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**Dr. Brendan Williams, Dr. James Berry and Professor Stanley McGreal - The East Coast Corridor****Spatial Development Strategies for the Dublin-Belfast Metropolitan Regions****Introduction**

The European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) adopted in May 1999 (European Union, 1999) established a number of common strategic objectives for community policies and development initiatives relevant to the Dublin-Belfast corridor. The strategic guidelines include the development of a polycentric/multi-centred urban system to strengthen partnership between urban and rural areas and promote integrated transport and communications concepts. The future of urban regions within Europe is dependent on a combination of policies involving economic competitiveness, social cohesion and environmental quality as essential requirements in delivering a sustainability agenda. Development processes influencing such policies include a combination of factors. Firstly the restructuring of economic activities is resulting in shifts towards high technology industries and internationally traded services. Secondly the agglomeration of economic activities is being encouraged as by commercial enterprises clustering to achieve economies of scale. Finally the emergence of economic corridors within urban regions are experiencing strong development pressures particularly along the main transport axis which link urban areas and smaller settlements.

The Dublin-Belfast corridor is identified as a core axis with the potential to attract inward investment flows from the economies of Europe and Ireland. Reports undertaken by business organisations both north and south such as the Confederation of British Industry (NI) and Confederation of Irish Industry have identified the potential spin-off in terms of growth, revenue generated and employment created from enhanced business and commerce links. Within the eastern seaboard corridor the metropolitan regions of Dublin and Belfast occupy strategic positions to attract investment and development as well as benefit from the wider economic spin-off. This paper specifically considers the extent to which current policy in relation to planning and infrastructural development is seeking to capture these potential benefits based upon a cross-border dimension.

The ESDP places considerable emphasis upon spatial planning and Trans European Networks for transport, energy and telecommunications, while programmes such as INTERREG IIC are clearly geared to assist cross border projects. In this respect the EU is having an increasing impact on spatial development within member states. The aims of the European Commission as expressed in key reports such as Europe 2000 (EU, 1991) and Europe 2000+ (EU, 1995) include sustained and balanced economic development through co-operation and joint action between interested parties at all levels, supported by a common framework for territorial planning. Arguably due to past divisions the concepts proposed under Europe 2000+ have not been activated with the rigor or enthusiasm seen in comparable cross-border regions in mainland Europe. With increasing co-operation, including the development of institutions notably the Northern Ireland Assembly and various north-south cross-border bodies (North-South Ministerial Council) it is now opportune to reassess the potential of economic links within the Dublin-Belfast corridor. The Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland, 2025 (DRD, 2001) identifies the importance of the corridor in the context of the Belfast Metropolitan Area and the designation of growth towns such as Banbridge and Newry. Similarly, the Strategic Planning Guidelines for the Dublin Area and the statutory development plans for North Dublin (Fingal) place a significant emphasis on the importance of the corridor particularly for future development planning. If borders are not to be barriers to integration in land use planning terms then agencies and systems need to be able to communicate and co-operate effectively together.

The core aims of the ESDP have been adopted by the respective member states in developing strategies for urban-rural relationships. The approaches contained in the ESDP document for the UK (DETR, 2000) and the National Spatial Strategy for Ireland (DOE, 2000) embody the concept of polycentric spatial development based on economic and transport linkages and cross-border co-operation. These internal and external communication linkages are expressed in terms of "gateways" within the context of regional systems and diversified development strategies. Examination of the specific urban/regional development and planning policies relating to the Dublin region, for example, indicate that while these strategic concepts are advanced, practical achievements in diverting development from the pressure areas in the Dublin region to the west and south is not occurring. Consequently the trends of dispersal northwards towards the corridor are likely to be further reinforced.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the European perspective concerning spatial development strategies in relation to metropolitan corridors; to assess the role of these strategies specifically on the metropolitan areas of Dublin and Belfast; and to consider the impact of development and investment policies on the Dublin-Belfast corridor. The structure of the paper falls into two broad parts, which deals initially with the development and planning policy issues in the Dublin region. This followed by an overview of the Northern Ireland perspective and the Regional Development Strategy, which incorporates the vision of an outward looking, dynamic and liveable region and where diversity is strength rather than a division. The discussion within the paper considers the intra and inter-regional development prospects for the Dublin-Belfast corridor. Although further research is necessary, broad indicators are used to consider some of the development impacts within the corridor.

### **Recent Development Patterns in Dublin**

*The major increase in development activity in the eastern region of Ireland including Dublin is directly linked to economic performance over the past decade. In a recent paper, Williams examines the results of emerging development trends and their particular impact on transportation and congestion in the Dublin region (Williams, 2001). In particular the region has experienced major employment growth of 39% between 1994 and 1999 which compares with 29% growth for the rest of the state (CSO, 1999). The preference for large-scale multinational employers to locate in this region has been linked to the size and quality of its catchment area, labour pool, and infrastructure facilities including port and airport connections. The East region in turn accounted for 50% of the country's growth in the population over 15 years of age, 49% of the national increase in numbers at work and 46.3% of all new private cars registered over the period 1994-1999. This disproportionate share of growth in economic activity is well in excess of its 1996 population share at 38.8%. The critical under-performance is housing provisions where the proportionate share has not increased in tandem with the other factors. The difficulties associated with housing production continues to cause major long term impacts on the regions development pattern with commuters pushing up housing demand in the north Leinster area.*

The importance of the M50 ring around the city is reflected in the locational pattern of the major IT employers locating in Dublin over the 1990s. This clustering of business activity is similar to that experienced in many other cities and is a major influence on the residential and transportation pattern of the new Dublin workforce. In addition a major wave of new office development has occurred in suburban Dublin as the Central Business District vacancy levels and supply of development land has declined. Developments including office parks, technology parks and the airport districts have become large generators of traffic in the Dublin Region with 150,000 car journeys in the M50 on a daily basis (NRA, 1999). The Edge City with its dispersal of employment locations has significant implications for transportation patterns and internal accessibility within the Dublin region.

The regional spatial consequence of this increased activity has been characterised by the outward dispersal of housing and employment functions from the existing core of the urban area to the expanding commuting region. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the commuter belt has expanded from a concentrated area of 15km around the economic core to 25km and now stretches to 100km from the central area. While such development was viewed initially as the consolidation of emerging large commuter towns such as Naas and Drogheda recent trends indicate that many smaller villages are now experiencing significantly high levels of new housing construction. Indeed the peripheral expansion and the urban spread in Dublin now extends northwards with a catchment area spreading beyond the border into Northern Ireland which is reinforcing the corridor effect. Many business and development interests already operate on a cross-border basis with working and commuter patterns evident in the cross-border areas of Dundalk and Newry.

### **Dublin Regional Policy Context**

The first Strategic Planning Guidelines (SPGs) for the Dublin region were published in 1999 with a review and update occurring in 2000 as a consequence of the initial population and growth projections being exceeded. Whilst the review was generally welcomed as a useful contribution in attempting to resolving Dublin's urban development problems the absence of serious funding commitments and proposals for effective implementation reduce the credibility of the SPGs. The fact that the SPGs were brought forward subsequent to six of the affected local authorities having already adopted their own statutory development plans opens up issues for potential concern.

The SPGs places a strong emphasis on sustainable integrated urban development along existing or proposed transportation corridors separated by green wedges within which development largely for local needs only are to be permitted. Already some of the local authorities concerned have submitted planning proposals which are contrary to the guidelines. Contentious development proposals include the potential development of major business parks at the Dublin Border in County Meath and near Bray, County Wicklow. In June 2001 the National Planning Appeals Board rejected plans for a business park in Wicklow which had been endorsed by the local planning authority. This signals the board's efforts to uphold the SPGs on the basis of proper planning and sustainable development criteria but clearly potential conflicts will continue to materialise

The policy shift towards sustaining current economic development is also evident in the National Development Plan for the period 2000-2006 (DOE, 2000). The plan proposals are aimed specifically at the infrastructural development required nationally and with particular emphasis on the development of public transport in Dublin. With a funding commitment of over £IR40 billion this represents the beginning of an intense public capital programme aimed at improving the competitiveness and efficiency of the Dublin Region. Major projects underway in the Dublin Region include the completion of the orbital road network around the western edge of the city, the motorway from Dublin to Belfast and the access tunnel to Dublin port. Previous experience concerning proposals in the region for extensive infrastructural and public transportation improvements reveal a poor record of achievement on implementation.

Sustainable development in the context of urban development policy has at its core the aim of avoiding uncompensated costs. In the context of the housing and settlement strategy for the Dublin region, sustainability concerns will need to ensure that the integration of housing provision, infrastructure and transportation contribute to economic development over the longer term as well as improving quality of life in respect of other indicators such as education and health. Under the UN and EU Treaties of Maastricht and Amsterdam, the concept has been endorsed and adapted in Ireland. The document, *Sustainable Development – A Strategy for Ireland*, (DOE, 1997) reinforces the need to encourage careful planning of residential, commercial and industrial uses; making effective use of land within existing urban areas; and integrating strategic, economic and social planning within the development process. The concept of sustainable development for urban environments with growth achieved in parallel rather than at the expense of environmental quality is now widely accepted (UN Agenda 21 and the Maastricht Treaties). Despite the acknowledgement of such strategies current housing problems clearly demonstrates tensions between these policy goals and an ability to implement change. The difficulty in adapting to change in the urban economy is frustrated by a lack of co-ordination between national and regional settlement strategies.

### **Future Urban Development Policy Initiatives**

A consultation paper on The National Spatial Strategy has been widely debated in Ireland and announcements of key decisions on such policy is expected towards the end of 2001. An assessment of the proposals indicates that decisions on several major areas with particular relevance to the Dublin Region are well advanced. The aspiration to distribute new industrial service and enterprise development within Ireland has already been reflected in reduced grant aid to businesses locating in Dublin with effect from January 2000. Attempts to redirect such development will have investment consequences for the Dublin region should an economic slow down occur. However redirecting urban growth to alternative areas with the capacity to absorb both the positive and negative externalities of such growth may prove problematic

The consideration of new institutional arrangements for land use and transport planning in the Greater Dublin area is also at consultation stage. This policy document recognises the need for structural changes in key urban management processes for the Dublin area. In particular the sharing of administrative and executive power within several layers of government is seen as creating overlapping responsibility and giving rise to competing or conflicting interests. The need to link transportation planning to other development processes is clearly transparent. However the essential role of economic development policy in generating demand is not sufficiently emphasised in the discussion document. Indeed the extent of such demand and its dispersal in the wider Dublin region is significantly advanced and has major implications for future urban management particularly in terms of the development of the economic core area, the morphological agglomeration and the functioning of the urban region. Furthermore no single agency is responsible for the co-ordination and integration of an urban management policy response to the problems of the region. Consequently there is an absence of a comprehensive approach to urban development issues. The need for effective urban management has increased with rapid economic development given that existing resources including infrastructure is predominately fixed in the short term.

In summary the broad mix of urban policy measures relating to the Dublin region represent an attempt to contain and provide a more sustainable basis for the expanding economic base of the region. Attempts to divert growth from the pressure points in the core area to other regions are peritoneal and the market trend towards the East Region is continuing. Such a pattern is likely to further intensify development pressures north of Dublin along the East corridor particularly with the high house price levels within the city. The considerable potential offered by the main transport axis linking Dublin and Belfast is likely to continue to be an obvious location for residential growth, economic development and inward investment. The subsequent sections of the paper consider the position in Northern Ireland and the status of the corridor from the Belfast perspective.

### **New Planning Structures Post-devolution in Northern Ireland**

Since devolution the structure of government in Northern Ireland has changed substantially with the introduction of 11 new departments. Under direct rule the monolithic structure of the DOENI had a sweeping array of powers and functions whereas under the new system the responsibility for planning related matters is now divided between three departments. The key players are the now slimmed down Department of the Environment (DOE), the Department for Regional Development (DRD), and Department for Social Development (DSD). Currently the structure and role of the Planning Service which operates under the ambit of the DOE and deals with operational planning matters (development plan and development control) and the 26 District Councils in Northern Ireland which are consulted on planning matters (no executive planning powers) remain unaltered.

Executive responsibilities are discharged through the departments, subject to the powers and roles of the Northern Ireland Assembly and its committee system. Checks and balances are in-built to give reassurances that the new institutions command the confidence of both sections of the Northern Ireland community without prejudicing workability. There is also a need to create inter-linkages between departments to forge a sense of joined up governance on planning, development and property investment matters at different spatial scales (Berry, Brown and McGreal, 2001).

In terms of planning and development strategies and the implementation of policies all three departments have core responsibilities. The Strategic Planning (NI) Order 1999 conferred powers to the DRD to formulate a Regional Development Strategy (RDS) for Northern Ireland. The pre-devolution DOENI had started work on the strategy but under the new departmental arrangements, responsibilities for taking this forward were transferred to the DRD. As powers required by the DRD to carry out this function are still needed by the DOE to undertake its planning control functions they could not be transferred under the Transfer of Functions Order and were obtained independently through the 1999 Order. The latter places new statutory responsibilities (Article 4) on the DRD to provide policy guidance and advice in relation to the RDS and to coordinate its implementation. In practice the planning policy, development plans and development schemes prepared by other government departments are required in future to be consistent with the strategic objectives and policies of the RDS

A central component of the Regional Development Strategy (RDS), which has been the subject of a public examination (DRD, 2000) and subsequent adoption by the Assembly (DRD, 2001), is to develop the Belfast Metropolitan Area as a city region capable of competing in the league of European cities. However responsibility for the preparation and implementation of development (area) plans of which the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) is a prime example resides with the DOE emphasising the need for cross departmental collaboration in delivering top-down regional, metropolitan and local planning strategies and policies. The need for collaboration between departments is further reinforced by the portfolio of responsibilities held by the DSD. In terms of planning and development, the DSD has strategic responsibility for regeneration initiatives and structures in place to facilitate the implementation of renewal policies in urban and rural areas. Clearly, the overlapping nature of departmental responsibilities necessitates an integrated approach in the delivery of cross-sectoral solutions to complex social, economic and environmental problems.

## The Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025

Set within the context of the European Spatial Development Perspective, which informs the preparation of regional spatial strategies at EU level, the RDS provides an important planning framework for Northern Ireland based on economic competitiveness, social cohesion and sustainable development. This will require innovative arrangements at the sub-regional level and regular monitoring to ensure that the strategy, development plans and development control processes are responding to emerging trends and opportunities. The key factors driving change in the province include a regional population growth rate, which exceeds that of the UK and the Republic of Ireland making Northern Ireland one of the fastest growing regions in Europe, accommodating a population growth of 105,000 persons by 2015, the need for 160,000 new households by 2015 with over 60% of these households comprising one or two persons, and an increase in home ownership which is expected to increase from 71% in 2000 to 80% by 2015. In addition it is anticipated that the development needs of economic growth will necessitate 100,000 new jobs whereas on the downside the number of vehicles in the Region will double by 2025 resulting in increased environmental and accessibility problems. These social and economic pressures are important overarching issues within the RDS in planning for a fast growing regional economy with the capacity of providing high value added sustainable outputs.

The pivotal component for the planning of the Region is the Spatial Development Strategy, which provides a hub, corridor and gateway framework for regional development. It is designed to promote balanced and integrated growth across the network of cities, main and small towns and their rural hinterlands. This functional approach to spatial development based on a polycentric network of main and small towns recognises the catalytic impact of the Belfast sub-region on economic growth and development. Radiating outwards the transport corridors offer the potential to achieve a balanced growth strategy throughout Northern Ireland with primary links to the regional gateways of ports and airports connecting with European and global communications network. By making the best use of key regional assets to accommodate growth the Spatial Development Strategy intends to promote sustained investment in the regeneration of urban areas, maximise the use of neighbourhood resources, improved urban transport systems and encourage more sustainable forms of housing development. Sustainability in the development process is to be achieved through integrated land use and transportation planning by encouraging compact urban forms, reusing of Brownfield sites and creating high quality urban and rural environments

In relation to the Belfast Metropolitan Area and its associated travel to work hinterland a balanced portfolio of development options are envisaged including continued revitalisation within the BMA, planned lateral expansion on the key transport corridors and accommodating growth in main towns. Given the environmental constraints, congestion pressures, the need for balanced growth and the availability of investment locations in nearby centres the strategy envisages that the main towns of Antrim, Banbridge, Craigavon, Downpatrick, Lame and Newtownards will, depending their growth potential, develop as counter magnets to the BMA. A ring of seven smaller towns closer to the BMA have been earmarked for significant planned expansion to accommodate housing and economic growth within the core area. This balancing of growth and development is reflected in the proposed distribution of the 160000 additional dwellings required in Northern Ireland by 2015. From housing growth indicators it is envisaged that the BMA and its hinterland will accommodate 77,500 new dwellings with the north, south and west of the region absorbing the remaining 82,500. Extending out from the BMA to include the district council areas of Banbridge and Newry and Mourne it is estimated that 63,500 (40%) of the total housing requirement over the time frame of the strategy will be located within the immediate proximity of the transportation path corresponding with the Belfast-Newry corridor.

The Regional Strategic Transport Network (RSTN) has therefore a fundamental role within the RDS in making the best use of the infrastructure network and in providing development and investment opportunity along key transport routes such as the Belfast-Newry Corridor. The RSTN comprises 5 transport corridors including 4 linked corridors and the BMA Transport Corridor. Specifically the Eastern Seaboard Corridor intends to provide high quality inter-city links between Belfast and Dublin. The strategy is therefore committed to reinforcing the market for rail services by encouraging development in appropriate locations along rail corridors and at transport nodes where access to the network can be gained. By encouraging cross border networks of economic co-operation and enterprise the RDS also intends to tap the potential of the Belfast-Dublin development corridor to accelerate the growth of the manufacturing and service sectors. This will have an ultimate impact on the spatial development and investment strategies of the BMA and towns along the corridor.

Furthermore the intention to integrate land use and transportation within the strategy will necessitate housing requirements being fully reflected in transport investment planning particularly in the opening up of serviced land for housing provision, maximising the potential of higher residential densities, and increasing the housing supply side within development plans.

The RDS contains an aspiration target that 60% of projected housing requirements should be accommodated on Brownfield sites within existing urban areas and towns over 5000 population. The potential for achieving the target for individual towns is to be determined through the development plan process using the sequential approach informed by urban capacity studies and taking account of local conditions. Within the Belfast-Newry corridor (including the BMA and the district council areas of Banbridge and Newry and Mourne) 38100 dwellings of the projected housing requirement will be targeted within existing urban limits. Although both the BMA Plan and the Banbridge/Newry & Mourne Area Plan 2015(DOE, 2001) are in the early stages of preparation there is some degree of scepticism whether this target can be realistically achieved.

Parallel initiatives to stimulate both urban and rural revitalisation based on cross-border joint initiatives will further reinforce the cumulative benefits of the corridor in terms of employment, services, tourism and local infrastructure provision. Full implementation of the corridor as a Trans-European Network will require improved strategic cross-border transport infrastructure, services and connections between towns particularly Newry and Dundalk. In this regard the corridor offers a development impetus based on a sizable catchment area with access to consumer and labour markets. Indeed there is the potential for a range of specialist business opportunities to cluster on the corridor. The regional towns of Banbridge and Newry are identified within the RDS as Strategic Employment Locations (SELs) to attract and accommodate major inward investment projects and local enterprise. This provides the potential for a range of specialist business opportunities to cluster on the corridor such as engineering, information communications technology and biotechnology. These business clusters are to be located at established nodes within towns or in industrial office park developments at the edge of towns convenient to road or rail transport interchanges. The RDS suggests that over the longer term perspective changes in economic circumstance or travel demand patterns within the corridor may necessitate the building of a composite Belfast-Dublin section of motorway and rail route from Lisburn via Banbridge to Poyntzpass north of Newry to meet future demand within a high growth area by providing an additional inter-city route and a new commuter rail line (DRD, 2001).

#### **House Price as an Indicator of Demand in the Belfast-Newry Corridor**

Within the context of this paper the RDS and its component parts will have a profound impact on the spatial development strategies at the regional, sub-regional and local levels in Northern Ireland. These impacts will clearly permeate to the Belfast –Newry Corridor and with similar strategies envisaged in the Republic of Ireland for the Dublin-Dundalk leg of the corridor the implementation of a Trans-European Network will require integrated planning, development and investment decisions on housing, economic processes and infrastructure provision. In terms of residential development demand-supply relationship have an important bearing on house price performance in high growth areas such as South Belfast and South Down, which broadly correlate with the corridor. House price is a particularly sensitive indicator with markets reflecting both macroeconomic performances, as well as more local matters notably development pressures. Recent research by the authors (NIHE, 2001) on house price analysis for the BMA over the period 1995-2000 shows that the percentage increase for the BMA at 89.86%, with the average sale price increasing from £46,557 in 1995 to £88,393 is significantly above that for the province as a whole (73.76%). Averaged out over the 5-year period this represents an annual increase of 17.97 %. Mapping of house price using GIS shows that the highest price locations are in the southern sector of Belfast extending out along the corridor towards Lisburn. It is also apparent that there are steep price gradients, moving from the high priced locations in the upper quartile to areas with property prices in the lowest quartile over distances of less than 0.5 km.

High house price in the southern sector of the BMA and rippling out influences are pushing purchasers notably the first time house buyer further out along the Belfast–Newry corridor to towns such as Lisburn, Hillsborough, Dromore and Banbridge. It is interesting to observe that average prices along the corridor for the year 2000 for South Belfast (£135,119); Lisburn(£92,505) and Mid and South Down including Banbridge and Newry(£91,815) are considerably in excess of average prices for Northern Ireland (£82,816) The result is that locational decision making becomes a trade-off between housing costs and transport costs. Additional to the cost of travel which is primarily car based, are the associated externalities of commuter congestion in the BMA. Furthermore within the Newry-Armagh catchment area there is evidence of investor activity in the market where those working in the Republic of Ireland are acquiring cheaper housing on the northern side for residential purposes and by taking advantage of the rail/road infrastructure are within commuting range of the Dundalk-Drogheda-Dublin corridor (NIHE, 2001). This illustrates the ever-increasing range of the commuter belt, which is likely to become even more intense as the road, and rail programme proceeds. Clearly these trends indicate the strong relationship, which exists between purchaser behaviour and accessibility to transport networks. However the planning system needs to urgently address the relationships between spatial development strategies and policies for delivering integrated land use and transport planning specifically within the development plans for the BMA and the Banbridge/Newry & Mourne Area.

## Conclusion

Regional strategies with an emphasis on transport corridors are being advanced as a partial solution to development pressures but also as a mechanism for delivering a balanced growth strategy. The metropolitan regions of Dublin and Belfast are experiencing similar urban development pressures. Economic growth in recent years has resulted in almost full employment and high activity levels across key sectors of the respective economies both north and south. Economic performance trends are placing emerging constraints on the future urban growth capacities with regard to housing, infrastructure and transport provision. The demand for housing in both urban areas has resulted in rapid house price inflation with the result that house purchasers are being forced further out along the corridor. This is contributing to an expansion in the catchment areas suggesting that locational decisions are a trade off between house price and transport costs. In this context the availability of land to accommodate growth and investment along transport corridors will require integrated strategies capable of delivering sustainable outputs. This paper recognises the respective strategic benefits, north and south, in relation to the Dublin-Belfast corridor. However the capacity to maximise this potential will require the soft infrastructure based on co-operation and integrated decision making as well as the hard infrastructure of physical investment.

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