

SPEECH BY MALCOLM MOSS MP, MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT FOR NORTHERN IRELAND, AT THE LAUNCH OF DISCUSSION PAPER “THE BELFAST CITY REGION: “TOWARDS AND BEYOND THE MILLENNIUM” ON 24 JANUARY 1996

My purpose today is to announce a major review of planning issues in the Belfast City Region and to introduce a new policy aimed at securing higher standards of urban design – particularly in relation to new development on greenfield sites.

The term “*Belfast City Region*” is perhaps new to Planning in Northern Ireland, but the concept of studying the needs of the city in relation to its hinterland is not. As far back as 1945, a body known as the Northern Ireland Planning Commission produced a report on the future not only of the City of Belfast but of (and I quote) “*the adjoining parts of Antrim and Down – hereinafter referred to as the Belfast Area*” – end of quotation. The Matthew Report in 1963 recognised the interdependence of the towns and villages neighbouring Belfast in the “*Regional Survey and Plan*”. As we approach the Millennium it is, I think, appropriate that we should again be addressing planning issues on a city region basis.

I am particularly pleased to see elected representatives from every local authority in the region. Today we have representatives from the district council areas of Antrim, Ards, Ballymena, Banbridge, Carrickfergus, Castlereagh, Craigavon, Down, Larne, Lisburn, Newtownabbey, North Down and of course Belfast. In addition, we have people from the business, community, public and voluntary sectors. You are all most welcome.

The fundamental principle - sustainability

I should like to begin with a word about the fundamental principle that determines our approach to the planning of development. *We must strive to ensure that development is sustainable.*

By this I mean that development to meet the needs of our generation cannot be regarded as “sustainable” if it compromises the ability of the next generation to meet *its* needs.

It is, of course, natural for us to seek a higher standard of living. But the sustainability principle means we must do so in a way which protects the environment and safeguards all that is precious to us – and to succeeding generations.

The document I published last year, “*Transportation in Northern Ireland – The Way Forward*”, was a first step towards the goal of a sustainable transportation strategy. It suggested that we should aim to manage the growth in car journeys and to encourage alternative modes of travel which have a less harmful environmental impact.

Sustainable development was also one of the principles underlying the housing policy consultation document “*Building on Success*” which I published just before Christmas. Sustainable residential development should encourage walking and cycling and provide attractive and useable open space.

So the objective of sustainable development underpins today’s announcements.

Belfast City Region

Last May, we began a debate about the future of Belfast. I suggested that we work together to produce a long term vision which would set out the type of city we would like to see in twenty or twenty-five years time.

In working to create a vision for Belfast, however, we cannot think of the city as something that functions separately from the wider area in which it is situated. There is an interdependence at many levels between the core city and the neighbouring towns and villages.

Thousands of people live in places like Antrim, Bangor, Banbridge and Downpatrick but work in Belfast. The city centre is a draw for shopping, entertainment and leisure while the region provides numerous opportunities

to the city dweller for open air recreation. The city provides specialist hospital facilities and further education. The ports of Belfast and Larne serve the needs of the region and indeed places much further afield. I could quote other examples but I trust I have said enough to make the point that there is an entity which constitutes the Belfast City Region.

I believe that the city region is the right context for us to consider the important planning and development challenges which lie ahead. In other parts of the world the city region has become the hub of the international economy. The mobility of business demands that we must enhance the competitiveness of the region as a whole, and redefine what we mean when we speak of “the city” to embrace the entire region as one community. Within the community a strong and dynamic core is essential, but the interdependence, to which I have referred, calls for a mutually beneficial and integrated strategy for development.

The Belfast City Region has a population of about one million people. The need for an overview, looking long term, particularly at where new development will be located, is reinforced by evidence that this population is growing and by the increase in the number of new households. The projected growth in households suggests that we are likely to have to provide for a significant number of new homes in the city region over the next quarter century – perhaps as many as 100,000.

In the light of these factors, we need to review the issues facing the city region and to decide what shape the pattern of development might be – well into the next century. As a first step in this process, I am today publishing a discussion paper entitled “*The Belfast City Region – Towards and Beyond the Millennium*”.

This document signals a new approach to the way in which we determine the future pattern of development. It seeks to move us beyond land use planning to address social and economic issues related to the quality of place and the quality of life. It reminds us that Belfast is an evolving city. It will, I hope, evoke in the people’s minds an image that as a place in which to live, visit or invest, the Belfast City Region is positive rather than negative: supportive rather than destructive: enterprising rather than dependent.

My aim is to stimulate debate and so the document sets out a number of key questions. *These are not meant to be prescriptive nor are they exhaustive but they are designed to give structure to the debate.*

The central issue is how and where new development should be accommodated within the city region. I am looking for views on the broad approach which is likely to command the widest support and makes most sense in terms of sustainable development. I am suggesting that such an approach could be based on the following four key aims:

- firstly, we should seek to accelerate the recovery of the inner and middle city, and make them more attractive locations for housing;
- secondly, we should limit new development on the edge of the urban area to those locations where sustainability and quality objectives can be achieved;
- thirdly, we should conserve the quality of the environment throughout the city region, and this would include strong control over sporadic development in the countryside; and
- fourthly, we should manage further expansion of towns and villages in the city region, so that development is concentrated at those locations which are best able to accommodate growth.

Today, I invite everyone who has a concern for the future of the city and the region to come forward with comments, constructive criticism and proposals. I am initiating an extensive consultation process. Over the next six months, my Department will sponsor a range of seminars and discussion groups to take account of as wide a range of views as possible, including those of district councils, community groups, developers and organisations with a constituency in planning the environment. I myself will be available for discussions with elected representatives.

Following this period of discussion, I intend to bring forward for further consultation early next year more detailed proposals which take account of the views expressed.

The Quality Initiative

I turn now to what I term the 'Quality Initiative'. By that I mean the quality of development which will be expected in the future – particularly in relation to new housing.

My colleague, John Gummer, as Secretary of State for the Environment, has launched a similar "Quality Initiative" in England and Wales with the aim of raising awareness of the importance of good design and quality in the built environment.

I want to see an improvement in environmental quality and good layout design. I would like to see new layouts incorporating formal open space, walks and cycleways. I would like to see more planting, and the return of tree-lined avenues in new development. I would like to see layouts that support public transport provision. All of these call for the comprehensive planning and design of sites which are big enough to deliver a new standard of quality. Fragmented edge-of-city development should become a thing of the past.

I am today calling upon the Planning Service to secure a higher quality of design, layout and landscaping than that which has been delivered, particularly on Greenfield sites, in the recent past.

It is already government policy that anyone wishing to develop land should bear the cost of necessary associated roadworks and any other consequences for the public purse arising from that development, and existing development plans must be interpreted accordingly. But this new emphasis on design quality and sustainability means that from now on the actual scheme will be as important as the site in the granting of planning permission. An illustration of the kind of layout I have in mind is included with your papers.

To enable a large-scale development to proceed, developers will be expected to enter into formal agreements with the Department to guarantee that the package proposed will be delivered. The Department will bring forward further advice in the use of planning agreements in due course.

Implication for the Belfast Urban Area Plan and other plans currently under preparation

These policies on quality development and infrastructure provision will be incorporated into proposals for alteration of the Belfast Urban Area Plan 2001, which my Department will publish in the very near future. There are, however, further implications in what I have just announced for the Belfast Urban Area Plan and for other plans currently in preparation.

It will obviously take some time to complete the process thoroughly in relation to the Belfast City Region and we cannot halt development in the meantime. On the other hand, we must not pre-empt the outcome of the city region review by authorising large scale land releases.

The Belfast Urban Area Plan, which was published in 1989, released land for housing development on the edge of the city sufficient to cater for anticipated demand over the first half of the fifteen year plan period. The development of other land on the city side of the green belt boundary – described as “whiteland”- was left as a matter for further consideration following a mid-term assessment of housing demand.

Over the last ten years, the majority of new housing development in the Belfast Urban Area has taken place in suburban greenfield locations, and so the balance sought in the area plan between housing development in the suburbs and in the inner city has not been achieved. On this basis, I acknowledge that there is a case for postponing any release of “whiteland” for further suburban housing.

However, I am conscious that we must ensure that there is provision of new homes to meet the objectives of our housing policy, and that the existing supply of suburban greenfield sites is rapidly diminishing. I am also keenly aware that the local construction industry is dependent, in no small measure, on a reasonably buoyant housing market.

I have considered carefully the arguments for and against proceeding with the release of additional greenfield sites. I have concluded that the community interest would best be served by a two-sided approach. First, we should encourage new housing in the inner and middle city where there is

an established and under-used infrastructure catering for physical, social educational and recreational needs. Second, we should offer a *limited* release of whiteland on the edge of the urban area pending conclusions from the wider review of the city region.

Details of the proposed release will be announced within the next few weeks, but the release will be strictly managed in accordance with the quality approach to new housing development which I have just outlined. My Department will take the lead in having illustrative plans prepared for a number of sites which are considered suitable for village-scale development.

There are a number of other plans currently in preparation. I have instructed the Planning Service to adopt a two stage approach in zoning "greenfield" land for housebuilding in the Lisburn, Carrickfergus and Castlereagh Area Plans should they be published ahead of this wider review of the city region. The plans, if brought forward ahead, will propose a first phase allocation of land necessary to cater for housing development up to the year 2001, leaving the remainder for consideration at a later stage after the city region exercise is complete.

Concluding remarks

Ladies and gentlemen, I am conscious that today we are engaged in the first step of what may be a radical change in the way the Belfast City Region will develop in the first years of the new Millennium.

I believe that this city region has the potential to compete with the most successful regions in Europe. The challenges and opportunities, however, must be grasped with purpose, imagination and vigour. The planning decisions and commitments made over the next few years will largely determine the direction and pattern of the region's growth for the first decades of the next century.

Choosing the appropriate form of regional development should be an issue for all inhabitants of the region. The plans for each district should be consistent with the overall pattern for the entire city region. Every section of our diverse community should be involved in understanding the problems

and opportunities and developing a strategic plan to achieve a shared vision. Experience of other city regions such as Barcelona, Toronto, Glasgow and Pittsburgh prove that positive and lasting change can and do occur as the result of a visionary approach and a progressive planning agenda.

The document issued today seeks to stimulate discussion and produce a consensus about the most critical development issues. This open and participative approach will, I believe, help us to shape the future of the Belfast City Region and to develop our vision for the City of Belfast which will enable it to become competitive, socially inclusive and sustainable.

My vision is of a city and region in which people have both the opportunity and the confidence to live, work, shop and take their leisure in a high quality environment. I look forward to your views on the points that I have made – because you, and those whom you represent, have a crucial part to play in making this vision a reality.

BELFAST
24th JANUARY 1996