

**Address by Mr. Michael Finneran T.D.,
Minister of State at the Department of the
Environment, Heritage and Local Government**

at the

**Border, Midland & Western Regional Assembly
Annual Conference**

Roscommon

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A Chathaoirleach - Councillor Crosby, Director – Mr Finn, Members of the Assembly and other distinguished guests. I am delighted to have the opportunity to address you here today, in my home county, which is always a pleasure and a privilege.

The themed question for today's conference is timely and I would like to address it - *Is the National Spatial Strategy delivering balanced regional development?*

Firstly, I would like to make an important point. The NSS was not, and is not, designed on its own to deliver balanced regional development. It was not and is not the silver bullet which will provide economic and social prosperity across the country.

This needs to be emphasised and understood, lest unrealistic expectations are placed on the shoulders of the NSS. The NSS is a spatial planning framework to guide development in order to achieve a better balance of social, economic, physical development and population growth between regions. The NSS *per se* does not deliver balanced regional development but it does facilitate it.

Delivering balanced regional development is the responsibility of a broad range of policy makers and stakeholders: Government Departments, Regional Authorities, local authorities, State agencies and private enterprise. The NSS is designed to inform their policies and decision making so that the country as a whole develops in a manner which is sustainable into the future.

So what has the NSS achieved?

There is no doubt that the NSS has played a key role in shaping policy and investment at national, regional and local levels. And also on a cross-border basis.

Some examples for you: -

- The design of the Transport 21 Programme was heavily influenced by the NSS in terms of where the transport infrastructure expansion and enhancement should occur.
- All water and waste water investment applications are vetted for compatibility and consistency with the NSS and the relevant Regional Planning Guidelines.
- Agreements between Government Departments and the Department of Finance on capital envelopes require that Departments

demonstrate how investments are being prioritised, in line with the NSS.

- The regional development objectives of the current NDP are heavily shaped by the NSS; and
- The North West Gateway Initiative between Letterkenny and Derry is now taking legs and this cross-border interaction was advocated in the NSS.

When the NSS was published in 2002, it was a future looking document - it was land-use forward planning at a national level. Furthermore, the publication of Regional Planning Guidelines in 2004 was a crucial step in relating the aims of the NSS into practical, implementable objectives. The RPGs in turn have been a key influence in local development plans. This hierarchy provides the spine of our land-use planning policy.

I know that work is underway in regional authorities on the review of the RPGs. I cannot over-emphasise the crucial role that RPGs play in determining proper planning and sustainable development. They are a touchstone for city and county development plans and a key consideration for An Bord Pleanála and the judicial system in their determinations.

NSS Review and Outlook

My Department is undertaking an NSS Review and Outlook to assess where we are, seven years into the 20-year spatial framework and, perhaps more crucially, where we're heading. Given the significant economic and social change in the last six or seven years and indeed the more recent uncertain short- to medium-term economic outlook, we feel it is timely to undertake this "refresh". It will also closely tie in with the RPG reviews and help to inform them.

However, we are not going back to the drawing board – the NSS was designed as a robust, 20-year planning vision and its principles and policies are still valid. The NSS Review and Outlook will focus on how it is being implemented,

- taking stock of what has been achieved,
- learning from best practice – what is working and where can we do things better,
- identifying the challenges over the next few years and
- setting new and clear priorities for action.

The overall aim will remain of guiding more balanced regional development so that all regions can fully harness their development potential and that the country and island as a whole continues to grow.

Cities and larger urban areas that are attractive, competitive, sustainable and dynamic are one of the key drivers for regional economic and social development. International research clearly shows that successful countries and regions must have successful cities and urban areas at their core. As well as bringing economies of scale, good linkage between businesses and a concentrated skilled workforce, competitive cities contribute to the formation of competitive regions by acting as economic engines that promote regional growth and employment.

The updating of the NSS will look at our network of cities, the role and trends of our gateways and hub towns and set out what needs to be done to assure and accelerate their development as drivers for their wider regions and their more rural environs. Challenging questions will also need to be addressed within the NSS Review about the roles that rural areas must play in the wider context of regional development.

[It is expected that the NSS Review and Outlook will be submitted to Government for their consideration and endorsement shortly after Easter.]

Developing Areas Initiative

The NSS came into being in the middle of the most rapid economic and social change ever experienced in the history of our State. This growth in demand presented major challenges in terms of infrastructure and

services. Despite the best of intentions, mistakes have been made in the past - there's no getting away from it. But we have learned from these mistakes. We know better now. We know what doesn't work – and, more importantly, what does. We know that we must take a holistic approach to the development of sustainable communities and the delivery of both hard and soft infrastructure.

It is this cohesive approach which underpins the Developing Areas Initiative which now forms such a pivotal part of development policy and which I'm driving within my Department and across central and local Government.

We have identified 48 fast-growing urban and suburban areas which are under development pressure in terms of economic or social demand and where there is a lack of, or a need for, more joined-up central and local actions and governance to meet that demand in a co-ordinated way. We have identified the range of hard infrastructure – roads, water services and so on – as well as the softer infrastructure – the schools, amenities, community facilities - needed in these areas and the sequencing for that infrastructure.

Our next and more critical challenge is to ensure that the resources are available and prioritised to deliver it to them within what is available at central and local levels.

All-Island Dimension

I mentioned earlier the North West Gateway Initiative between the gateways of Letterkenny and Derry. Cross-border co-operation on economic, social and cultural issues are crucial because, in global terms, we're a small nation on a small island. In order to withstand and recover from economic shocks, we have to maximise our strengths and ensure that we are well-positioned to grasp the opportunities that we have or that come our way.

The reality is that we are operating within an all-island economy and so we have to start thinking in those terms. We are stronger when we work together - we can achieve more through collaboration than competition. As well as the Letterkenny-Derry initiative, significant progress has also been made on the Newry Dundalk "Twin City" Initiative, and the Councils on both side of the border have recognised the potential that working together on key projects can bring, even in these straitened times.

In order to put firm and positive strategies in place for all-island collaboration on spatial planning, a Framework for Collaboration on

Spatial Strategies on the Island of Ireland has been agreed between officials of my own Department and the Department of Regional Development in Northern Ireland. I expect it to be endorsed politically in both jurisdictions shortly.

It is built around three main themes and objectives:

- putting into action a focused range of regional and local spatial planning initiatives for key development areas, identified in both the NSS and in Northern Ireland's Regional Development Strategy;
- a prioritised programme of highly strategic and targeted investments to support key aspects of both spatial strategies; and
- a programme of research to further deepen our knowledge of development patterns trends and their drivers on an all-island basis.

I must stress that the Framework for Collaboration will be challenging – both for the two governments as well as for regional and local stakeholders, but the potential benefits arising from greater collaboration are enormous. Therefore, we must see it as a starting point which will require commitment, energy, support and clear actions from all stakeholders – central and local Governments, Government and State Agencies, the private sector, academia and NGOs.

Both the NSS Review and Outlook and the ongoing review of Northern Ireland's Regional Development Strategy will emphasise the all-island dimension to spatial planning which, as I've said, will be critically important as we move forward.

Conclusion

An excellent programme of speakers has been lined up for your conference this morning so I don't want to take up too much more of your time. Indeed, I'm looking forward to hearing some of the presentations and discussions here and will be taking back some key messages back to my Government colleagues.

In conclusion, I would like to say thank you again for the opportunity to be here with you and I wish the conference every success.

Thank you.