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Community Planning and Land Use Planning in Ireland's Border Area

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Introduction

The convergence of local government reform in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is occurring at a unique moment in the island's history, allowing further consideration on how an inter-jurisdictional co-operative framework can foster collaborative decision making on cross boundary community planning issues. In Northern Ireland, the introduction of community planning is heralding the reorganisation of local government, together with the transfer of statutory land use planning functions from the centre to the new local authorities. The Republic of Ireland is also witnessing a strengthening of its local governance arrangements. The Local Government Reform Act 2014 will create new Local Economic and Community Plans (LECP), which facilitate the better integration of public bodies, social and community partners to collaboratively work on integrated plans for specific actions in communities. This paper explores the interfaces between land use planning (reforms) and community planning (innovation) in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in the specific context of the border area. There are vertical, horizontal and lateral dimensions to this potential interface and the context is febrile with questions around culture, capacity and competence in executing the new governance arrangements on integrated service delivery and spatial development.

¹ Since submitting the KESS abstract, Professor Greg Lloyd has retired from Ulster University. The author would like to thank Prof Lloyd for his intellectual thoughts and guidance associated with the research project that has informed this paper.

Research Methodology and Framework

The evidence informing this paper has been gathered through a combination of:

- Academic research and review of existing scholarly literature relating to land use planning and local government moderation and cross-border collaboration across Europe;
- Analyses of policy documents, strategies and reports on community planning and local government reorganisation across the island of Ireland;
- A research project, funded by the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD), aimed at exploring potential collaboration in the Irish border area, between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, with respect to land use planning and community planning (integrated service delivery). This paper draws on empirical research collected through semi-structured interviews from the abovementioned project.

The Context for Convergence

The European Union's focus on territorial cohesion has increased the importance of cross-border cooperation. In particular, contemporary governance arrangements challenge how authorities and stakeholders consider ways to nurture harmonious development and innovative integrated approaches that address spatial and sectoral issues (Knippschild, 2011). At the same time, tentative arguments are emerging to support the notion that with the modernisation of government and governance systems across European member states, *spatial planning*² systems are reforming with a degree of convergence around *policy goals*, e.g. achieving sustainable development, building sustainable and resilient communities, addressing demographic change (Stead, 2013). However, Stead (2013) also found that there is little evidence for convergence of *policy outcomes*, such as development patterns and sharing services, and *policy instruments*, such as impact assessment techniques, targets and indicators, public participation techniques in spatial planning. What is significant from the body of literature in this area is the need for further research around how current periods of reform to both spatial planning approaches and wider governance arrangements offer scope to pool resources and expertise to address shared policy goals across borders.

Set against this backdrop, the *Framework for Cooperation – Spatial Strategies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland* was published by the Department of Regional Development (Northern Ireland) and Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Republic of Ireland). The 2013 Framework for Cooperation “is a non-statutory approach to providing advice and guidance at relevant spatial or geographical scales. It seeks to encourage policy makers in the public sector to take account of the wider impact of their work, to recognise and exploit opportunities for a wider perspective and to avoid ‘back to back’ planning” (DRD and DEHLG, 2013: 2).

The significance of this inter-jurisdictional strategic planning framework is that it highlights the operational realities of facilitating cross-border planning and governance between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. It asserts a joint commitment to securing a cooperative approach between the two states through a non-statutory document. This is a specific approach which rests on agreement and cooperative working. On the one hand, the Framework for Cooperation does not present a formal, material spatial planning framework

² Drawing on an established European tradition, *spatial planning* also goes further than land use planning to embrace sector planning, regeneration and local service delivery. It promotes connectivity across geographies and seeks to integrate health, welfare, education as well as economic and environmental agendas that involve a spatial dimension. Therefore, spatial planning can be considered an integrative tool to shape land (use) and (the social use of) space.

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which seeks compliance and deliberate actions to common ends by both states. On the other hand, it does raise questions about the 'fit' between various interventions in the cross border space. Thus, whilst the rules of the game have been changed by this informal arrangement, its implementation rests on the various organisations – local authorities and planning agencies – involved in that particular geographical area.

At one level, the intellectual and practical development of the Framework for Cooperation forms part of a concerted effort to promote more effective joint working between the two territories. This is part of the political and diplomatic momentum initiated by the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. In practical terms, both the UK (Northern Ireland) and Ireland have sought to promote greater cohesion and connectivity across a number of practical functions, including the provision of energy infrastructure and transport linkages between the two states.

At another level, there are recognised working relations between the established strategic and local planning arrangements on the island of Ireland. These are not stable, however, as both territories are undergoing a period of flux in their respective arrangements. In the Republic of Ireland, a National Spatial Strategy sits alongside a National Development Plan and a local zoning-based land use planning system. The National Spatial Strategy – and its forthcoming successor, the National Planning Framework – asserts a national strategy for planning and development and set out how the Republic of Ireland can be spatially structured and developed over the next twenty years. The Strategy sets out to achieve coordinated development between various localities and, in particular, to achieve more balanced regional development, while still recognising the importance of Dublin as an economic centre. This asserts one strategic framework which is relatively integrated, with a clear hierarchical structure and set of cascading policies.

In contrast, Northern Ireland comprises a more fragmented governance framework with a separate Regional Development Strategy, with discretionary application to the land use planning regulatory system. The Regional Development Strategy is not limited to land use matters, however, but seeks to present a more integrated strategic decision-making framework which reflects the inter-relationships between physical development, and economic, social and environmental matters in Northern Ireland. It recognises the uncertainties arising as a consequence of prevailing economic and financial conditions and it asserts strategic principles to consider infrastructure investment and key projects. Particular attention is paid to external and internal communications; renewable energy; waste management; and climate change projects. Whilst both are very different in design and process, both are also the subject of reform and modernisation. This is not then a level playing field for strategic cooperation and this is particularly evident in the border areas.

At local government level, there are ongoing challenges for the delivery of public services. Increased fragmentation, the splitting apart of local government functions and the proliferation of partnerships are common arguments that hinder the development of a joined-up approach. Separate proposals are emerging in local organisation reorganisation in both jurisdictions to address these challenges. In Northern Ireland, the proposal to introduce community planning under the Review of Public Administration – which will herald the reorganisation of local government, together with the transfer of statutory land use planning functions from the centre to the new local authorities.

Alongside the introduction of Community Planning in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland is also witnessing a strengthening of its local governance arrangements. The Local Government Reform Act 2014 will create new Local Economic and Community Plans (LECP). They aim to facilitate better integration of public bodies, social and community partners to collaboratively work on integrated plans for specific actions in communities. These new governance landscapes are illustrated in Figure 1.

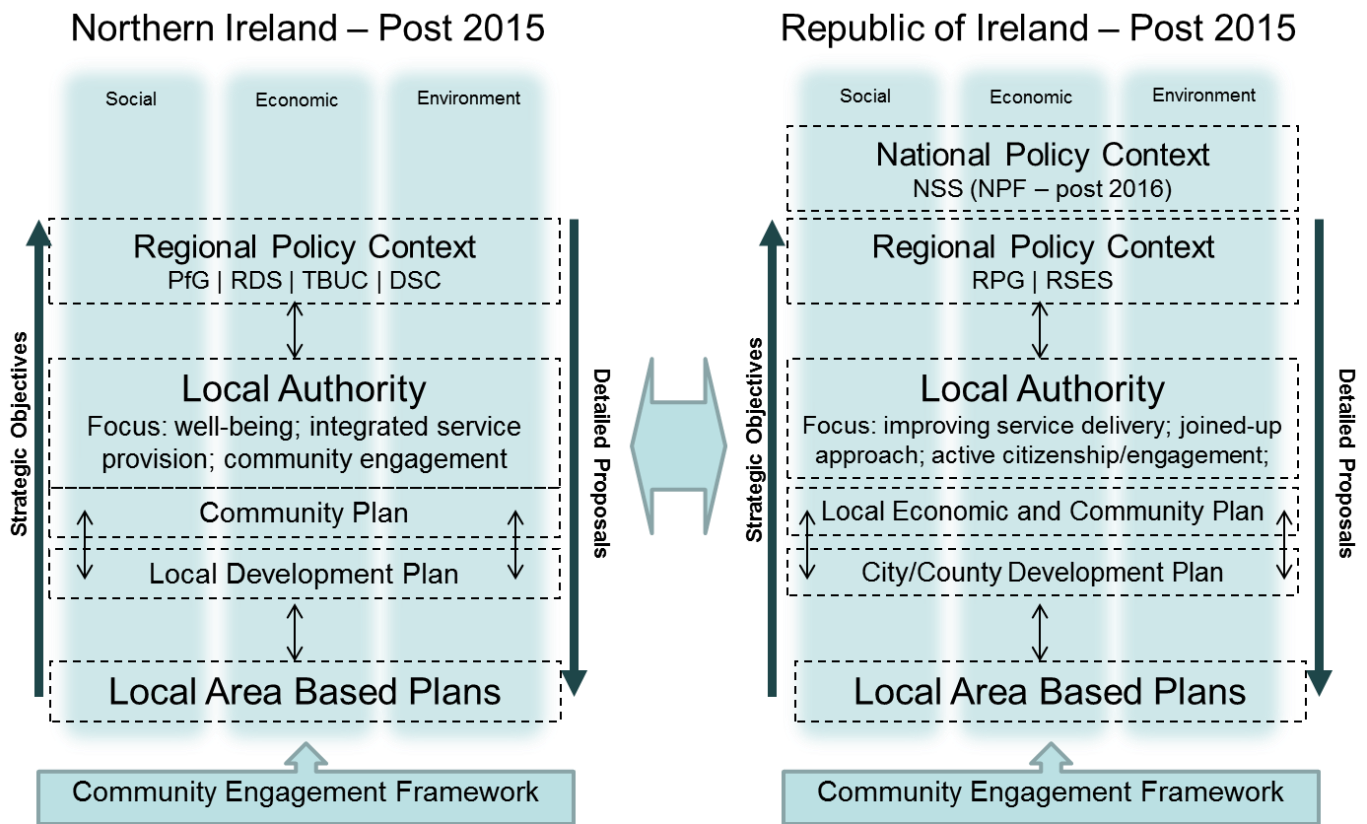


Figure 1 – Policy and governance context between both jurisdictions.

The research findings illustrate that there are a number of opportunities and challenges emerging through the reforms in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. These are discussed below under lateral, vertical and horizontal dimensions.

Lateral dimension

Opportunities for improving collaboration currently exist in relation to: (1) the 2013 Framework for Cooperative, as it provides an overarching construct on which to nurture stronger collaborative inter-jurisdictional working; (2) convergence of policy goals, e.g. economic and environmental aspects that are common concerns for local authorities in the border area; (3) similar governance architecture and instruments are emerging from the reforms, such as new Community Plans in Northern Ireland and Local Economic and Community Plans in the Republic of Ireland; (4) focus on linking development (spatial/physical) planning and public service provision (community planning) appears to be a core transformation in both reform processes; (5) ad hoc inter-jurisdictional collaborative operations between local authorities in the border areas are happening and are building strong working relationships.

Some of the challenges across the lateral dimension relate to: (1) political perception, or misperception, of cross-border working to improve spatial development and service delivery to citizens across jurisdictions; (2) high level conversations that focus on big issues, such as tourism and physical infrastructure, and not around

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local citizen needs or public services they engage with on a day-to-day basis; (3) there not being a cross-border statutory body on spatial and economic planning that can influence the operations between neighbouring local authorities in the cross-border zone; (4) having no 'pooled sovereignty' – that is shared institutions for decision making on shared matters on concern; (5) developing a cross-border development zone that takes a more strategic approach to spatial development and service provision.

Vertical dimension

Opportunities currently exist in relation to: (1) a well established formal and rigid set of communication channels between central and local government in the Republic of Ireland that have developed over a number of years; (2) the function of the Partnership Panel in Northern Ireland to provide scope of enhancing vertical communication between central government and local government.

Some of the challenges across the vertical dimension relate to: (1) local authority partnerships are missing the 'big players', such as national utility companies and private sector organisations in Community Planning Partnerships³ in Northern Ireland and in the Local Community Development Communities, which oversee the development of Local Economic and Community Plans, in the Republic of Ireland; (2) a lack of high level priorities, at the regional scale in Northern Ireland, to provide an overarching framework to inform community planning outcomes and to help align community planning activities with strategic objectives.

Horizontal dimension

Opportunities currently exist in relation to: (1) merging development planning and economic functions under one directorate in local authorities in the Republic of Ireland that take a more holistic approach to stimulating economic growth within a spatial perspective; (2) the possible merging of development planning and community planning functions under one directorate in the new local authorities in Northern Ireland to better align service provision with spatial development.

Some of the challenges across the horizontal dimension relate to: (1) institutional insularity, e.g. council, which can limit its ability to look beyond its geographical boundaries; (2) the need for a robust performance management framework to measure outcomes, track progress and highlight areas of improvement; (2) effective partnership working between the various agencies involved to work together to improve service provision and stimulate new and innovative ways of delivering services in the future.

Conclusion

Community planning, as articulated in both jurisdictions, tends to be predicated on two key principles. First, it is intended to provide the over-arching policy and priority framework in a given jurisdiction based on the co-ordination of initiatives and partnerships. This seeks to promote horizontal integration. Second, community planning has a vertical dimension since it is also intended to improve the connections between national priorities and more local governance arrangements. Securing both vertical and horizontal integration in each jurisdiction represents one challenge – to secure a 'pooled sovereignty' in local planning and governance. Then seeking to integrate across the border represents another operational challenge. The processes of change in train provide an opportunity to develop better joint working.

³ Based on the draft Local Government (Community Planning Partners) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 currently out for consultation.

There is yet another dimension. Community planning will be a new responsibility of local government in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. It will demand new competencies and capacities for action involving civil engagement, agency coordination and the deliberate need to integrate the land use planning and community planning functions not just in each jurisdiction, but across the border area. It is perhaps here that the greatest challenges are present to creating a pooled sovereignty in local governance in the border areas.

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