



An Taisce

The National Trust for Ireland



Principles for Sustainable Rural Settlement

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Preamble

An Taisce has long voiced concerns as to the ongoing suburbanisation of rural Ireland and the resulting decline of rural towns and villages. The evidence clearly shows that the highly dispersed settlement patterns that have been allowed to take hold are extremely costly and have stored up significant social, economic and environmental problems that are to the long-term detriment of rural communities and the rural economy.

In our submission to the National Spatial Strategy in 2001, An Taisce argued that in the absence of clear, proactive policies to support small rural towns and villages and prevent sprawl, major cities and their hinterlands would continue to grow disproportionately to the detriment of rural Ireland. Unfortunately, this has proven to be the case and, while it is now impossible to undo the mistakes of the past, An Taisce will continue to advocate a vision for settlement patterns in rural Ireland - an alternative for creating and maintaining sustainable and thriving rural communities - based on five core principles. None of these principles are radical. In fact, they are all supported by numerous national planning policy documents, which continue to be widely ignored or selectively applied in practice.

For the purpose of this short document, we have defined rural Ireland as areas outside larger towns and cities. We understand there is no single 'rural Ireland', but a highly heterogeneous space encompassing suburbanised commuter regions which are under severe development pressures and more remote regions which are experiencing long-term population decline. However, we believe the following five principles can be applied in all contexts to create a better and more resilient future for rural communities. In the absence of such principles, rural decline is likely to continue unchecked.

Five Core Principles:

- 1 A strong network of thriving towns and villages is fundamental for rural development.
- 2 Scattered housing in unserviced locations should be restricted and instead directed to rural towns and villages.
- 3 Implement a 'Serviced Sites Initiative' in rural towns and villages as an alternative to scattered housing.
- 4 Rural Ireland is a critical resource for a post-carbon world.
- 5 Manage the economic, social and environmental legacy of scattered housing.

Principle 1

A strong network of thriving towns and villages is fundamental for rural development.

Our historic network of rural towns and villages are a critical national asset and must be the cornerstone of any rural settlement policy designed to support rural economic development and service delivery. Maintaining rural communities with a high quality of life can only be achieved through firstly creating vibrant, resilient and self-reliant local economies.

Past policies and efforts aimed at rural regeneration have not succeeded due to a political blindness of the central importance of settlement patterns in the rural economy. Unfortunately, this trend has most recently been continued by the Commission for Economic Development in Rural Areas (CEDRA). As a consequence, many of our rural towns and villages, which should be hubs for the local economy, have been allowed to wither on the vine. Only nucleated, walkable communities can support opportunities for innovation, new enterprise and a diverse range of job-rich local shops, pubs and businesses; reduce social alienation and promote community interaction through sporting, cultural and voluntary activities; and underpin the delivery of essential services and infrastructure, such as public transport, post offices, schools, policing, broadband and health.

To date, planning policies have completely failed to curb the piecemeal suburbanisation of the Irish countryside. The net result has been a failure to develop the full potential of our rural towns and villages to act as economic centres and counterweights to the increasing dominance of larger cities. The consequences are not benign. The thin spread of population has led to the slow economic and demographic demise of large parts of rural Ireland, particularly the out-migration of young and highly skilled people.

Principle 2

Scattered housing in unserviced locations should be restricted and instead directed to rural towns and villages.

In order to bolster the strength of our rural towns and villages, counter-urbanisation and the haemorrhaging of population to surrounding hinterlands must be curtailed. Scattered commuter-driven rural housing is not a sustainable, efficient or viable strategy for rural regeneration.

Dispersed housing externalises very significant hidden costs to society at large. If the true costs were accounted for, settlement in isolated locations would be generally unaffordable for most households. Dispersal also considerably increases environmental pressures and heightens the vulnerability of rural householders to cost inflation (e.g. transport fuel, carbon taxes and 'septic tank' charges), service withdrawals and infrastructure downgrades (e.g. hospitals, ambulance services, roads, schools, post offices etc.).

New 'one-off' dwellings should be strictly regulated and new housing demand instead directed to nucleated settlements through a plan-led approach. In principle, there should be a strong general presumption against all new dwellings outside locations where the services and infrastructure required by citizens cannot be effectively and efficiently delivered at a reasonable cost.

Only households with a clearly verifiable 'rural need' (i.e. immediately and directly involved in agriculture, forestry or other rural based primary employment in the locality) should be permitted to build outside of serviced settlements and only after demonstrating that no alternative existing dwellings are available to meet their needs. In practice, this requires a review of the Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines 2005 that are so vague so as to permit them to be routinely ignored, reinterpreted and selectively applied by local authorities. As a result, they have achieved little in stemming the proliferation of unsustainable rural settlement patterns.

Principle 3

Implement a 'Serviced Sites Initiative' in rural towns and villages as an alternative to scattered housing.

An Taisce recognises that there is a significant demand for self-build dwellings which are tailored to individual preferences as an alternative to purchasing homes in multi-unit schemes, which can often be of poor quality. This demand is currently being met through uncontrolled ad hoc building in the countryside.

An Taisce instead recommends the introduction of a national 'Serviced Sites Initiative' supported by government. Land in serviced settlements, such as small towns and villages, could be purchased either directly by local authorities or via private initiatives and the required physical infrastructure put in place (e.g. sewers, water, roads, communications etc.). Individual plots would then be sold at a reasonable cost to people who wish to build their own dwelling, subject to certain design parameters. Such an initiative would provide the advantages of a one-off dwelling but in a serviced location, that supports the development of nucleated, walkable communities.

Crucially, in order to be a successful, a Serviced Sites Initiative must be buttressed by corresponding planning and fiscal policies that fully remove the current hidden subsidies and perverse incentives towards self-building in unserviced, isolated locations. While such a proactive initiative would have up-front costs to the Exchequer, it would yield very significant long-term savings, increase the property tax base of local authorities and support wider policies aimed at rural renewal. It would further serve as an important mechanism for achieving the political acceptance of the need for new restrictive housing policies in unserviced rural areas. The potential for a Serviced Sites Initiative could be explored through the 5% of ERDF funding available to Ireland for the 2014 to 2020 period that is ring-fenced for fostering new and innovative solutions in the field of sustainable urban development.

Principle 4

Rural Ireland is a critical resource for a post-carbon world.

The scientific evidence on man-made global warming is unequivocal. By the end of this century, the use of fossil fuels must cease requiring the complete decarbonisation of our transport and energy systems. In any event, by the middle of this century the global demand for fossil fuels will outstrip supply resulting in significant energy price inflation, particularly for transport. This requires a complete transition to sustainable modes of transport and a transformation in how we use energy.

Planning for the transition must start now. In rural areas, over 90% of all trips are made by private car and the effective provision of alternative public transportation is impossible due to the highly dispersed origin and destination of journeys. As a result, thinly spread car-dependent rural communities are particularly vulnerable to fuel price inflation for transport, home-heating and the measures that will be necessary to achieve international climate change obligations, such as increased road user charging and carbon taxes.

An Taisce believes that rural areas can be Ireland's most precious resource for a post-carbon world in terms of sustainable local food production, energy efficiency and decentralised energy generation through, for example, small-scale wind, hydro, biomass, geothermal, combined heat and power, and solar. If planned correctly, this opportunity could be a significant boon for rural communities, help increase their resilience and to buffer them from the vulnerabilities of global uncertainty and energy price inflation.

However, the current widespread commuter-driven suburbanisation of our finite rural land is an entirely short-sighted and profligate use of this important resource, creating multiple land-use conflicts. Instead, government should plan for a post-carbon future based around a polycentric network of small nucleated, walkable settlements that support self-reliant, relocalised economies while leaving sufficient space for other essential land-uses such as local food, forestry and energy production.

Principle 5

Manage the economic, social and environmental legacy of scattered housing.

Despite successive high-level government objectives that have consistently had the stated objective of preventing commuter-driven scattered rural housing and sprawl, it is now recognised that these policies have been widely ignored or selectively enforced. However, now a significant proportion of the Irish population live in over 430,000 dispersed houses and very often facing the brunt of transport cost inflation, downgrading of infrastructure and service withdrawals due to ongoing austerity measures. This costly legacy is now locked-in, unfortunately cannot be unpicked but must be managed appropriately, as follows:

Water

Water is a fundamental natural resource critical for public health, ecosystems and the economy. According to the EU Water Framework Directive, Ireland is under a legally binding obligation to protect and improve water quality to a strict timetable. Unregulated diffuse private waste-water treatment systems are a significant source of water pollution. Due to the characteristics of Irish soils, there is little capacity for further new private waste-water treatment systems, as the cumulative impact now represents a public health and environmental hazard. The ongoing regulation of private waste-water treatment systems must be fully implemented without delay. Means-tested grants for remedial works for non-performing treatment systems should continue to be made available to subsidise the required works for rural householders. Given the scale of private treatment systems that have been permitted, this will be extremely costly for the public purse. However, the protection and improvement of the quality of our water resources must be a non-negotiable public policy objective.

Energy

Ireland's legally binding EU 2020 target for renewable energy production is driving a significant expansion of onshore wind turbines and new grid infrastructure. Due to the widespread spatial scattering of houses, it is now not possible to locate this infrastructure at a sufficient setback distance from people's homes, causing significant public opposition and concern. An Taisce recommends that Ireland urgently move away from the current uncoordinated developer-led

approach to wind farm development towards a plan-led strategic approach. Suitable sites should be identified through a nationally coordinated Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA). The potential for clustering wind energy development on land in public ownership which is more remote from people's homes, such as former cutaway industrial peatlands where restoration of bog habitat is a potential option and existing grid infrastructure can be utilised, should be fully investigated.

Transport

Ireland is under a legally binding obligation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 20% by 2020. In the coming years, Ireland's target will be increased by up to 40% by 2030. The transport sector, largely due to the massive increase in the use of private cars as a consequence of spatial sprawl, is a very significant emitter of greenhouse gases. It is therefore an absolute imperative that investment in public transport, walking and cycling is maintained and improved in order to offer communities a viable alternative to private cars. Public transport is also an important service for disadvantaged, isolated and elderly rural residents. Given the considerable legacy costs associated with Ireland's scattered settlement patterns, joined up, innovative and strategic approaches are required, and linked to better implementation of spatial planning policies. Progressive price-based demand management measures to reduce private car use will also be required, with all revenue raised ring-fenced for sustained investment in shifting journeys from private to alternative modes, particularly in rural areas.

Landscape

Despite widespread piecemeal suburbanisation of the countryside, Ireland still boasts some few remaining outstanding landscapes. These landscapes are a critical national asset, particularly for the tourism sector, and must be protected. Currently, most local authorities have design guidelines for single houses that are routinely ignored in practice. After restrictions, any new dwellings permitted must fully comply with sympathetic design and site guidelines (see, for example, 'Building Sensitively in Ireland's Landscapes' produced by Fáilte Ireland and An Taisce). Fiscal incentives should be offered for the sensitive restoration of vernacular buildings as opposed to new builds. Oversized suburban-style dwellings and excessive removal of hedgerows should be prohibited. According to Census 2011, there are over 150,000 vacant houses in rural areas and 60,000 vacant holiday homes. There is no justification for permitting any further holiday or second homes outside serviced locations. Incentives should be considered for the demolition of vacant one-off dwellings that are unlikely ever to be occupied.

Habitats

Under the Habitats and Birds Directive, Ireland is under a legally binding obligation to protect and improve habitats. The cumulative impact of multiple one-off dwellings is having a significant impact, particularly in terms of water quality, loss of habitat and disturbance. After restrictions, any proposal for a new dwelling within 15 kilometres of a Natura 2000 site should be the subject of an Appropriate Assessment (AA), including a full ecological assessment of cumulative impacts.

If you require any further information on the above policy issue, please get in contact



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