



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Sustainable and Compact Settlements Guidelines for Planning Authorities

Proposed Policy Approach

Consultation Paper – March 2023

Prepared by the Department of
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1.0 Background

1.1 Introduction

The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage has developed a proposed policy approach as part of the preparation of Ministerial Guidelines on Sustainable and Compact Settlements.

It is the Ministers intention to replace the Sustainable Residential Development in Urban Areas Guidelines for Planning Authorities (the ‘Sustainable Residential Development Guidelines’) published in 2009 with new Sustainable and Compact Settlements Guidelines for Planning Authorities. The guidelines, when finalised, will constitute Ministerial Guidelines under Section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended. Section 28 provides that planning authorities and An Bord Pleanála shall have regard to Ministerial guidelines in the performance of their functions under the Planning and Development Act.

The preparation of the draft guidelines is progressing and environmental assessments are ongoing. This consultation paper outlines the evolution of wider policy since the publication of the Section 28 Guidelines, including the publication of the National Planning Framework (2018), Housing for All (2021), and the Housing for All Action Plan Update (2022) and provides a summary of the emerging policy approach in relation to density and development standards for housing. The approach is aligned to NPF priorities for compact growth and to Action 9 of Housing for All priorities to provide a greater range of high quality housing options.

When the environmental assessments are completed, finalised Draft Sustainable and Compact Settlements Guidelines for Planning Authorities and the associated environmental reports will be published for consultation. Following the consultation and with any subsequent changes made (subject to SEA and AA) the Compact and Sustainable Settlements Guidelines for Planning Authorities will be issued as Ministerial Guidelines under Section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended.

2.0 National Policy Context

2.1 National Planning Framework

The National Planning Framework (NPF) 2018 is the national spatial development strategy for Ireland to 2040. The shared goals of the NPF are expressed in the framework as 10 no. National Strategic Outcomes detailed in Figure 1.1 below.



Figure 1.1 NPF National Strategic Outcomes

The NPF forecasts that Ireland will continue to experience significant population growth, above the EU average, with an expected increase of around one million people, above 2016 levels, by 2040. The NPF growth strategy seeks to facilitate balanced regional development focused largely on the five cities of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford and with the balance of growth targeted throughout the Country. The strategy seeks to ensure economic prosperity for all, environmental sustainability and climate action across all regions. To achieve this, the strategy identifies a need to move away from the ‘business as usual’ spatial pattern of development that has emerged over recent decades; a pattern that has seen majority growth in population, housing and jobs around Dublin and in the adjoining

Eastern and Midland area; towards a spatial development pattern with greater regional balance.

The strategy can be summarised under three headings:

- (a) Regional Balance: Achieve more regionally balanced population growth, split roughly 50:50 between the Eastern and Midland Region, and the rest of the Country.
- (b) City and Regional Growth Drivers: To underpin regional balance, target 50% of projected population growth into the five cities of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford, with the balance of growth targeted throughout the Country. The strategy supports the future growth of Dublin as Ireland's leading global city of scale. It also sets ambitious growth targets for the four cities of Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford.
- (c) Compact Urban Growth: Target 50% of new housing growth in the five cities within the existing built-up footprint, on infill or brownfield lands. Target 30% of new housing growth in all other settlements, within the existing built-up footprint, on infill and brownfield lands.

Compact growth that sees the renewal of existing settlements, rather than continued sprawl, is a key priority of the NPF in order to maximise quality of life, improve access to services, ensure efficient use of land and allow for greater integration with existing infrastructure and public transport. The preferred approach is to focus on the greater reuse of brownfield and infill lands within the built up area of existing settlements and the development of sites in locations served by existing facilities and public transport. It is a priority of the NPF to achieve an increase in residential densities in settlements, and to develop more integrated and connected settlements, with better integration between land-uses and transport.

The Sustainable and Compact Settlements Guidelines for Planning Authorities will expand on the high-level strategy of the NPF and set detailed criteria for residential development to support the development of compact and sustainable settlements.

The guidelines will reinforce the need for more compact and efficient forms of development and the need to consider the different contexts in which housing development takes place.

2.2 National Development Plan 2021-2030

The National Development Plan 2021-2030 sets out the level of investment needed to underpin the NPF and drive its implementation over the next decade. There is a strong focus on objectives of the NPF to achieve compact, sustainable and liveable settlements that will shape investment choices over the coming decades. As part of the national capital investment programme, a €3 Billion Regeneration and Development Fund has been put in place to drive and support the aims of the NPF, for both urban and rural areas. The NDP commits to investing significantly in housing, education, health, water services and transport infrastructure.

2.3 Housing for All 2021

Housing for All – A New Housing Plan for Ireland (HfA) 2021 is the Government's housing plan to 2030. It is a plan to improve Ireland's housing system and deliver homes for people with different housing needs. The overall objective is that everybody should have access to sustainable, good quality housing to purchase or rent at an affordable price, built to a high standard, and located close to essential services, offering a high quality of life. There is a recognition of the need to plan for a more diverse and socially inclusive society. There is also a recognition that a sustainable housing system requires infrastructure, including public transport infrastructure and water services. The plan sets out a series of actions, across four pathways, to achieve a steady supply of housing. This includes a suite of actions aimed at changing the system of urban development, land management and housing provision including initiatives relating to Residential Zoned Land Tax (RZLT), Land Value Sharing (LVS) and Urban Development Zones (UDZs). The aim of these measures is to allow the State to take a more active role in land management with a view to translating the compact and sustainable development objectives of the NPF into the delivery of housing.

It is also an action of HfA to develop Sustainable and Compact Settlements Guidelines for Planning Authorities (these guidelines), that include guidance on innovative approaches to medium and higher density housing. The aim of this action is to improve residential quality and to support objectives of the NPF for compact, sustainable and liveable settlements.

2.4 Climate Action Plan 2023 (CAP23)

The Climate Action Plan 2023 (CAP23) is the first plan to be prepared under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, and following the introduction of economy-wide carbon budgets and sectoral emissions ceilings in 2022. The plan implements these carbon budgets and sectoral emissions ceilings and sets out a roadmap for taking decisive action to halve our emissions by 2030 and reach net zero no later than 2050, as committed to in the Programme for Government. In relation to transport emissions, CAP23 highlights that travel preferences are embedded through settlement patterns. The Plan notes that the dispersal of residential settlements, commercial zones and workplaces to peripheral areas instead of focusing on central areas and locations served by public transport, has led to an over-reliance on the private car. The Annex of Actions includes a number of actions to ensure that settlement patterns support sustainable travel and that there is improved integration between land use and transport. This includes an action to prepare guidelines in relation to sustainable and compact settlements.

2.5 National Sustainable Mobility Policy 2022

The National Sustainable Mobility Policy (SMP) 2022 sets out a strategic framework for active travel and public transport to 2030, to help Ireland meet its climate targets. The associated action plan to 2025 contains a range of actions to improve and expand sustainable mobility options across the country by providing safe, green accessible and efficient alternatives to car journeys. It also includes demand management and behaviour change measures to manage daily travel demand more efficiently and reduce the journeys taken by private car. This includes an action to prepare guidelines in relation to Sustainable and Compact Settlements.

The policy's targets are aligned to Climate Action Plan targets to increase daily active travel and public transport journeys by 2030, and to deliver a 10% reduction in the number of kilometres driven by fossil-fuelled cars.

The SMP's approach to achieve a more sustainable transport sector is based on the principle of Avoid-Shift-Improve as follows:

Avoid: Reduce the frequency and distance of trips by ensuring more people live in closer proximity to a wider range of services.

Shift: Ensure communities are well designed so as to move towards more environmentally friendly modes of transport, such as walking, cycling or using public transport.

Improve: Improve the energy efficiency of vehicle technology through improved vehicle efficiency and clean fuels.

The creation of compact and connected urban areas is key to achieving the overarching aims of the SMP. Many of the policy goals relate to land use planning and the design of settlements. SMP actions include the delivery of metropolitan area transport strategies in the five cities and local transport plans for the regional growth centres and key towns. These plans will inform and supplement City and County Development Plans and Local Area Plans to ensure that future growth occurs in a more sustainable manner.

2.6 Town Centre First

The Town Centre First (TCF) Policy, launched in February 2022, builds on NPF priorities in relation to the regeneration of settlements across Ireland. It contains a range of policy measures aimed at creating city and town centres that function as viable, vibrant and attractive locations. The policy recognises that there are high levels of vacancy and dereliction in many centres and the need for a coordinated response to ensure that cities and towns reach their potential. The actions focus on establishing Town Centre Regeneration Teams and Town Centre Plans that will support a plan-led approach to regeneration.

There is a focus on enhancing centres, addressing vacancy and incentivising the refurbishment and regeneration of underused buildings and sites.

2.7 Conclusion

In implementing the high-level approach of the NPF and ensuring that the future development of settlements supports the actions of Housing for All and the Climate Action Plan 2023 (CAP23), there is a need to carefully plan for the growth of settlements of all sizes. Understanding the opportunities and challenges facing settlements is an important first step in incorporating sustainable development principles into the planning system.

3.0 Proposed Policy Approach

The proposed Sustainable and Compact Settlement Guidelines for Planning Authorities will build on and update previous guidance in relation to the planning and development of urban and rural settlements. The proposed policy approach is focused on the interaction between residential density, housing standards and quality design and placemaking. The intention is to provide a national policy framework that supports the delivery of more compact and diverse housing typologies, in light of the overall objective of increasing housing supply. The proposed policy approach is described in the following sections.

3.1 Density

The Sustainable Residential Development Guidelines 2009 (and the Residential Density Guidelines 1999) recommend that planning authorities should promote increased residential densities in appropriate locations, including in city and larger town centres. This recommendation is based on three significant social, economic and environmental considerations, as follows:

- (i) The trend towards smaller average household size,
- (ii) The need to encourage the provision of affordable housing, and
- (iii) The need to reduce CO₂ emissions by reducing energy consumption and to support a more efficient use of energy in the residential and transport sectors.

All three considerations remain relevant, with the need for accelerated supply of more diverse and affordable housing now critical, and greater urgency also in relation to the need for settlement and travel patterns that support the more efficient use of energy and contribute to the achievement of net zero carbon emissions and other climate action targets by 2050.

The NPF seeks a continuation of the tiered approach to residential density seen under the Sustainable Residential Development Guidelines, with highest residential densities at the most central and accessible urban locations and more compact and sustainable forms of development overall.

The Sustainable Residential Development Guidelines 2009 promote a three tiered approach to residential density, with densities of up to 35 dwellings per hectare (dph) in smaller towns and villages, densities of 35 to 50 dph in outer suburban and greenfield areas of cities and large towns, and densities of 50 dph + in more central and accessible urban locations.

Given the NPF priorities for compact growth and reflecting the variety of settlements and settlement contexts where residential development takes place, the proposed policy approach is to expand on the density ranges contained in the 2009 Guidelines. This is to ensure that decision-makers can take into account the particular circumstances of the individual site, with density standards acting as a tool to guide the appropriate scale of development rather than as a prescriptive methodology.

The proposed policy approach is to indicate recommended density ranges for Cities, Metropolitan Towns¹, Large Towns² (10,000+ population), Small and Medium Sized Towns (>1,500 to 10,000 population) and Rural Towns and Villages (>1,500 population).

¹ Towns outside of the city and suburbs but within the Metropolitan 'MASP' areas identified in Regional Planning Strategies.

² Excluding MASP towns.

In each settlement, recommended density ranges would be set for (i) central areas that comprise the city or town centre and surrounding neighbourhoods; (ii) urban areas that comprise the early stages of residential and mixed use development around the central area; and (iii) suburban or edge areas. The proposed policy approach is as follows:

- Cities: Densities of 100-300 dph in central areas, densities of 40-200 dph in urban areas³ and densities of 40-80 dph in suburban and edge areas.
- Metropolitan Towns: Densities of 40-150 dph in town centres and urban areas and densities of 35-80 dph in suburban and edge areas.
- Large Towns (10,000+ population): Densities of 40-150 dph in town centres and urban areas and densities of 30-80 dph in suburban and edge areas.
- Small and Medium Sized Towns (>1,500 to 10,000 population): Densities that respond to existing context in town centres and urban areas, and densities of 25-30 dph in edge areas.
- Rural Towns and Villages (>1,500 population): Densities that respond to existing context.

The density ranges for 'Cities', 'Metropolitan Towns' and 'Large Towns' are broad and may need to be further refined at neighbourhood or site level, in the preparation of development plans⁴ or in the consideration of individual planning applications, based on considerations of proximity and accessibility to urban services and the need to protect the character (including historic character) and amenities of the local area. The general approach would be that densities at the upper end of the specified range are applied at the most central and most accessible urban locations, with densities at the mid-point and lower end of the range as proximity and accessibility reduce. In addition, decision makers will need to make a judgement in relation to the suitability of a proposed development having regard to the receiving context and the need to protect the character and amenities of an area.

³ Including Major Town Centres within the built up area of a city.

⁴ Development plan, local area plans and / or SDZ planning scheme.

The proposed policy approach includes a general presumption against very high densities in excess of 300 dph on an ad hoc basis, with such densities open for consideration on a plan-led basis only. In the case of larger strategic sites, the proposed policy approach recognises that densities will be determined on a plan led basis.

3.2 Housing Standards

The quality of new housing plays a significant role in improving health and wellbeing and contributes to sustainable development and quality placemaking. One of the core principles of the proposed policy approach is to support, alongside national building standards, new homes that provide a high standard of safety and amenity while also supporting sustainable forms of development.

Research and stakeholder engagement undertaken in support of the proposed guidelines indicates that the continued application of suburban housing standards dating from the early 1900's is hampering innovation in the housing sector in Ireland. In particular, a reliance on suburban housing standards is precluding compact housing models that have the potential to offer a broader range of housing options in urban areas and provide for the more efficient use of zoned and serviced land.

In particular, low-rise⁵ medium density housing models that are common in the UK and Europe offer significant potential to contribute to compact urban growth when applied at the right locations. Key design principles include reduced plot sizes and a tighter arrangement of houses, narrower streets, reduced car parking and the distribution of private open space in the form of patios and / or upper level terraces and balconies. There is generally a strong emphasis on the creation of attractive streets and open spaces, which is important in creating a strong sense of place and community. This type of housing combines modern internal housing standards with traditional town and village form. It can deliver residential densities of 40 to 100 dph (approx.) with a high proportion of own-door units.

⁵ 2-4 storey (approx.).

With significant population growth forecast and changing demographics that will see an increasingly diverse population, coupled with priorities in relation to compact growth, the proposed policy approach is to support and facilitate medium density housing models in Ireland, alongside traditional housing and apartment developments. The approach is aligned to NPF priorities for compact growth and to Housing for All priorities to provide a greater range of high quality housing options.

To enable greater innovation in housing design a more graduated and flexible approach to the application of residential development standards will be required. In particular, it will be necessary to review and update standards for houses and duplex units in local development plans.

The proposed policy approach includes the following recommended standards:

- **Separation:** A minimum separation distance of 16 metres between opposing upper floor windows that serve habitable rooms⁶ at the rear of houses and duplex units. Provision for further reductions where there are no opposing windows serving habitable rooms, and where suitable privacy measures are designed into the scheme to prevent overlooking of habitable rooms and private amenity spaces.
- **Private Open Space:** A minimum private open space provision of 10 sq. metres per bedspace, with provision for further reduction where an equivalent amount of semi-private open space is provided in lieu of private open space, subject to an absolute minimum provision of 5 sq. metres private open space per bedspace. The recommended standard also includes greater flexibility in relation to the design and location of private open space, to allow for terraces, patios and balconies at ground or upper levels.
- **Public Open Space:** A minimum public open space requirement of 10% of the total site area (net) for new residential development in statutory development plans.

⁶ Primary living spaces such as living rooms, kitchen / dining rooms and bedrooms.

- **Car Parking:** In order to meet the targets set out in the National Sustainable Mobility Policy 2022 and in CAP23 for reduced private car travel it will be necessary to apply a graduated approach to the management of car parking within new residential development. In 'Cities', 'Metropolitan Towns' and 'Large Towns (10,000+ population)' car parking should be graduated based on location and access to services by public transport, walking and cycling. In areas of high accessibility, car-parking provision should be minimised, substantially reduced or wholly eliminated, while in areas of medium accessibility, car-parking provision should be substantially reduced.

The intention is to provide greater flexibility to allow for more compact and sustainable forms of development and greater housing choice. This approach will not preclude traditional forms of housing or apartment development, as the standards set out are minimum, rather than maximum standards. The proposed policy approach will include performance-based standards to ensure that all residential units meet a high standard of amenity and that the safety and amenity of adjacent residential and other sensitive occupiers of adjacent properties is safeguarded to a reasonable extent.

3.3 Quality Design and Placemaking

The preferred policy approach will include guidance in relation to quality design and placemaking, including indicators of quality design and placemaking that should be applied in the preparation and consideration of individual planning applications. This includes indicators relating to sustainable and efficient movement, the mix and distribution of land uses, the integration of natural assets and green infrastructure and built form. The proposed policy approach highlights that the quality of design and placemaking will be particularly important in the case of compact housing. The layout, position and composition of buildings, the interface with streets and open spaces and the integration of car parking will all be key to ensure the overall quality and amenity of the development and a satisfactory relationship with the site surroundings, including the impact on neighbouring occupiers.

4.0 Next Steps

4.1 Consultation

The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage invites written submissions or observations in relation to the proposed policy approach set out in this paper. The written submissions or observations received during the consultation period will be taken into consideration when finalising the Draft Sustainable and Compact Settlements Guidelines.

A submission or observation can be made by email to the following address: nrupconsultation@housing.gov.ie. Submissions will be accepted from **30th March 2023 to 27th April 2023, up to 5pm**. Submissions will not be accepted outside the consultation period.

4.2 Strategic Environmental Assessment and Appropriate Assessment

In line with requirements under the EU Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive (the SEA Directive), SEA is being undertaken on the emerging Draft Sustainable and Compact Settlement Guidelines for Planning Authorities. This SEA process will ensure that environmental considerations are fully integrated into the preparation and adoption of the Guidelines with a view to promoting sustainable development.

In line with requirements under the Habitats Directives, the Draft Guidelines will also be subject to Appropriate Assessment (AA) Screening and full AA where this is determined to be necessary.

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