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## Proactive Planning Will Make Most of Regional Differences

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# THE IRISH TIMES

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This page shows the article as it originally appeared in the newspaper. The article itself can be read on the following page.

## Opinion & Analysis

Six Dáil statements Bóiseach would not like to be asked about



## Proactive planning will make most of regional differences



**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**  
The Government's regional development strategy is a key element of its economic and social policy. It is a strategy that is designed to address the regional differences that exist in Ireland. The strategy is based on the principle of proactive planning, which means that the Government is taking steps to address regional differences before they become a major problem. This is a proactive approach that is designed to ensure that regional differences do not become a major problem in the future.

We live in a world that is complexly religious and secular at the same time



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# Proactive planning will make most of regional differences

In their final article on planning for the future, the authors say it is time for planners to accept, rather than fight against, imbalanced development and settlement between Ireland east and west – the east will not be stopped from becoming an urbanised city region, while the west should exploit its cultural and environmental distinctiveness

**T**HROUGH WILFUL neglect of the naturally emerging bigger picture, current Irish strategic policy is trying to plan against the emergence of a naturally urbanising Ireland. Instead, we are trying to plan nationally for what is locally and politically expedient, but either way we are planning to fail. To succeed we will need to change and re-invent how we plan – and what we are planning for.

The biggest change we will need to make is to develop new structures through which political and administrative control will match city-based functional areas. This will involve harnessing existing county and regional structures – on an all-island basis – to form new territories united by common opportunities and challenges. This restructuring will require a significant devolution of authority from central to regional and local government; Ireland, despite its small size, has one of the most centralised systems of governance in Europe.

To reflect the large range of differing cultural and environmental conditions, the Atlantic territories of western Ireland will continue to need to be administered at the

smaller scale of counties, though the west will be planned and co-ordinated as the largest region on the island.

The east and midlands on the other hand will be organised into large city-based 'regional areas (see figure 1).

The other big change will be the use of planning as a proactive instrument for development. If we are to successfully manage the transition of the Irish economy away from current, eroding foreign direct investment (FDI) models we will need to use every instrument at our disposal to remain globally competitive.

The potent factor needed for success is a joined-up planning system – where land use, financial instruments, infrastructure, settlements and natural factors are harnessed to create the conditions necessary for development. More fundamentally, planning will need to place enterprise and economic development as a first priority with housing following and not the opposite, as we have been practising for the last 40 years.

Our current national strategy to sustain global competitiveness is based on attempting to compete internationally in the knowledge economy. In Ireland, however, we generate 77.3 patents per million population, well below an EU average of 128, with Scandinavian countries averaging 200-plus.

Perhaps instead we should seek to secure our future by playing to our strengths, using our proven skills and aptitudes in such lucrative growth areas as music and culture where worldwide entertainment and media industries are predicted to grow to US\$1.8 trillion by 2010, for example.

Policy-makers and politicians will find it hard to admit that one-size-fits-all strategies can no longer apply to policy in Ireland, but a successful plan for, say, 2030 will acknowledge the need to plan creatively for the different futures of Ireland's east, west and midlands. We will need the flexibility to evolve and pursue divergent strategies to allow all areas to achieve their full potential. Critically, we need to provide for a European city-region in the east. It is happening anyway, but we should take away the haphazard nature of its evolution and plan strategically for it.

The challenge, therefore, for the east will be to co-ordinate large-scale urban settlement and associated infrastructure – to densify in planning jargon – while the west will need to diversify by sustaining, and profiting from, its cultural and natural distinctiveness.

New plans for space and place mean that the next generation of infrastructure in Ireland will be answering different needs, especially in an all-Ireland context. Major new infrastructure will need to be developed to service the eastern region, and will need to be located well away from the congestion of the east coast. Ideally, this infrastructure will consist of a unifying north-south spine to serve the emerging pattern of urbanisation.

The Atlantic territories will play a leading role in the diversification and expansion of Ireland's post-FDI economy. Diversity, distinctiveness and designations will be key words for this, but the capacity of these areas to sustain higher numbers will be limited by designations and regulations to protect water, habitats and the landscape. This can be regarded as a burden or an opportunity. With foresight and focus it can become the latter. Devolved governance and funding, coupled with economic development strategies that play to unique strengths of the area, will be the key to the future of Atlantic Ireland. These strengths include culture, education, the natural environment and tourism, while building on the established pattern of loose high-tech clusters of medical and pharmaceutical products. The Atlantic areas also offer unique opportunities to sustain the type of quality of life indicators that will increasingly attract mobile, discerning and high-earning individuals. These types of individuals offer the realistic opportunity to develop these areas as a Switzerland of the Atlantic.

Such strategies will need clear, focused and co-ordinated interventions to succeed. These will include the establishment of Government-funded intervention services to allow individuals, projects and communities to be developed within the strictures of increasingly complex and demanding designations. The Atlantic Territories will also need specialist technical and fiscal support to manage a transition from subsidised to specialist "boutique agriculture" – high value, high quality food products with strong localised identity – like French cheese and wine regions.

Meanwhile, the midlands will service and sustain the eastern and western corridors with infrastructure, materials, water, power, timber and aggregates. Furthermore, its central location will make it ideal as the home to major logistics, storage and transportation operations – especially if new rail, road and airport infrastructure can be properly co-ordinated. The midlands will also be home to many people who are unable to tolerate the quality of life and prices of the east, but will want to enjoy the proximity of major urban centres. Less regulated than the west and less pressurised than the east, the midlands will offer choices and opportunities for many.

In a vision of a successful Ireland in 2030, the east will have recovered from being the unloved, but prodigious, child and will be acknowledged and supported as the central engine of the Irish economy. Here a mixture of indigenous industrial and service sectors, successfully serving international markets, will co-exist with a resurgent agri-business sector which will include some of the largest and most successful companies of their type in the world.

Within these newly organised and planned areas, the greatest transformation will be of our cities. We urgently need a vision for our sprawling, low-rise conglomerations of suburban housing, dog-eared old villages, tatty industrial estates and dreary edge-city retail warehouses that pass for the cities of modern Ireland. Despair-inducing areas have previously been used as the raw material for urban transformation. Temple Bar and the IFSC in Dublin, for example, have shown what more joined-up Irish planning can achieve. We can, and have, successfully used the challenge of re-planning urban areas as a way of creating a rich network of pedestrian friendly centres where urban vitality and creativity can flourish.

Irish planning has the potential for integrating considered economic and social strategies to have different objectives in different places. Strategic spatial planning has a vital contribution to make to a managed transition away from an economy based on agricultural subsidies, FDI and property development.

It doesn't have to be the conveniently disjointed and blinkered way it is now. It doesn't even have to be the way that we've imagined here, but we should have the debate about our future, and an emergent plan – a plan for the future that accepts realities, limitations and strengths, not a plan to stop or limit things that are new and unfamiliar. The question is whether we have the political and social courage to have the debate and create a plan for future success.

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## CONOR SKEHAN AND LORCAN SIRR

### Planning conference

Many of the issues raised by Conor Skehan and Lorcan Sirr in this article and their piece in yesterday's Opinion and Analysis page will be discussed at the Irish Planning Institute's national planning conference 2008, being held in Westport, Co Mayo, on Thursday and Friday. Skehan will address the conference on Thursday on the question of the Water Framework Directive – a framework for spatial planning?



Killary Harbour, Galway: the west will need to sustain and profit from its natural distinctiveness. Photograph: Brian Lynch

### Ireland in 2030

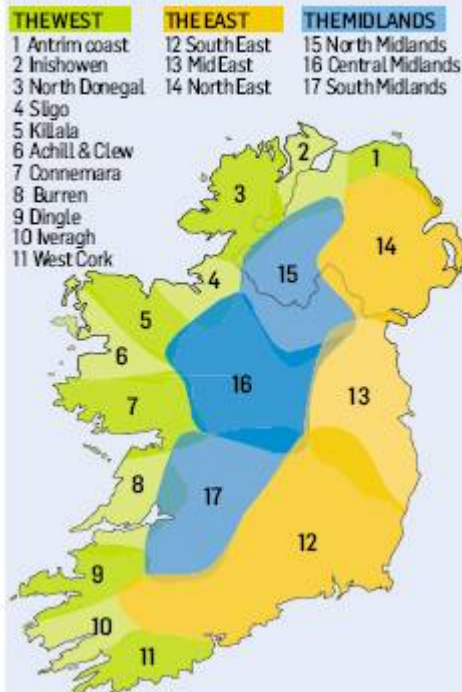


Figure 1 New Structures for Administration, Politics and Planning

Perhaps we can have it both ways. If, instead of continued denial, we accept the inevitability of population growth in the east and increasing designations in the west we can plan for different sets of futures for different parts of Ireland – using different structures to govern and plan them. This is a plan for density in the east and diversity in the west – both served and sustained by midland areas