



Oifig an
Rialaitheora Pleanála
Office of the
Planning Regulator

**Statement by the Planning Regulator to the
Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action 23rd February 2021**

***Key Issues and Challenges in Delivering Reductions in Carbon Emissions
from the Transport Sector adopting the Avoid – Shift – Improve approach.***

Introduction

Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation. You asked me to focus on key policies in achieving the transport sector's share of the 51% reduction in carbon emissions needed by 2030 bearing in mind the Avoid-Shift-Improve approach.

Proper planning and sustainable development is fundamentally good for our planet, its climate and all living things depending on it.

The Oireachtas placed the concept of Proper Planning and Sustainable Development at the heart of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended).

It permeates every policy layer from the National Planning Framework published by Government in 2018 to statutory policy and guidance published on an ongoing basis by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Our remit in the Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR) is as an independent overseer of the implementation, by local authorities and An Bord Pleanála, of the regulatory and policy framework for planning set by the Oireachtas and Government.

In my remarks today, I would like to share our sense of both current practice and future priorities in relation to three key areas:

- Avoiding increasing energy demands through proper planning;
- Accelerating the shift towards more sustainable travel patterns; and
- Diversifying our energy systems so we can power a sustainable future.

Are we avoiding increased energy demands through proper planning?

Historically our model of development has hardwired us to mainly low density development dependent on car-based transport, perhaps due to poor awareness of impacts on the environment and the weakness of sustainable alternatives.

Legislative reforms in 2010 did introduce stricter controls on where and how much land could be zoned for development, but before then development patterns were predominantly market rather than plan led and roads rather than public transport led.

It has been challenging to implement the 2010 Core Strategy reforms, which has required de-zoning in commuter locations and rezoning in urban areas.

Today the Government's National Planning Framework (NPF) commits to securing an average of 40% of all new homes on brownfield and infill development land, rising to 50% in cities and 30% in our towns and villages through local authority planning.

My Office, established in 2019, is statutorily obliged to enforce the NPF, a policy published in 2018. We are an early stage in our oversight of development plan preparation under the new approach introduced by the NPF. Today, 31 local authorities are re-writing their plans finishing by around end 2022.

From our vantage point, we see a mixed picture of these emerging plans and indeed the wider functioning of our planning process and its economic underpinnings.

Some local authorities work hard on climate action centred planning policy despite significant vested interest, political and sometimes public opposition where the link between certain developments and climate are not fully appreciated.

Other local authorities point to brownfield and higher density development being much less economic compared to lower density greenfield development. They see following traditional patterns of development essential in meeting housing supply pressures.

Communities too, often want to retain familiar 19th century skylines as our cities and towns address 21st century challenges including an extra 1 million people by 2040.

Building upwards and making better use of underutilised urban land, providing attractive, affordable urban housing and connected communities are some antidotes to our historical business-as-usual outwards pattern of energy intensive urban sprawl.

Yet regeneration is massively time and resource consuming, often litigious and – without effective participatory based planning can be locally contentious.

Our 2019 Annual Report highlighted that until the NPF is properly reflected and acted upon, we will continue to approve and develop too much in locations that hard wire us into increasing energy demands and fail to tap sustainable energy sources.

Turning around the affordability, attractiveness and viability of large-scale housing delivery in town and city centres is critical.

So would a national brownfield and infill development land register to identify what compact growth means and to monitor and measure progress on Government targets.

Land activation measures such as progressing the Land Development Agency Bill, empowering local authorities with resources and powers to implement vacant and derelict sites legislation and swift despatch of litigation arising are also vital.

How will we shift towards active and sustainable travel?

Spatial planning policies are hugely influential in determining transport patterns. The less we spread out, travel lowers and so do energy needs and emissions.

Our response to the pandemic has also opened our minds to a different way of living, working and moving that is kinder to our communities and our planet.

Technology can break old links between work and mobility. Remote working is a new lifeline for rural towns and villages. The desire to help struggling town and city centres delivers advances in new pedestrian and cycle friendly urban areas.

Government is making unprecedented investments in active and public transport and we are working closely with the National Transport Authority in the assessment of development plans and feeding into the work of the NTA in the preparation of Metropolitan Area Transport Strategies across our cities.

In particular, we are championing the critical importance of full integration between transport and land use planning at the local plan level and have seen really positive advances like the recent draft Local Area Plan for Athy and Dingle Hub project.

With both the NTA and local authorities, we want to put in place programmes to smart-skill local authorities in delivering sustainable mobility solutions for wider county areas and key towns working with communities harnessing Government investment.

But first we must shift from promoting sprawling estates and scattered housing, which never work from a public transport and active travel perspective.

How can planning improve the sustainability of our energy sources?

We have national targets to generate 70% of our electricity from renewable sources by 2030 which could mean delivering 4GW onshore.

Communities want real action on climate. One of the best ways to tap that desire would be to show how every county in the country could play its part in delivering that 4GW to 2030 and more with offshore wind to a carbon free society by 2050.

Instead, OPR assessments of some local authority plans find effective bans on roll-out of sustainable energy sources. If repeated around the country, these will block achievement of our targets. We will act resolutely on any policy breaches we find.

Publication of updated Wind Energy Guidelines is urgently needed, but is a first step. A national renewable energy roadmap with county-specific targets could provide the basis for designation of Sustainable Energy Zones by local authorities in their development plans where community wind, solar and other renewable sources match up with national targets so places to compete for sustainable and ethical investment.

By tasking Regional Assemblies with the Climate Action Regional Offices and local authority energy agencies and national climate experts, we quickly need a spatially co-ordinated strategy, to get to 4GW and beyond and secure greater consensus on where and how to electrify our mobility, home heating and wider economic systems.

Conclusion

The foresight of the Oireachtas has left us with a legacy of planning legislation that already statutorily requires local authorities to plan in a way knowing that our future depends on climate action.

Section 10(2)(n) of the Planning Act already demands forward planning that:

- reduces future patterns of energy consumption;
- shifts our present energy needs towards renewable sources; and
- adapts to climate changes already happening.

The pace in implementing this law is quickening since the publication in the NPF, the establishment of our Office and the coming of local authority climate action plans. These should be strongly linked to and give quantitative direction to the development plan preparation and planning application decision making processes.

Local government and local authority planning has a central role to play in the Avoid-Shift-Improve approach. But it needs clear policy frameworks and resources to work with to ensure local authority members focus on the task at hand rather than seeing our submissions as intrusions into local democracy.

Notwithstanding this, the OPR has a statutory mandate, legislated for by the Oireachtas and supported by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, to see that all the constituent cogs in our country's planning process work together.

In the planet's not just local interests.

Thank You.

Niall Cussen