

**Work, rest and play: planning for functional territories
Dundalk, 7 April 2011**

UK-Ireland workshop looks at using ESPON

There has been a move towards harmonising spatial development strategies either side of the Irish border. ESPON's research provides a valuable backdrop to this work. These themes emerged from an all-island workshop held on 7 April in Dundalk. It was organised by the Irish ESPON Contact Point as part of the ESPON project INTERSTRAT, which is exploring how ESPON can help practitioners involved in the preparation of integrated territorial development strategies.

Shared concepts

Jenny Pyper, Director of Regional Planning at the Department of Regional Planning in Northern Ireland, explained how the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) in the North and the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) in the South provide a framework for more local planning. Both have sustainable development at their core and share many concepts.

Research from ESPON can help as such strategies seek to balance economic and environmental aims. The RDS has identified some development challenges. Belfast has been losing population and densities have been falling. However the metropolitan area remains crucial to the economy of the Province, though Derry is another driver in the north-west. However, there had been controversy about the designation of nine sub-regional centres, as different small towns sought to optimise their status within a planned settlement and services hierarchy.

Functional Territories

Niall Cussen, Senior Planning Advisor in Ireland's Department of the Environment, stressed the concept of "functional territories". He pointed to the corridors linking Dublin and Belfast in the east and Derry and Letterkenny in the north-west, and the potential, so far less developed, to forge stronger linkages in the more rural Central Borders area. Key themes for joint work were sustainable travel, economic development and co-ordination of infrastructure. "It takes time to mobilise co-operation," said Niall, "but 10-15 years ago people just were not thinking in this way. EU initiatives like INTERREG have helped."

Pádraig Maguire, a planner from the Borders Regional Authority, welcomed the work being done in ESPON. He said, "The range of reports from ESPON can help us to look at spatial plans from national to local level, and to avoid getting trapped into just following administrative boundaries."

Local Practice

In the discussion there was recognition that the eventual devolution of planning powers to local government in the North will pose challenges, because of the

lack of familiarity with planning amongst these councils. It was also recognised that there was a strong identity with local place on both sides of the border. Could exposure to what is happening elsewhere in Europe help local policy makers to grasp the bigger picture?

There was a general feeling that the nature of today's economy is setting a context that makes cross-border co-operation in planning necessary. Transport and energy require connectivity across the whole island. Offshore windfarm development in the Irish Sea can create new opportunities for green industries. There has already been interesting work on energy in Dundalk through the Dundalk 2020 Sustainable Energy Zone developed under the EU's Concerto programme. Tourism and recreation, economic development and landscape assessment were identified as topics where the cross-border approach, which is such an important part of European spatial planning, could deliver benefits.

Ten messages from ESPON

In summing up, Cliff Hague from the UK ESPON Contact Point, stressed the momentum that there now is in Europe behind the idea of "place-based development" as way to work for territorial cohesion. He identified ten messages emerging from ESPON research that can inform practice. These were:

1. Flexible development strategies are needed that are tuned to functional territories, rather than more traditional "comprehensive" plans confined by administrative boundaries.
2. Agglomeration effects benefit larger urban centres through "soft" spillovers of knowledge and know-how that have become increasingly important as the knowledge economy has developed.
3. Cities therefore have a vital economic role and policies need to reflect this.
4. Diversity is strength: beware taking "off the peg" solutions or "best practice". There is diversity within diversity – not all coastal regions, for example, have the same assets or challenges.
5. Think regional development, not sector development. In particular recognise that agriculture is no longer the main driver of rural economies.
6. Networks and connections are probably more important in development than physical proximity. Who / where is connected, and what connects the different networks?
7. Work to make multi-level governance work. Plans and development visions need to accommodate pressures and actions at different scales.
8. Aspatial policies have unanticipated territorial impacts. Plans should be a key mechanism to test whether such impacts are positive or negative.
9. You can use scenarios to engage a wider audience in thinking about regional futures and the scope for actions.

- 10.** Is your region resilient? What are the points on which it is vulnerable and how can they be managed?