affordable always on broadband infrastructure be given immediate priority. The Assembly also believes that other alternatives be looked at, such as wireless and satellite and that a specific proportion of the budget for broadband could be allocated

to measures other than fibre backbone. We would recommend that pilot initiatives, which have proved to be successful be mainstreamed.

### *3.5.2 Transport*

The NSS makes provision for the development of transport to support and link the various gateways and hubs through the provision of radial and linking corridors and strategic international access points. The BMW Regional Assembly welcomes the provision of radial and linking corridors, but would suggest that they need to be strengthened between the joint gateways (Athlone, Mullingar, Tullamore) and hubs (Castlebar, Ballina). The NRA National Roads Programme did not prioritise strategic road projects in the BMW Region to date. This is of major concern to the BMW Regional Assembly.

As stated in its earlier submission, the BMW Regional Assembly recommends that a number of strategic cross-radial corridors should be allocated a new degree of priority. Of the five cross-radial routes that we suggested in our original submission, only two of them (N80 from Moate to Enniscorthy and the Sligo-Dundalk link) are nominated as a strategic linking or radial corridor in the NSS. The suggested N52 Ardee/Nenagh link between Athlone and Larne/Shannon/Cork is not included in the strategy, nor the N61 Athlone/Roscommon/Boyle link or the N55 Athlone – Cavan link. These routes would serve as essential linking points between the BMW and S&E Regions in a north-south direction.

The provision of public transport is relatively vague in the NSS and we would propose that it should be given immediate priority. We would also disagree with the proposal that bus services should be the principal form of public transport outside the Greater Dublin Area and suggest that rail transport for both passengers and freight should be expanded as an immediate priority. Commuter rail services for the gateways and hubs of the region should be developed as an immediate priority. The Midland triangle of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar and the joint hub of Castlebar and Ballina should have regular commuter rail services connecting them if they are to function effectively as joint units. As stated in its submission on the Western Rail Corridor, the BMW Regional Assembly strongly proposes that a feasibility study should be carried out to assess the viability of the Western Rail Corridor (Limerick, Galway, Sligo). It is hoped

that these issues will be addressed in the on-going Strategic Rail Review. Giving greater priority to rail transport will not only relieve congestion on the roads, but will also be more environmentally sustainable, contributing to a reduction in toxic emissions, which are contributing to climate change.

### *3.5.3 Energy*

The BMW Regional Assembly pointed out in its earlier submission that electricity generation capacity is inadequate for the BMW Region. We are pleased with the statement in the NSS that particular emphasis is being placed on the reinforcement of the grid in the western countries and that power corridors may be considered to augment the capacity of the grid in Galway/Mayo/Sligo and from Dublin to Dundalk. We would recommend also that two smaller power plants should be constructed in the region, using Corrib gas if possible. Alternative sources of energy should also be explored, such as community-owned wind energy projects.

The BMW Regional Assembly proposes that the Corrib gas pipeline should be extended and that the potential pipeline from Castlebar to Ballina should be developed as an immediate priority.

### *3.5.4 Social and Cultural Infrastructure*

The NSS recognises the importance of social and cultural infrastructure (health education, leisure and cultural facilities) in the development of towns and cities. The commitment in the National Development Plan to support Regional Sports Centres in towns designated as gateways and hubs should now be put into effect. The Assembly is concerned about the lack of commitment to this measure, as evidenced in the 2003 estimates.

## **4. Case Studies of other Spatial Strategies and the European Spatial Development Perspective**

The Danish Spatial Strategy - the National Planning Report for Denmark has been lauded as a good model of spatial planning in Europe. It is a 25-year strategy, which lays out the co-ordination of environmental, economic and socio-economic factors within a specific national and local geographic context. Similar to the Irish NSS, it sets out a polycentric network of town and cities, with the designation of new national

centres to act as catalysts for regional development. It takes into consideration new business trends in Denmark, the EU Objective 2 conversion programme and the existing strengths and specific characteristics of Denmark's regions.

One of the notable features of the Danish National Planning Report is a focus on helping individual regions to retain and develop their distinctive characteristics whilst developing an appropriate balance between competition and co-operation between towns and between town and country. This is also partly achieved through strong local and regional government. There is also considerable emphasis placed on the aesthetic qualities of neighbourhoods and towns and giving priority to form and aesthetics in urban and regional planning. This is an element, which is somewhat overlooked in the Irish NSS and we would suggest that aesthetic qualities are taken into account in any new developments under the NSS. This could apply to both urban and town strategies and also to building styles in rural areas,

The delineation of national centres differs from the Irish NSS in that the plan prescribes 16 different indicators for the national centres, which can change over time. They include characteristics such as a university, harbour freight terminal, hospital with twenty or more specialist departments and a regional theatre and orchestra. Emphasis is therefore placed not only on commercial characteristics, but also on very specific cultural and leisure amenities. Whilst the NSS does refer briefly to the development of cultural and leisure amenities, we would recommend that in the implementation of the Irish NSS, greater emphasis should be placed on the development of such amenities in order to create places that develop not only economically but also provide a pleasant environment in which to live and work.

The European Spatial Development Perspective is a European-wide policy instrument, which recognises the regional disparities between and within the member states of the European Union and starts from the assumption that growth itself or convergence of economic figures is not sufficient to develop a balanced spatial structure across the Union. It aims to achieve a balance between economic and social cohesion, conservation of natural resources and more balanced competitiveness of the European territory. The ESDP is a legally non-binding document but Member States are asked to

take into account the policy aims and options of the ESDP in their national planning systems.

The policy options of the ESDP include the following: (i) promotion of the networking of urban regions; (ii) better accessibility as a pre-condition for polycentric development; (iii) development of Euro corridors (iv) strengthening of cities and regions at the external borders of the EU; (v) conservation and development of biodiversity and (vi) development of the European cultural heritage. The NSS represents an attempt by the Irish Government to implement a national planning framework in line with the objectives laid down in the ESDP. The NSS is also based on the principle of polycentric development and the fostering of urban networks. The NSS is relatively strong in the areas of economic clustering, development of urban networks and the strengthening of cities and regions, but somewhat weaker in the areas of environmental protection and the development of cultural heritage. We would recommend that in the implementation of the NSS, the environmental and cultural significance of any developments should always be taken into account and policies and practices should actively promote conservation, biodiversity and cultural heritage.

## **5. Conclusions**

The BMW Regional Assembly welcomes the publication of the National Spatial Strategy and views it as a very important policy tool for the planning and implementation of more balanced regional development in Ireland. The Assembly believes that the designation of five gateways in the BMW Region is an important step in spreading development more evenly throughout the country, but also recommends a strengthening of and emphasis on the role of rural areas and smaller towns with a weak urban structure. The Assembly recommends that infrastructure in the BMW Region needs to be developed as an immediate priority in order to give meaning to the priorities laid out in the Strategy and in particular the rail network, which would develop important linkages between gateways and hubs and other towns and villages.

It is the Assembly's view that the NSS requires a clearer implementation strategy with a statutory basis if it is to have real meaning and effect and the Assembly would welcome the opportunity to be a lead partner in its implementation.

## REFERENCES

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### Websites

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