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Planning for a better Ireland: Trusting in the wisdom of crowds

In 2018, the Irish government published the National Planning Framework (NPF) as part of Project Ireland 2040. As the Irish economy emerged from a decade of economic recession, these planning documents were seen as timely. The vision set forth was "based on a set of values that will ensure Ireland's long term economic, environmental and social progress for all parts of our country". A glossy new plan, for a new Ireland, that was still facing the same old problem, unbalanced growth. In the same way that the Buchanan Report did in the 1960s and the National Spatial Strategy did in the early 2000s, the NPF attempted to grapple with the reality that growth in Ireland tends to be urban and that the difference in the wealth of Irish regions is widening.

Moycullen 2030: A Village Plan

Inspired by the NPF, this Irish Research Council funded project set out to explore a different approach to planning in Ireland. Owing to the nature of the modern service-led economy, it will come as little surprise that cities are growing faster than less urbanised regions. However, in Ireland this trend towards unbalanced development was well established over five decades ago. This project grew out of a concern, that politically, Ireland is one of the most centralised countries in Europe. Local government finances reflect this reality (see Whitaker Policy Brief no. 56); local planning in Ireland is underfunded. The result of this is a lack of coherence in planning at the local level. Local Area Plans tend to be statistical exercises deduced from constrained budgets at the local authority level, and devoid of real consideration of their place.

The Village Plan set out to develop a methodology to encourage the broadest possible public engagement in planning for the future development of a village from the bottom up. Part of this methodology involved the development of the 'Village Plan' App which introduced users to the environmental and social consequences of planning decisions. Over the course of six months, the project collected the wishes and wants of over 800 residents (close to 50%) of the village. The plan is available for download here.

Policy Recommendations

One key difference between the publication of the NPF and previous planning strategies is the climate imperative we are facing. At no time in our history has it being made so clear that we cannot continue as we have done. Decreasing urban sprawl, provision of alternative transport options and better building practices are no longer peripheral concerns, they must be central in all future planning decisions. This project set out to test the hypothesis of people authored places. Its goal was to place residents at the centre of the planning process. What became immediately obvious was the untapped desire for people to be part of the planning process. The outcome is a set of recommendations that not only abide by good place design principals but also recognise and legislate for, and indeed hope to address, climate change. Planning documents can help us identify the problems with unbalanced development, but we need to recognise that without a fundamental redress in the top-down, centralised approach we take to planning, we cannot expect development to happen in any different way.