

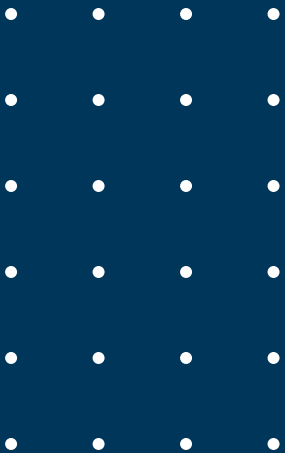


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Taighde, Idirphlé, Comhairle
Research, Dialogue, Advice

COUNCIL

No.168 May 2025



Deepening Compact Growth in Ireland

National Economic & Social Council

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2. The Council may consider such matters either on its own initiative or at the request of the Government.
3. Any reports which the Council may produce shall be submitted to the Government, and shall be laid before each House of the Oireachtas and published.
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Deepening Compact Growth in Ireland

COUNCIL REPORT

No.168 May 2025

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Abbreviations

CHDDA

Custom House Docks Development Authority

CPO

Compulsory Purchase Order

CSO

Central Statistics Office

DDDA

Dublin Docklands Development Authority

DPH

Dwellings per Hectare

EVs

Electric Vehicles

GDA

Greater Dublin Area

GIS

Geographic Information System

IAE

Irish Academy of Engineering

IFSC

International Financial Services Centre

LDA

Land Development Agency

MASP

Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan

MMC

Modern Methods of Construction

NCC

National Competitiveness Council

NPF

National Planning Framework

NPO

National Policy Objective

NTA

National Transport Authority

OPR

Office of the Planning Regulator

RIAI

Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland

RRDF

Rural Regeneration and Development Fund

RSES

Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy

SDZ

Strategic Development Zone

TII

Transport Infrastructure Ireland

TOD

Transport Orientated Development

URDF

Urban Regeneration and Development Fund

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In addition to deliberation by the members of the NESC Council, this report benefitted from the insights of an informal group convened by NESC to discuss research on planning and housing issues. This comprised a small number of officials from the following organisations: the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the Office of the Planning Regulator, the Housing Agency and the Land Development Agency.

The Secretariat acknowledges helpful discussions with Niall Cussen, Chief Executive and Planning Regulator, Office of the Planning Regulator; Seán McKeown, Chief Executive and Ivor Grimes, Director of Services, Waterford City and County Council. Written comments from Ajith Vyas Venugopalan of Plural Architects, India are also acknowledged.

Executive Summary

Ireland's sprawling pattern of development has long been of concern for economic, social and environmental reasons. It results in higher costs of providing public services and infrastructure. It also leads to high car dependency to meet daily needs. Ireland's long-term spatial plan, the *National Planning Framework*, sets out an alternative vision based on compact growth. Compact growth means having more growth within the boundaries of cities, towns and villages and the development of new walkable neighbourhoods. It includes the renovation of vacant and derelict property. More apartments contribute to compact growth but are not synonymous with it. The Council welcomes the provisions in the 2024 *Sustainable Residential Development and Compact Settlements Guidelines for Planning Authorities* that provide for more compact 'own door' housing in appropriate locations.

Why compact growth?

The literature on compact growth has found much evidence for the benefits of compact cities. The key idea of compactness is to make places more accessible. The benefits of compact growth include higher productivity and innovation, more sustainable travel (less car dependency), improved access to services, and lower energy consumption. Many studies have shown that more compact growth reduces the cost of public services and infrastructure.

There can also be costs to compact cities, including reduced housing affordability. Compact growth does have to be carefully managed to achieve the benefits while minimising any negative side-effects.

Obstacles

The search for affordable housing may lead people to avail of accommodation far from where they work and that is often car-dependent. This works against compact growth. Related to this, brownfield development tends to be more costly for developers than greenfield, and it is more expensive to develop apartments than houses. Other factors that limit compact development include gaps in infrastructure in urban centres and lack of effective co-ordination between relevant agencies.

Recommendations

While compact growth is government policy, its achievement remains a challenge. To advance this, the Council makes the following recommendations:

- Increase public investment to unlock land suited for compact growth – this includes both major urban transformation projects and investment in essential infrastructure, especially water services, to facilitate housing in towns and villages. If investment is focused on land in public ownership, there is scope to recover some of the cost through sale or leasing of land.
- Develop arrangements to enhance co-ordination between public infrastructure bodies and others. For large areas of development, put in place dedicated institutional arrangements.
- Review development incentives with a view to achieving a structure that provides stronger incentives for brownfield development.
- Continue to seek reductions in the construction costs of apartments as well as houses. Implement the recommendation of the *Residential Construction Cost Study Report (2023)* and advance the six lines of action on modern methods of construction (MMC) identified by NESCC (2024).

- Increase investment in cost-rental homes: this will contribute to an increased supply of homes at more affordable rental levels in urban areas.
- Develop a brownfield activation strategy that includes review of the most important codes and regulations that affect brownfield development such as conveyancing, compulsory purchase and building control.
- Set rent controls – which the Council believes will continue to be required beyond 2025 when the current rules are due to expire – on a more flexible basis to support increased supply.
- Place more emphasis on densification of existing areas including facilitating more use of corner sites, gardens, backlands and mews developments.
- Provide clearer guidance to those seeking to renovate vacant and derelict properties on what is required across different regulations, including fire safety and conservation where relevant. Support the Dublin City Council Adaptive Reuse Unit with appropriate funding and other resources to realise the potential of Dublin’s vacant and derelict commercial properties. This approach would also be relevant to other larger urban centres.
- Give broad-based consideration as to how – building on existing initiatives like Town Centre First – the resourcing, powers and development capacity of local authorities could be expanded so as to be capable of turning around the fortunes of many rural communities, in tandem with wider social and economic interests.
- Adopt a more three-dimensional approach for planning in areas subject to the prospects of substantial regeneration and change to help people better understand what is involved in new development and thereby facilitate deeper engagement. This would also require a step-change in the resourcing of local authority forward-planning departments and a broadening of their multi-disciplinary capability. Following engagement on plans, it would be desirable that developers could be confident that proposals submitted in accordance with the plan would swiftly receive planning permission.
- Trends in the density of new development should be monitored against the guidance for planning authorities on sustainable residential development published by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (2024). The Council welcomes the intention set out in the revised NPF to clearly define the built-up footprint for each settlement on the land-use zoning map and the development of new approaches to the measurement and monitoring of compact growth. For cities, it would be desirable to have targets for the share of new housing in the central area.

The new Programme for Government includes several commitments of relevance to the achievement of compact growth, including the following:

- Create a new strategic fund to invest in infrastructure, to acquire land, assemble sites, de-risk sites in existing towns and cities to maximise their potential growth.
- Enact a new Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) Bill with streamlined and strengthened CPO powers to activate underutilised land for home building.
- Strengthen the LDA’s CPO powers.
- Establish Land Activation Units in each local authority.
- Invest additional capital in Uisce Éireann to support reaching our new housing targets. We will prioritise water and wastewater infrastructure to deliver the capacity to facilitate housing development in our towns and villages.
- Ensure that every local authority has an expanded vacant property team in place to help bring vacant properties back into use (Government of Ireland, 2025a: 41-42, 45).

The Council welcomes these commitments and supports their speedy implementation to expedite compact growth. Ireland has begun to move towards compact growth. It is vital that this re-orientation is sustained and advanced by all relevant departments, agencies, utility providers, local authorities and developers.

Chapter 1



Introduction

Compact growth is the first National Strategic Outcome or goal set out in the National Planning Framework (NPF), Ireland's strategic spatial plan for the period to 2040. The NPF was originally published in 2018. Following a public consultation and review, a draft revised NPF was published in July 2024; the final draft revised NPF was adopted by government in April 2025. Over the period 2022 to 2040, the draft revised NPF expects that Ireland's population will grow by roughly one million people. This represents an increase in the State's population equivalent to a town of approximately the size of Drogheda every year. Population growth of this scale will be associated with an increase in employment of hundreds of thousands. When account is taken of the backlog of unmet housing demand and the loss of stock through obsolescence, there could be a need for around one million additional homes over this period.¹

The physical pattern of this expansion will have major economic, social and environmental implications. The goal of compact growth seeks to achieve this in a manner that is less dispersed than the long-term pattern of development in Ireland to date.

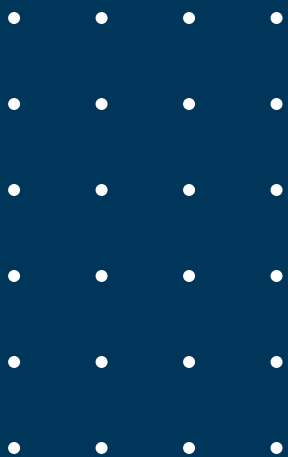
This report explores key issues in regard to compact growth. It is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 examines what is meant by the concept of compact growth.
- Chapter 3 outlines the benefits of compact growth along with some possible negative effects.
- Chapter 4 considers Ireland's performance on compact growth, including progress made so far on the relevant targets from the NPF.
- Chapter 5 examines the obstacles to achieving compact growth in Ireland.
- Chapter 6 provides examples of compact growth elsewhere by summarising successful international case studies of compact brownfield development.²
- Chapter 7 presents recommendations to support compact growth in Ireland.
- Chapter 8 concludes the report.

¹ One million over this period is the equivalent of 55,555 homes annually.

² This chapter is based on a recent study commissioned by the Housing Agency (Indecon International Consultants, 2024).

Chapter 2



What is Compact Growth

2.1 The Concept

Compact growth can be contrasted to sprawl, which has been defined in the literature as follows:

... the process in which the spread of development across the landscape far outpaces population growth. The landscape sprawl creates has four dimensions: a population that is widely dispersed in low-density development; rigidly separated homes, shops, and workplaces; a network of roads marked by huge blocks and poor access; and a lack of well-defined, thriving activity centers, such as downtowns and town centers. Most of the other features usually associated with sprawl — the lack of transportation choices, relative uniformity of housing options or the difficulty of walking — are a result of these conditions (Ewing *et al.*, 2002 from EEA, 2016: 21).

Many authors view compactness and sprawl as existing on a continuum. Hamidi *et al.* define as compact 'any development pattern with moderate to high densities, mixed uses, strong centres and well-connected streets' (Hamidi *et al.*, 2015:36). A compact city is defined by Burton (2002) as 'a relatively high-density, mixed-use city, based on an efficient public transport system and dimensions that encourage walking and cycling' (Burton, 2002).

The goal of compact growth is explained in the NPF as follows:

Carefully managing the sustainable growth of compact cities, towns and villages will add value and create more attractive places in which people can live and work. All our urban settlements contain many potential development areas, centrally located and frequently publicly owned, that are suitable and capable of re-use to provide housing, jobs, amenities and services, but which need a streamlined and co-ordinated approach to their development, with investment in enabling infrastructure and supporting amenities, to realise their potential. Activating these strategic areas and achieving effective density and consolidation, rather than more sprawl of urban development, is a top priority (Government of Ireland, 2018: 14).

In the NPF the goal of compact growth applies across places of all sizes, not just cities and their suburbs:

An increase in the proportion of more compact forms of growth in the development of settlements of all sizes, from the largest city to the smallest village, has the potential to make a transformational difference.

It can bring new life and footfall, contribute to the viability of services, shops and public transport, increase housing supply and enable more people to be closer to employment and recreational opportunities, as well as to walk or cycle more and use the car less (Government of Ireland, 2018: 27, 28).

These goals are reiterated in the final draft revised NPF. Irish Cities 2070, a multidisciplinary group,³ recently produced a book, *Irish Cities in Crisis*, which is a wide-ranging exploration of the experience of and prospects for Irish cities (Browne *et al.*, 2024). It includes visions of how Galway and Dublin could evolve in future decades if they were to adopt the principles of compact development. These visions illustrate what pursuit of compact growth could mean in practical terms. Some features of these visions are now briefly summarised.

³ This group is supported by the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (RIAI) and the Irish Academy of Engineering (IAE). Its members have expertise in architecture, urban design, economics, demography and other disciplines, with members from both professional practice and academia.

2.2 Vision for Galway

The population of Galway city tripled between 1966 and 2016 to 79,934 and could do so again by 2070. The gross residential density of Galway is relatively low at 13 dwellings per hectare (dph) excluding parks and private amenity grounds. It has a vibrant city centre, but its suburbs consist of large blocks (typically 100-200 hectares) of unconnected, low-density, residential, cul-de-sac-based estates.

If Galway continues its current development path and triples its population with new development at an average density of 26 dph, the size of the urban area would double by 2070. The Irish Cities 2070 group outlines an alternative scenario in which infill areas are developed to an average density of 85 dph on 70 per cent of the land, leaving 30 per cent for a mix of other uses. Dwellings that become obsolete are redeveloped at three times their current density. Other smaller areas of infill opportunities, including corner sites, back-lands and the green edges of existing developments, are developed at medium density, while the splitting of larger homes into apartments is encouraged. It is estimated that this increased densification could provide 91,500 additional dwellings at a gross density of 34 dph, and this would be sufficient for high-frequency public transport to be viable. In this scenario the size of the urban area increases by 21 per cent (instead of 95 per cent).

The vision incorporates implementation of the current strategic plan for transport in Galway and extends it to 2070. This includes three new commuter rail stations (Renmore, Murrough and Roscam/Prospect) along the coast; these would support three new neighbourhoods based on the principles of transport-orientated development (TOD) south of the railway line. The Irish Cities 2070 group proposed that the local authority take control of the district, apart from the existing homes, prepare a masterplan, install the infrastructure and facilitate building out the area by a range of different types of developers including the city council itself, co-operatives, developers of different sizes and AHBs. The group acknowledges that climate change is a risk for the development of this area but claims that it can be mitigated.

This vision is concerned not only with fitting more housing into a given area but also seeks to transform single-use suburbs into mixed-use neighbourhoods with good transport connections to the rest of the city and to a green infrastructure comprising greenways, open areas, new public recreation centres and local parks.

2.3 Vision for East Coast and Dublin

Coady *et al.* (2024) consider the potential development of the east coast of the island up to 2070. They include the three Northern Ireland coastal counties (Antrim, Down, Armagh), the four Greater Dublin Area (GDA) counties (Dublin, Meath, Kildare and Wicklow) and four counties in the southeast (Wexford, Waterford, Carlow and Kilkenny). This area covers 58 per cent of the population of the island.

Under 'business as usual', it is assumed that future development occurs only on brownfield and greenfield sites at twice the density of the existing settlement for high- and medium-growth towns and at a slightly lower density for low-growth settlements. Under this scenario, Coady *et al.* project 'massive encroachment' (*ibid.*: 541) on agricultural land. Dublin grows westwards and is likely to subsume Maynooth, Celbridge and Naas by 2070. Belfast extends to subsume many surrounding towns including Lisburn, Dundonald and Whiteabbey. On a smaller scale, it is projected that, following business as usual, the high-growth town of Drogheda plus the adjacent villages of Bettystown, Laytown and Mornington will coalesce to form 'a new almost entirely suburban city' (*ibid.*: 541).

The authors then set out an alternative compact-growth vision for the east coast, including Dublin.

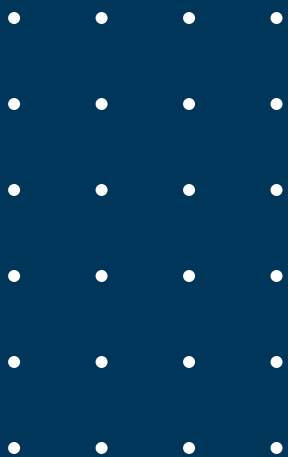
In developing the vision of a compact Dublin city, Coady *et al.* (2024) do not include the potential for a higher population to live in the city centre and the inner Georgian, 19th and early 20th century suburbs but focus on the 1940-2020 suburbs covering 9,400 hectares. They estimate that it would be feasible

to increase the density of these suburbs by 21 dph by developing corner sites, back-lands and the green edges of existing developments and small infill sites, including sites made available through obsolescence as well as the splitting of large houses into two apartments. This is estimated to generate 200,000 homes. The existing Strategic Development Zones (SDZs) (Adamstown, Cherrywood, Clonburris and the Glass Bottle Site at Poolbeg), LDA sites at Dundrum and Shanganagh, and other large tracts are estimated to have potential for 25,000 homes. In addition, the authors identify greenfield and brownfield sites across the city that together amount to 3,420 hectares and could provide 275,000 homes at a density of 115 dph on 70 per cent of the land. This includes obsolete industrial estates and a portion of Dublin Port lands.

In total this gives an estimate of a potential 500,000 new homes within Dublin's existing urban footprint. In addition to providing more homes in existing suburbs, this vision identifies the opportunity for Dublin's suburbs to accommodate a mix of new uses – educational, retail, workspace, community, cultural and recreation – so that over time they could evolve to be 15-minute neighbourhoods.

These alternative visions illustrate how the pursuit of compact growth over several decades would have a transformative effect on places. These ideas, developed by the Irish Cities 2070 group, are not official visions or plans for the future of Dublin or Galway but they merit consideration in the long-term planning of both cities.

Chapter 3



Why Compact Growth?

3.1 Business as Usual

The achievement of compact growth in Ireland would mean a change in development patterns from established, historical trends or 'business as usual'. A discussion paper produced by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government identified several reasons why continuing with 'business as usual' is not desirable:

It has led to overdevelopment in some places and decline in others. This has meant that services and facilities may be rapidly required in many different areas, while they may be underutilised elsewhere. This makes it costly and difficult to plan for future needs. It has impacted on the efficient and timely provision of a range of services and facilities related to people's health and well-being.

It has resulted in people travelling longer distances, often by car, which has contributed to car dependence and traffic congestion as well as wasteful time and energy spent commuting.

It has made it difficult to provide viable, i.e. frequent, reliable, cost-efficient and cost-effective public transport in most places outside urban Dublin.

It has not led to balanced rural or urban growth outcomes, especially outside the 'hinterland' areas surrounding the largest cities and towns.

It has affected social cohesion and, in some locations, reinforced social disadvantage.

It has affected the vitality, fabric and character of the established parts of many of our towns and cities, whereby commercial activity has relocated to edge locations in some cases or has withdrawn completely in others.

It has led to the incremental loss of agricultural land, put pressure on water resources and on environmentally sensitive areas and contributed to increasing carbon emissions (Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, 2017: 13).

The discussion paper identified further implications for health and quality of life from continuing with 'business as usual':

This approach is likely to reinforce existing trends in people's health resulting in an increase in the prevalence of chronic illnesses due to environmental factors. Coupled with increased levels of obesity which are prevalent in children as well as adults, our general health will deteriorate and compromise the quality of life that we can enjoy.

This type of pattern would more than likely mean that the older built-up areas of cities would suffer further stagnation or population decline. In addition, the likelihood is that people in Ireland will spend even more time commuting, less time with family, be at risk of social isolation and be less inclined to participate in the communities they live in, all of which will impact negatively on our mental health.

Without intervention, the exceptional relative scale of Dublin is such that hinterland population growth is likely to expand further. The Cities of Cork and Galway as well as Limerick and Waterford are also likely to exert similar influence on their surrounding County areas. This scenario does not support a healthy outcome whereby smaller settlements in city catchments will have to cater for

exceptional demand at a scale that they are not equipped to deal with, leading to situations such as children not being able to secure a school place in their local area and pressure on basic facilities such as access to healthcare.

The likelihood of further outmigration and consequent population decline in rural areas outside urban catchments would accelerate the ageing profile of the population, which in a negative feedback cycle, would hasten the process of decline. Many older people live alone and as services become less viable and withdraw due to falling population, they would as a consequence, also have less opportunity for social interaction. Areas with limited social interaction and community participation (including for older people), whether rural or urban, tend to stagnate and suffer from high real or perceived levels of anti-social behaviour and crime (Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, 2017: 21).

There is an extensive research literature on the effects of compactness. The remainder of this Chapter provides a brief overview, drawing mainly on a paper by Ahlfeldt *et al.* (2018) that synthesised the evidence of 300 studies of compactness from around the world.

3.2 Evidence on Compact Urban Development

There is considerable research evidence that compact urban development yields substantial benefits. These include higher productivity and innovation, more sustainable travel (less car dependency), improved access to services, lower energy consumption, more efficient provision of infrastructure and public services, and numerous environmental benefits from reduced pressure on land.

There is extensive evidence on the economic benefits of compact cities. Compactness can yield economic benefits by, among other things, facilitating knowledge diffusion and better matching of workers and jobs. Ahlfeldt *et al.* (2018) found that the evidence showing that compactness has a positive effect on innovation and productivity was particularly robust.

The effect of compactness on sustainable travel choice (including walking, cycling and public transport) has been widely studied. Ahlfeldt *et al.* examined 76 studies on this and in 84 per cent of the cases the results showed a statistically significant positive effect of compactness on sustainable mode choice.

Increased car use generated by sprawling development generates increased carbon emissions and traffic congestion. The increased adoption of electric vehicles (EVs) reduces emissions. EVs powered entirely by clean electricity would eliminate the emissions costs of car travel. However, there are other costs to car travel. These include an estimated 1.3 million people killed annually on a global basis by motor vehicles while a further 370,000 people are estimated to be killed annually through air, land and water pollution linked to motor vehicles (Miner *et al.*, 2024).

There is empirical evidence that compactness supports access to services. Ahlfeldt *et al.* reviewed 17 studies of access to services and amenities; in 76 per cent of cases compactness had a statistically significant positive effect on access.

In Ahlfeldt's literature review it was found that, for 75 per cent of results examined, compactness had a positive effect on the efficiency of public services delivery. There is also strong evidence to show that compactness reduces the cost of providing infrastructure.

By economising on land use, compact growth reduces land-take; i.e. the increase in artificial surface areas over time. Land-take creates major pressures on the environment, including habitat loss and landscape fragmentation. Fragmentation is the transformation of large habitat patches into smaller, more isolated fragments of habitats. This is disruptive to wildlife and among other things leads to higher traffic-related wildlife mortality. Impermeable surfaces in urban floodplains increase the intensity of

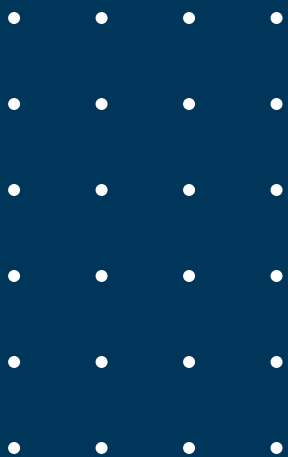
floods. Landscape fragmentation and habitat destruction, decreased carbon sequestration and impaired flood protection all contribute to a loss of resilience of ecosystems (EEA, 2016, 2021).

The environmental impact of land-take is recognised at EU and national levels. The EU published a new soil strategy in November 2021 and has called on member states to set land-take targets for 2030 with the aim of reaching no net land-take by 2050. This is to date a non-binding target. A national land-use review is being undertaken for Ireland at present with the aim of optimising 'land use to achieve environmental objectives in relation to climate, air, biodiversity and water while also supporting the achievement of socio-economic objectives in rural and urban areas' (Government of Ireland, 2024: 128).

Compact growth has many benefits but the review of empirical studies by Ahlfeldt *et al.* found that there can also be costs to compact cities, including reduced housing affordability and negative effects for health, traffic congestion and well-being. While sprawling development generates increased car use, leading to increased emissions and congestion as noted above, there is an offsetting effect whereby more compact development concentrates origins and destinations within a smaller area, which tends to increase congestion. Regarding wellbeing, a US study found a positive correlation between compactness and well-being as cities become more compact but a negative correlation when they become overly compact (Wang, 2022). In promoting compact growth, it is important to realise the benefits while seeking to minimise potential disadvantages. Compact growth policies need to be combined with active policies to achieve affordable housing within compact urban structures. Investment in sustainable transport facilitates equitable access to services and jobs and limits potential negative effects on health (Ahlfeldt *et al.*, 2018). Compactness also has potential to improve health by facilitating walking and cycling.

The international case studies of brownfield development summarised in Chapter 6 below show varying degrees of success in the provision of social and affordable housing. The highest level of success was in Aspern Seestadt in Vienna where 60 per cent of the new housing was social/affordable. This was achieved through the implementation of a regulation requiring a high level of this kind of provision. This illustrates that compactness can be combined with affordability.

Chapter 4



Ireland's Compact Growth Performance

4.1 Compact Growth in the NPF

The National Planning Framework (NPF) is Ireland's strategic spatial development plan for the period to 2040. The strategy, as outlined in both the original NPF and the draft revised version, is that growth will be both more regionally balanced and concentrated compared to the past. In terms of broad regional balance, the goal is to have a roughly even split in population and employment growth between, on the one hand, the Eastern and Midland region and, on the other, the combined Southern plus Northern and Western regions. At the same time growth is to be more concentrated by having 50 per cent of population and employment growth focused in the five cities and their suburbs. The NPF recognises that most of the Northern and Western region as well as parts of the Midland region lie outside the hinterland of these cities, so that the towns of Sligo and Athlone play regional roles, more so than towns of comparable size elsewhere. The NPF also recognises the key links between Letterkenny and Derry, and between Drogheda, Dundalk and Newry.

City growth is to be disproportionately concentrated in the four cities other than Dublin. According to the original NPF, population in these four cities is to grow by at least 50 per cent from 2016 to 2040 while Dublin's population is to grow by 20 to 25 per cent over the same period⁴. This is a major change relative to past trends and the NPF makes provision for a phasing-in of this growth.

In addition, the NPF sets a target that at least 40 per cent of all new housing is to be delivered within the existing built-up areas of cities, towns and villages on infill and/or brownfield sites. The balance will continue to be provided at the edge of settlements and in rural areas. There is also an objective of delivering at least 50 per cent of all new homes that are targeted in the five cities plus their suburbs within their existing built-up footprints. For settlements other than the five cities and their suburbs, the objective is to deliver at least 30 per cent of all new homes within their existing built-up footprints. These targets on the location of housing are set out in the original NPF and remain in the draft revised text.

The Expert Group who reviewed the NPF argued that the target of having from 30 to 50 per cent of new homes within the existing built-up footprints of cities and other settlements was too low to achieve compact growth. They also criticised the definition of existing built-up areas as being too wide on the grounds that it includes considerable greenfield land, particularly in metropolitan areas (Burke *et al.*, 2023). The built-up areas are defined by the CSO based on the Census results. The CSO revised the definition of built-up area for the 2022 Census, and it states that the greenfield areas included are now minimised. However, the revised definition will still include suburban areas so does not address the concern about insufficient numbers of people living in urban cores. For the cities in particular, it would be desirable to also have a target for the share of new housing in the central area.

The final revised draft NPF also states: 'For the purposes of NPO 7, 8 and 9 the built-up footprint is defined as the area given over to urban land uses (i.e. artificial surfaces relating to urban land uses). The built-up footprint shall be clearly defined for each settlement on the land-use zoning map as part of the statutory plan making process' (Government of Ireland, 2025b: 22). The Council welcomes the intention to provide clarity in this manner.

While the formal targets for compact growth are largely the same in the original and draft revised NPF, there is more emphasis on this subject in the revised version. The wording of the target regarding new homes built within the built-up footprint of existing settlement has been modified to emphasise compact growth: 'Deliver at least 40 per cent of all new homes nationally, within the built-up footprint of existing settlements **and ensure compact and sequential patterns of growth**' (Government of Ireland, 2025b: 179). The final draft revised NPF provides a profile of City Edge, a major redevelopment

⁴ A broadly equivalent target is set in the final draft revised NPF for the four cities with a target of population growth of 40 per cent or more over the period 2022 to 2040. For Dublin the target in the revised NPF is 20 to 25 per cent growth over the period 2022 to 2040. It is of interest to focus on the targets from 2016 as there is data available for the period 2016 to 2022.

project in west Dublin with scope for up to 40,000 new homes and 75,000 new jobs. This is identified as an opportunity to achieve the goals of compact growth and transport orientated development (TOD) at scale.

There is an increased emphasis on TOD as a means of achieving compact growth in the final draft revised NPF:

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Department of Transport are working with the Land Development Agency (LDA), National Transport Authority (NTA), local and regional authorities and infrastructure providers to identify suitable opportunities for TOD at scale in the five cities, aligned to planned investment in the public transport network. ... The two departments are also reviewing opportunities for better integration of land use and transport in the regional centres. While locations outside of the metropolitan areas may not be suitable for large-scale TOD, the principles of TOD can be applied at local level to support compact development, sustainable mobility and climate targets (Government of Ireland, 2025b:153).

The final revised NPF includes the following new national policy objectives (NPOs) on TOD:

Deliver Transport Orientated Development (TOD) at scale at suitable locations, served by high capacity public transport and located within or adjacent to the built up footprint of the five cities or a metropolitan town and ensure compact and sequential patterns of growth. (NPO 10).

The Government will work to establish the necessary institutional and funding arrangements to support the development and accelerated delivery of TOD at suitable locations in conjunction with the ongoing programme of investment in the public transport network (NPO 95) (Government of Ireland, 2025b:175, 183).

A report on TOD opportunities in the Dublin area includes an estimate of the number of dwellings deliverable at specific locations (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and Department of Transport, 2023) and this will also be the case for subsequent studies of this kind. The revised NPF also commits to the development of a new approach to the monitoring of compact growth:

A new approach to monitoring urban growth will be developed, focussing on the built-up footprint of existing settlements comprising areas that are subject to existing urban land uses and the additional 'land-take' associated with development outside of the built-up footprint. A tool is being developed to track and compare urban development trends across the main urban settlements (Government of Ireland: 2025b: 21).

This is reflected in a new NPO as follows:

Develop and implement new approaches to measuring and monitoring compact growth in cities and larger settlements aligned to increased digitalisation of the planning system (Government of Ireland, 2025b: 187).

NESC welcomes the increased emphasis on compact growth and its more advanced measurement in the revised NPF.

Also of importance to achieving compact growth are the planning guidelines on sustainable and compact settlements prepared by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government for planning authorities. These set out density ranges across different types of settlements in addition to guidance on quality design and place-making as well as housing development standards. A new set of planning guidelines was published in January 2024 (Department of Housing, Local Government and

Heritage, 2024a). The new guidelines make changes that are designed to facilitate low-rise, medium-density housing. This is a model of housing development capable of achieving medium densities of 40 dph to 100 dph (net), with a high proportion of own-door units. Characteristics of this type of development include reduced plot sizes and a tighter arrangement of houses compared to suburban housing, narrower streets and smaller street setbacks, reduced car parking ratios, and high-quality streets and public spaces. This model facilitates the achievement of density targets in some locations without the use of standard apartments and thereby contributes to compact growth.

4.2 Performance

The high-level target that at least 40 per cent of new housing development should take place within the existing urban footprint is being achieved (see Table 4.1). The share of housing development within existing built-up areas for the State in 2023 was 67.2 per cent, up from 65.0 per cent in 2016. This share exceeded 40 per cent in almost all counties in 2023. The share was below 40 per cent in Roscommon (38.3 per cent) and marginally so in Donegal (39.8 per cent) and Westmeath (39.7 per cent) in 2023. Even for these counties, it still exceeded 30 per cent which is the target for areas outside the five cities.

The share of new housing within built-up areas has increased in most counties between 2016 to 2023. This could be an indication that the target is making a difference. However, there is also a cyclical influence. One-off housing is the most stable part of housing output: it is sustained even when the output of other forms of housing falls. Hence the share of one-off housing falls when housing output generally recovers. The share of single houses in total housing completions declined from 37.0 per cent in 2016 to 16.9 per cent in 2023 although in absolute terms the number of single house completions increased from 3607 in 2016 to 5404 in 2023.

There were large reductions in the share of housing within the built-up footprint in Kildare (-23.4 per cent), Dublin (-15.7 per cent) and Louth (-12.7 per cent) between 2016 and 2023. These are all counties with fairly high housing output and these reductions are of concern.

The 40 per cent target is a modest one. Despite achievement of this goal, Ireland continues to experience sprawling development. This is acknowledged in the draft first revision of the NPF: 'The fastest growing areas continue to be at the edges of and outside our cities and towns'. This has the following implications:

A constant process of infrastructure and services catch-up in building new roads, new schools, services and amenities and a struggle to bring jobs and homes together, meaning that there are remarkably high levels of car dependence and that it is difficult to provide good public transport.

A gradual process of run-down of city and town centres and established suburban areas as jobs, retail and housing move out, leaving behind declining school enrolments, empty buildings and a lack of sufficient people to create strong and vibrant places, both day and night (Government of Ireland, 2025b: 20).

Over the initial period of 2016 to 2022 (covered by the most recent Census data), the share of population growth represented by the five cities was just 32 per cent, well below the target of 50 per cent by 2040, even allowing for the permitted phasing of this target (see Table 4.2). Almost 23 per cent of national population growth took place in Dublin city and suburbs.

Table 4.1: Percentage of housing completions within the built-up footprint, 2016, 2020 and 2023

	2016	2020	2023	Change 2016- 2023
Dublin	94.9%	82.0%	79.2%	-15.7%
Kildare	65.4%	56.7%	42.0%	-23.4%
Meath	54.4%	57.0%	67.4%	13.1%
Wicklow	76.3%	88.3%	76.2%	-0.2%
Louth	79.0%	70.3%	66.3%	-12.7%
Laois	40.2%	65.3%	83.2%	43.0%
Longford	16.7%	32.7%	43.8%	27.1%
Offaly	29.4%	39.1%	79.3%	49.9%
Westmeath	45.5%	50.4%	39.7%	-5.8%
Cavan	25.3%	43.4%	55.2%	29.8%
Donegal	23.8%	46.3%	39.8%	16.0%
Leitrim	31.7%	2.7%	51.5%	19.8%
Monaghan	20.7%	38.2%	43.4%	22.7%
Sligo	30.6%	59.8%	63.9%	33.3%
Galway	38.2%	50.8%	53.7%	15.5%
Mayo	24.1%	32.9%	41.9%	17.8%
Roscommon	34.1%	36.5%	38.3%	4.2%
Clare	34.8%	50.8%	49.0%	14.2%
Limerick	63.7%	58.9%	63.0%	-0.7%
Tipperary	26.5%	38.5%	49.4%	22.9%
Carlow	28.9%	63.1%	55.8%	26.9%
Kilkenny	36.9%	55.3%	65.6%	28.7%
Waterford	65.0%	79.0%	76.6%	11.6%
Wexford	29.6%	47.4%	52.8%	23.2%
Cork	58.4%	71.2%	69.0%	10.6%
Kerry	38.5%	52.5%	58.3%	19.8%
State	65.0%	65.8%	67.2%	2.2%

Source: Regional Development Monitor Website. Figure for State calculated by NESC using the data from the Regional Development Monitor Website.

Table 4.2: Change in population in five cities and suburbs, 2011–2016 and 2016–2022

	2022	Total change 2011–2016	Total change 2016–2022	Share of growth 2016–2022
Cork city and suburbs	222,335	5.1%	6.5%	3.5%
Dublin city and suburbs	1,261,562	5.6%	7.5%	22.8%
Galway city and suburbs	85,856	4.1%	7.4%	1.5%
Limerick city and suburbs	103,611	3.0%	10.0%	2.4%
Waterford city and suburbs	60,200	3.9%	12.5%	1.7%
Total five cities	1,733,564	5.3%	7.7%	32.0%
Ireland	5,149,139	3.8%	8.1%	100.0%

Source: CSO (2023) *Census of Population 2022 Profile 1 – Population Distribution and Movements*, Background Notes Appendix Table 1, and CSO, *Census of Population*, previous years.

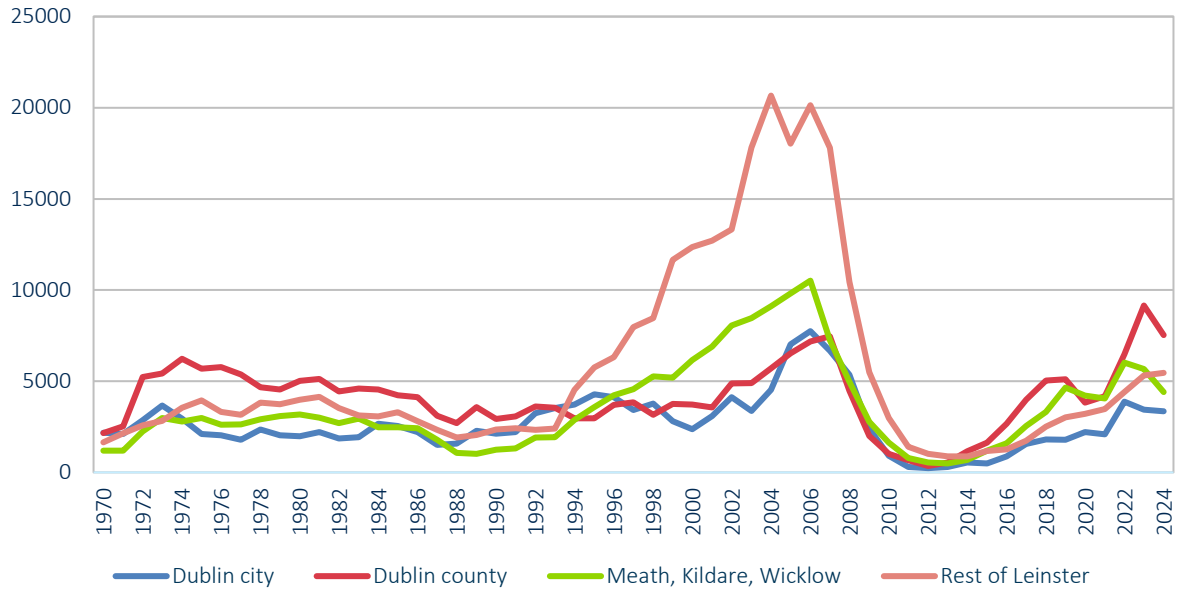
Note: A new definition of urban areas (built-up areas) was adopted in the 2022 Census. The figures above for 2022 are based on the 2016 boundaries of cities and suburbs, for comparability.

Over the period 2016 to 2022, Dublin’s population grew by 7.5 per cent, which was slightly behind the national average of 8.1 per cent. In the case of both Waterford and Limerick, population growth was faster than both national population growth and that of Dublin, at 12.5 per cent and 10.0 per cent respectively. If these growth rates were sustained to 2040, the cumulative growth rate for Waterford would be 60 per cent and that for Limerick 47 per cent. At these growth rates, in absolute terms Waterford city and suburbs would achieve the target of at least 50 per cent for the period 2016 to 2040 set in the original NPF while Limerick would come close. In the case of both Cork and Galway, population growth was below the national average. Hence the concentration of population growth in the cities outside Dublin is not yet happening as envisaged in the NPF.

The period 2016 to 2020 was one in which total population grew at a substantially faster rate than that indicated in the NPF. The targeted increase in the state population in the original NPF for the period 2016 to 2040 was 21 to 23 per cent; if it continued at the rate experienced in the period 2016 to 2022, the increase for the period to 2040 would be 37 per cent. For the most part, this higher than projected population growth occurred outside the cities and their suburbs, with the exceptions of Limerick and Waterford. The fastest population growth by county over the 2016 to 2022 period occurred in Longford (14.4 per cent), Meath (13.2 per cent), Fingal (11.6 per cent), Kildare (11.4 per cent), Leitrim (9.8 per cent), Waterford city and county (9.6 per cent), Wexford (9.5 per cent) and Wicklow (9.4 per cent). Most of these counties are adjacent to cities. This period includes the Ukraine war so is unlikely to be typical of the experience to 2040 in terms of total population growth.

The pattern of housing development in the eastern part of Ireland in recent years has been much less dispersed compared to the previous housing boom when the fastest growth in housing completions was in the outer Leinster counties; completions in these counties rose to double the level of Dublin city. These counties’ share of housing completions declined from 47.6 per cent of completions in Leinster in 2013 to 17.7 per cent in 2017 but rose to 26.3 per cent in 2024. The share of housing completions in these counties is no longer disproportionate to their share of Leinster’s population although the share of the State’s housing completions in Leinster as a whole (70.1% in 2022) is substantially higher than its population share (55.7% in 2022).

Figure 4.1: Housing completions in Dublin and Leinster, 1970–2024

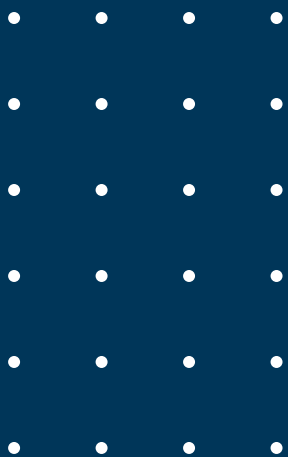


Source: CSO Database, New Dwelling Completions. Data based on ESB connections up to 2010.

A range of other variables could be used to monitor compact growth. Density features prominently in Ireland's residential planning guidelines as discussed above, and it would be worthwhile monitoring the trends in key density variables, especially for the five metropolitan areas. These include average urban population and employment density, and the share of the population in low-density areas.

The trends in vacant and derelict buildings in cities, towns and villages are also worth monitoring.

Chapter 5



**Obstacles to Compact
Growth**

Compact growth is government policy but there are many obstacles to its successful realisation in Ireland.

5.1 Incentives

The cost of housing is a major influence on the achievement of compact growth. The search for affordable housing leads people to seek housing far from where they work in areas that are often car-dependent, even if formally within the boundary of an urban area. These housing cost differentials reflect development costs.

Brownfield development is an important component of compact growth. A recent report published by the Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR) has examined Ireland's experience in this regard (Mitchell McDermot and Office of the Planning Regulator, 2024).

The OPR study included a cost comparison of a brownfield and greenfield project. The comparison was based on costs in an actual brownfield project compared to estimates of what a project with the same design would cost at a greenfield location; i.e. a comparison was drawn between an actual brownfield project and an equivalent, hypothetical greenfield one. The brownfield project was not named due to commercial sensitivity. The brownfield project is a residential development with 110 units in a six-storey building over basement. It is located on the edge of a city centre with surrounding buildings on the site boundary.

The report found that, from the developer's perspective, brownfield development was considerably more costly and less commercially viable than a comparable greenfield development. It was estimated that the brownfield development would cost **from €58,000 to €77,000 per unit more** compared to a hypothetical greenfield development. These are the direct costs as they would be experienced by a developer. The components of the estimated extra cost of the brownfield development were as follows:

- Additional site cost of €8k – €11k per unit compared to a greenfield location.
- Additional cost of €9k – €12k per unit arising from abnormal site features including demolition of existing buildings, removal of underground tanks, removal of asbestos and fixing ground contamination.
- Additional hard construction cost of €28k – €37k per unit. Construction costs are typically higher for brownfield developments due to constraints on site access, logistics and proximity of neighbouring properties.
- Additional soft cost of €13k – €17k per unit. These cover statutory fees and contributions, professional fees, sales and marketing costs. Most of these costs are proportionate to hard costs.

However, adopting a wider view of costs, the report cited estimates from research prepared by the Housing Commission that the additional cost of core infrastructure required for greenfield development was €102,000 to €137,000. This was based on a situation in which there was a need to accommodate an additional 15,000 people in or around a town with a population of 50,000. A comparison was made of the infrastructure cost of two scenarios as follows: (i) the extra 15,000 people are housed within the settlement boundary of the town, bringing its population to 65,000; (ii) the additional people are accommodated in a settlement located 5km from the town.

The second scenario requires additional infrastructure investment in roads, rail, bus services, water/wastewater, electricity and telecom connections. This additional cost was estimated at €102,000 to €137,000 per home. A summary of this research appears in Appendix 4e of the report of the Housing Commission (2024).

While brownfield development may require infrastructure upgrades and sometimes new infrastructure, it will typically generate savings by reducing the extent of new infrastructure required. For both existing and new infrastructure, compact development makes better use of the infrastructure, through for example higher-density development in the vicinity of public transport stations.

The additional infrastructure costs of greenfield development are mainly borne by the State rather than developers. The Housing Commission comparison excluded several other costs such as operation costs, energy, travel costs of residents, the cost of additional carbon emissions, and other environmental costs, including the loss of biodiversity through the consumption of greenfield land.

If account is taken of the wider costs of greenfield development, then it appears that it is brownfield that is more cost-effective. It would be worthwhile to undertake a full cost benefit analysis of all the relevant costs and benefits of greenfield and brownfield development in Ireland.

A second incentive issue is that it costs more to develop apartments than houses. There is some scope to address this through more compact, medium-density housing, which is less costly than apartments.

A third incentive concern is that renovation or adaptation of derelict property for residential use is often not commercially viable.

There are financial incentives that seek to address these issues to some degree. The Croí Cónaithe (Cities) fund provides generous incentives for the development of new apartments in cities for sale to owner-occupiers (up to a maximum of €120,000 per apartment)⁵ but uptake to date has been modest. While the scheme applies in the five cities, the developments announced to date have all been in Dublin or Cork. This may reflect the conditions that the apartment blocks must be four storeys or higher and have a net density of at least 35 dwellings per hectare.

Individuals can avail of grants for renovating vacant and derelict properties. The Programme for Government indicates that these will be extended to 'over the shop' premises.

The high cost of developing apartments in Ireland is one part of the incentive problem for compact growth. Of course, the development costs of houses are also of concern. As part of Housing for All, a study was conducted on the comparative construction costs of apartments in five European cities: Dublin, Birmingham, Copenhagen, Utrecht and Berlin (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2023). It was found that the typical construction cost of an apartment was highest in Dublin. The study also compared the construction cost of an apartment in Dublin to one built in the other cities to Irish specifications, referred to as a 'travelling box' comparison. When such a comparison was made, it was found that costs were quite similar across the different cities, and that costs for Birmingham were now 9 per cent higher than Dublin.

The reason for lower construction costs for apartments in the cities concerned arises from differences in scope, specifications and size. In terms of scope, lower costs arise from more limited finishes including bare ceilings, absence of fitted wardrobes and ensembles, and sometimes minimal or no fitted kitchen. The differences in specifications include more use of some dimensions of modern methods of construction (MMC) as well as more standardisation of components such as windows and doors.

The study made a series of recommendations to reduce costs, several of which focused on standardisation. It recommended the development of standardised approaches to the design of housing. These approaches would include the development of: (i) standardised dwelling types and (ii) standardised specifications, including for building services (i.e. plumbing, heating and ventilation systems and electrics) and standardised components. The study recommended further research on

⁵ The level of the grant is based on the viability gap, i.e. the difference between the unit cost of developing an apartment and the market price. The maximum grant per apartment is expected to be €120,000 (inclusive of VAT) but this may be exceeded by up to 20 per cent (€144,000 inclusive of VAT) in certain cases in regional cities where the viability gap is larger.

costs, including market research on whether there is a market in Ireland for apartments with lower specifications than the norm, e.g. without fitted kitchens and wardrobes.

Last year NESCC published a report on MMC which found that there was significant scope for MMC to boost productivity in construction. It identified six lines of action to encourage greater adoption and use of MMC in housing among producers and to promote acceptance among users (NESCC, 2024).

5.2 Infrastructure Investment

Compact development reduces long-run infrastructure costs as well as having a lower carbon footprint and ecological impact. However, there are still upfront infrastructure and other costs incurred with compact development. Two of the Regional Assembly submissions on the revision of the NPF point to constraints on infrastructure funding as a key obstacle to the capacity to achieve compact growth. According to the submission of the Southern Regional Assembly:

The objectives for compact growth in our cities outside of Dublin are compromised by a lack of enabling infrastructure to unlock sites and support higher densities, and a lack of viability for the market delivery of higher density developments on brownfield lands (SRA, 2024: 8).

A basic requirement for housing investment to take place in an urban settlement (a minimal requirement for compact growth) is sufficient capacity in water infrastructure. This capacity and, in some cases, other basic infrastructure is lacking in many urban areas.

The Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) both support compact growth. They provide up to 75 or 85 per cent grant funding mainly to local authorities, awarded on a competitive basis. These funds appear to have had a strong impact relative to the scale of funding. However, the OECD (2023) points out that this type of short-term funding model is incompatible with investment in major infrastructure projects. Also, the bidding process absorbs administrative resources.

Another issue with these funds to support compact growth is the match funding element. In Ireland's local government system, in which local authorities have limited own resources and discretionary funds, the lack of matching funding can prevent them from availing of these schemes.

5.3 Lack of Co-ordination

Several reports, including the draft NPF revision, have emphasised the need for enhanced coordination if the vision of the NPF is to be implemented. The OECD recommended that Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) delivery boards be established at regional level with a dedicated statutory committee for Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) implementation and include representation from key infrastructure agencies, including the National Transport Authority (NTA), Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), Uisce Éireann, EirGrid and Irish Rail (OECD, 2023).

5.4 Centralisation

Several contributors to the book recently published by the Irish Cities 2070 group,⁶ *Irish Cities in Crisis*, argue that Ireland's overly centralised system is an obstacle to achieving good planning outcomes:

Governance at national, regional and local levels has failed our cities, with too much power being retained at national level and too little autonomy and resources devolved to regional authorities, rendering all levels of government ineffective in understanding planning and promoting desirable development models (Browne and Coady, 2024a: xvi-xvii).

They contrast this to the situation in European cities where:

successful city governments have considerable autonomy and access to in-house resources that are devoted to urban design and project development, while they are also able to draw on regional and national government support for the completion of large capital projects such as public transport infrastructure (*ibid.*: xvii).

Browne and Coady point to the limited finance of local authorities as a key part of the problem:

Local authorities do not have the finance to acquire developable land, envision, masterplan and design and then manage the development of new neighbourhoods at scale, ensuring the needed infrastructure and public services are in place prior to occupation. This is one of the key reasons why Irish cities have fallen behind their European counterparts where locally approved, master-planned and serviced sites are released to public, community and private actors, who develop their own projects within a robust framework of design guidance provided by the municipality (Browne and Coady, 2024b: 21).

The importance of the regional level is emphasised by the Irish Cities 2070 group:

The IC70 Group believes that currently there is insufficient devolution of authority, funding and accountability to the regions. Each region needs to be geographically coherent and have a minimum population of at least 500,000 in order to finance the necessary skilled staff to effectively carry out the required functions. This is not possible with the current county structure particularly for the smaller counties (Pike and Duggan, 2024: 195).

According to the OECD (2023), relative to other OECD countries Ireland is highly centralised, while many countries, large and small, 'have relatively high degrees of empowerment of local and/or regional authorities' (OECD, 2023: 12). The degree of centralisation of the Irish state is viewed by the OECD as an obstacle to realising the vision of the NPF:

Ultimately, if the ambition of the NPF is going beyond business as usual – and based on a vision of Ireland's future needs – the notion that small and centralised equates to agile and efficient needs a rethink (*ibid.*: 18).

The OECD recommends giving local authorities the tools to deliver the long-term vision of the NPF in the form of new own-source revenues and a multi-annual investment framework. As a first step it proposes that the 'government should establish an independent task force to explore opportunities for

⁶ Irish Cities 2070 is a multidisciplinary group, supported by the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (RIAI) and the Irish Academy of Engineering (IAE), with expertise in architecture, urban design, economics, demography and other disciplines, with members from both professional practice and academia.

subnational own-source revenues to enhance the capacity of local and regional government’ (OECD, 54: 2023).

Elsewhere, however, the OECD has argued that decentralised systems lead to more sprawl:

Decentralised governance systems – where local governments have the power to set land-use policies within their own jurisdiction – have been shown to provide implicit incentives for urban sprawl (OECD, 2018: 161).

While these findings appear to be in contradiction, it may be the case that one needs a centralised framework for land use policy (such as the NPF) but that more autonomous regional and local governments can be effective in the implementation of such frameworks.

5.5 Weaknesses in Urban Planning

Some of the contributors to the *Irish Cities in Crisis* book identify Ireland’s planning system and legislation as an obstacle to achieving successful, compact urban development. It is claimed by Reddy (2024) that the planning system is not satisfactory from the perspectives of either community representatives, developers or planners. Major changes have recently been made to Irish planning legislation through the Planning and Development Act (2024).

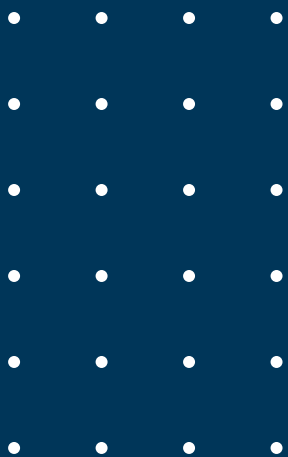
Despite problems in Ireland’s planning system, Reddy identifies examples of successful urban planning bodies in Ireland. These include the Custom House Docks Development Authority (CHDDA) (1987), Temple Bar Properties (1991) and the Dublin Docklands Development Authority (DDDA) (1997). The CHDDA, with a combination of special planning powers and tax incentives, oversaw the development of the International Financial Services Centre (IFSC) which now employs over 80,000 people. Its ownership of substantial land in the area was important to its ability to lead redevelopment. The CHDDA was replaced by the DDDA in 1997, which covered a wider area on both sides of the Liffey. It adopted a more mixed land-use approach, and it required all new residential developments to reserve 20 per cent of homes for social and affordable housing.

A feature of planning in many EU countries is the presentation of development plans as models or three-dimensional images. Reddy (2024) argues that the use of this approach in Ireland would facilitate active community engagement, and that the final development plan would have the status of a planning permission. Permission would then follow automatically for applications in compliance with the development plan. Other applications could be made but these would be subject to the current planning and appeals process. This would free up planners from development control work to concentrate on planning. This in turn would require an upgrading of the skills of planners in relation to urban design, a theme emphasised by many of the contributors to the *Irish Cities in Crisis* book, including Coady and Browne:

Embedding compact growth as the default solution will require new skills, new ways of working, and considerable additional resources at all levels of government. Above all it will require increased personnel in planning, urban design, architecture, development management and engineering, working in teams in local and regional authorities to prepare the 3-D visions for our new and redeveloped neighbourhoods, and to realise them in collaboration with citizens and the many stakeholders engaged in community building and physical development (Coady and Browne, 2024: 519).

Coady and Browne propose that one or two Irish cities be designated as ‘pilots for a new way of designing and delivering a compact urban future’ (*ibid*: 519). This merits consideration and illustrates that adopting compact growth involves considerable change from practice to date.

Chapter 6



**How to Achieve Compact
Growth:**
International Case Studies

The Housing Agency commissioned Indecon economic consultants to study examples of successful compact residential development in other countries. The purpose of the study was to examine how these examples were developed and made viable, and what makes them a success as areas of compact development. Four examples were chosen:

- Aspern Seestadt in Vienna, Austria;
- Nordhavn in Copenhagen, Denmark;
- Vauban in Freiburg, Germany; and
- The Pearl District in Portland, Oregon, USA.

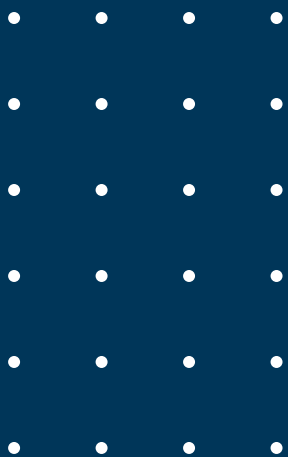
All these were brownfield developments. In all the examples, public agencies or companies played a leading role. Investment in public transport and other infrastructure and remediation of sites by public bodies were central to success. In three of the four case studies, the public entity⁷ was the landowner and undertook this investment before selling plots to developers. This was used to recover some or all of the infrastructure and other costs incurred. In the fourth case, the Pearl District in Portland, a public agency made the investment to address key obstacles to development as part of an agreement whereby developers undertook to deliver high-density housing and bear the cost of providing the affordable housing share of the development. One incentive that was effective in the case studies was lower-than-normal requirements for parking spaces. As well as reducing developer costs, this served the goal of reduced car dependency.

The study found that viability was not a major concern in these developments. Developers found these areas attractive. The work of public agencies in planning these areas and preparing sites for development through actions such as soil decontamination along with the provision of infrastructure and amenities made these sites attractive, for the most part without reliance on financial incentives. The development of the Pearl District in Portland was encouraged by multiple incentives but critical to it was an agreement with developers on infrastructure.

Legislative constraints on greenfield development were a common characteristic of the case studies examined in the Indecon study. The presence of greenbelts around the cities concerned means that continued growth of the city requires compact growth. Typically, these greenbelts have been in place for a significant period, and the authors of the Indecon study argue that 'the presence of these greenbelts has, for the most part, led to the embedding of the principles of compact urban growth in urban planning and development practices in the cities considered here' (Indecon International Consultants, 2024: 65). The alternative of greenfield development was not considered a viable option.

⁷ In the Vienna case study, private interests obtained a shareholding in the development company at a later stage in exchange for putting money into the company.

Chapter 7



**How to Achieve More
Compact Growth in
Ireland**

7.1 Compact Growth Targets

The headline target of 40 per cent of new housing within existing settlement boundaries is being achieved. This is a modest target, influenced by the economic cycle as the level of single housing is sustained across the cycle while scheme houses and apartments are highly variable. Consideration should be given to including other targets on compact growth. Density features prominently in Ireland's planning guidelines; it would be worthwhile monitoring the trends in key density variables, especially for the five metropolitan areas. The trends in vacant and derelict buildings in cities, towns and villages are also worth monitoring. The Council welcomes the intention set out in the revised NPF to clearly define the built-up footprint for each settlement on the land-use zoning map and the development of new approaches to the measurement and monitoring of compact growth.

7.2 Institutional Arrangements

Realising the NPF vision requires stronger co-ordination, particularly among the bodies responsible for providing infrastructure, and stronger governance arrangements are needed if the Metropolitan Area Strategic Plans (MASPs) are to be effectively delivered. One way of achieving this would be to establish Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) delivery boards at regional level with a dedicated statutory committee for MASP implementation and include representation from key infrastructure agencies including the National Transport Authority (NTA), Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), Uisce Éireann, EirGrid and Irish Rail, as recommended by the OECD (2023).

If regional and local authorities are to play a role comparable to their European counterparts in promoting compact development, some devolution of powers would be required, including reforms to provide more financial autonomy.

The case studies in the Housing Agency/Indecon study of sustainable compact development show that a common factor to many compact growth and regeneration initiatives internationally is the putting in place of specific institutional arrangements to drive the development process forward. A singular organisational focus on bringing the many parts necessary to achieve compact growth objectives – such as consolidation of land holding, master-planning, coordination with infrastructure providers, risk management and project management – is a common feature in many of the examples internationally. Historical experience in Ireland also demonstrates that purpose-designed organisational vehicles are of critical importance in both the private and public sectors.

From the regeneration of Dublin's docklands to the development of the Grangegorman campus of Technological University Dublin (TUD), the current Limerick 2030 initiative and the initiation of the Adamstown Strategic Development Zone by a commercial entity formed by the owners of the site to today's activities of the Land Development Agency, compact growth initiatives are significantly aided by a dedicated development entity. Such a singular focus can provide the organisational and operational clarity and leadership needed to unlock the many complexities of turning over previously 'stuck' sites such as brownfield regeneration to urban greenfield extension projects.

In addition, where there are clear and effective relationships with the relevant local authorities, resulting in judicious use of varied planning, building control, environmental, community engagement and local infrastructure coordination roles in support of the compact growth objectives – presumably supported by that local authority's development plan – the momentum for dynamic and progressive interventions can grow. This can be a strong force for de-risking the activation of complex sites. For example, key access elements to the Grangegorman campus of TUD to link the site to the city centre and the Luas project were enabled by compulsory purchase orders (CPOs) and other enablements by Dublin City Council. The same applies to the regeneration of the North Quays of Waterford city and the Brewery Quarter in Kilkenny.

7.3 Infrastructure

The continuation of sprawling development would add to the cost of infrastructure and public services. However, compact growth may require some infrastructure investment, and the absence of required investment is often the limiting factor. This applies to large redevelopment projects as well as to the availability of, for example, water infrastructure in rural towns. The URDF is often the source of key infrastructure investment supportive of compact growth but the matching funding requirement can be a barrier. The Council recommends that adequate long-term investment be provided for infrastructure to support the goals for compact growth.

In the European case studies in the Housing Agency/Indecon study, the development took place on publicly owned land, which enabled at least some of the expenditure on land preparation and infrastructure to be recovered through the sale of plots to developers of different kinds. There are similarities between the model used in these case studies and the redevelopment of the Dublin Docklands, and there is scope to apply it to the achievement of further compact growth in Ireland.

Where public investment is made in infrastructure and servicing public land, there are advantages to leasing rather than selling such land for development. Retaining land in public ownership removes the land from future speculative pressures. The costs of infrastructure investment can be recovered over time through an ongoing rental charge on the land. The rental charge can be reduced or eliminated to enhance affordability. Affordable purchase homes on leased public land could be subject to ongoing regulation of resale prices to achieve permanent affordability.

The new Programme for Government includes several commitments of relevance to infrastructure and land for compact development, as follows:

- Create a new strategic fund to invest in infrastructure, to acquire land, assemble sites, de-risk sites in existing towns and cities to maximise their potential growth.
- Enact a new Compulsory Purchase Order Bill with streamlined and strengthened CPO powers to activate underutilised land for home building.
- Strengthen the LDA's CPO powers.
- Establish Land Activation Units in each local authority.
- Invest additional capital in Uisce Éireann to support reaching our new housing targets. We will prioritise water and wastewater infrastructure to deliver the capacity to facilitate housing development in our towns and villages (Government of Ireland, 2025a: 41-42).

The Council welcomes these commitments and supports their speedy implementation to expedite compact growth. The experience of previous funds suggests that, rather than requiring local authorities and other agencies to engage in repeated competitive bidding processes, the new fund should provide long-term, multi-annual funding to support a planned approach.

7.4 Financial Incentives

There is a wide range of incentives in place for both greenfield and brownfield development, with key incentives to encourage more compact development, including the Croí Cónaithe grants. However, there are other financial incentives that probably encourage sprawl. The Help to Buy scheme provides help with the deposit for eligible first-time buyers of new homes while the First Home scheme helps to bridge the gap between the deposit plus mortgage and the cost of a home. Both incentives are location-neutral and apply to all types of dwellings, including one-off houses. However, an OECD working paper points out that, in countries in which single-family dwellings (i.e. houses) predominate, incentives for home ownership are in practice likely to encourage the purchase of houses more than

apartments. The construction of houses uses more land (and other resources) than apartments and this generates more sprawl (Monroy Moreno *et al.*, 2020).

Until recently there was considerable development of rental apartments in Dublin. Current rent controls appear to be a constraint on the development of new rental apartments, although there are other significant influences on this in cities. The current designation of rent pressure zones expires at the end of 2025. The Council believes that rent controls will continue to be required beyond 2025 but that they should be set on a more flexible basis to support increased supply.

A recent review of the private rental sector published by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage highlighted the challenge of developing new apartments at rents that are both viable for developers and affordable for prospective renters. This underlines the importance of reducing development costs and of continued investment in cost rental in order to achieve an increased supply of homes at more affordable rental levels (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2024b).

Ireland has development levies so that developers contribute to the cost of new infrastructure required by new development. An OECD working paper recommends that such levies or fees be differentiated by location to reflect costs:

If properly implemented, development charges can take into account the externalities of new urban development and discourage urban sprawl. In order to have this effect, the charges have to be differentiated by location to reflect the different infrastructure costs. For example, costs tend to be higher for developments located further away from major facilities and for low-density developments. To be efficient, development charges would be higher in these locations. ... in addition to varying by location, charges should also differ according to the density and type of development to avoid low-cost areas subsidising high-cost areas, small lots subsidising large lots, and smaller residential units subsidising larger units (Merk *et al.*, 2012: 39).

A site value tax is a recurring annual tax on property based on the site value of the property rather than the building (if any) located on the site. NESCC has previously envisaged a site value tax being applied to developed land, derelict land, vacant land and zoned sites, but not to agricultural land (NESCC, 2020). A site value tax would contribute to the goal of compact growth by encouraging more efficient land use. The National Competitiveness Council (NCC) recommended a site value tax on commercial property and land zoned and serviced for development, which would replace commercial rates and the vacant site levy (NCC, 2015). NESCC also previously recommended identifying and systematically addressing any barriers to the development and introduction of a site value tax (NESCC, 2020).

Financial incentives need to be subject to ongoing monitoring. The Council recommends that the issue of incentives be given further consideration with a view to finding the right approach both in regard to levies that reflect costs and positive incentives for brownfield development.

7.5 Brownfield Development Strategy

The Council supports the proposal of the OPR study to develop a brownfield activation strategy. The elements of such a strategy could comprise the following elements: a database of key brownfield sites across the State, a strategic policy framework to provide oversight, consideration of the balance of fiscal incentives for brownfield and greenfield development, and review of the most important codes and regulations that affect brownfield development such as conveyancing, compulsory purchase and building control (Mitchel McDermot and Office of the Planning Regulator, 2024).

7.6 Infill Development

Large flagship areas such as Clonburris in Dublin are important opportunities to create new communities informed by the principles of compact growth. However, many if not most of the opportunities for compact growth will be on smaller in-fill and brownfield sites. For example, Coady *et al.* (2024) estimate that it would be feasible to create 200,000 homes in the Dublin suburbs beyond the 19th century suburbs by increasing their density by 21 dph through developing corner sites, backlands, the green edges of existing developments and small infill sites, including sites made available through obsolescence, as well as the splitting of large houses into two apartments (as noted above).

Realising the opportunities for densification of existing areas will require innovation and could also be supported in some cases by planning changes. The Housing Unlocked competition run by the Housing Agency produced several innovative proposals. One was to support the development of mews dwellings in Dublin suburban homes with large gardens and access through back lanes. Their proposal was to analyse suburban laneways to establish design guidelines which would streamline the process of construction of new residential units. Mews homes constructed in strict compliance with national design guidance would then be exempted from requiring planning permission. With this approach, it was estimated that, within the M50 around Dublin, there was scope for 15,000 to 20,000 homes.

7.7 Vacant and Derelict Property

In view of the complexity and multiple challenges in restoring and adapting vacant and derelict property, as well as the benefits, there is a strong case for the public sector to play a leading role. The success of Waterford County and City Council in reducing vacancy illustrates the potential benefits that arise when a public body takes a proactive approach. The Council welcomes the commitment in the Programme for Government to ensure that every local authority has an expanded vacant property team in place to help bring vacant properties back into use. The needs vary across local authority, having regard to the scale and type of vacant property, and this should be taken into account.

The vacancy rate for housing in Ireland as measured by the Geodirectory⁸ has fallen and reached 3.8 per cent in the final quarter of 2024. It is lowest in the areas of the highest housing demand, e.g. Dublin (1.2%) and Kildare (1.5%) while it is highest in the west of Ireland, e.g. Leitrim (11.8%) and Mayo (10.6%). The vacancy rate for commercial property has risen and is now at 14.5 per cent (final quarter 2024). There is a case for a more focused effort to renovate and adapt commercial properties, including over-the-shop premises.

There is a commitment in the Programme for Government to introduce an over-the-shop incentive that would be a top-up to existing vacancy and dereliction grants. This should be helpful but previous incentives for this type of renovation seem to have had limited effect. As well as incentives there is a need for other measures.

The obstacles posed by regulation to renovation, including over-the-shop opportunities, require further consideration. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has published a *Bringing Back Homes Manual* (2024) which provides guidance on how to facilitate the reuse of buildings (under current regulatory requirements) and provides information on the various funding schemes available to property owners. However, a report by DCC found that private sector developers identify the lack of availability of clear guidelines for fire safety solutions for adaptive reuse projects as a barrier (Craven, 2024). Reforms are needed so that those seeking to renovate property are given clearer guidance on what is required across different regulations, including fire safety and conservation where relevant.

⁸ Geodirectory data do not count the following categories of homes as vacant: dwellings for rent or sale, dwellings undergoing renovations or where the owner is in hospital or a nursing home.

Work within DCC has demonstrated the potential to generate 14,000 new homes from the conversion of vacant commercial space in Dublin, including over-the-shop opportunities. It is unlikely that this potential will be realised by the private sector alone. The Council recommends that the DCC Adaptive Reuse Unit be supported with appropriate funding and other resources to realise this potential. The experience gained by a DCC programme to renovate properties for residential use in tackling issues such as fire safety could help inform private investors. This approach would also be relevant to other larger urban centres.

A practical difficulty for some people in availing of the vacancy and dereliction grants is the need for substantial funds upfront to carry out work before claiming the grant back. Provision of a bridging loan facility could help here.

Policy measures to address vacancy and dereliction can be classified as either supportive (e.g. grants and advice) or penalising (e.g. taxes on vacant or derelict property). Ideally, the different measures would work together as a package, supported by good information. Ireland has a range of measures in place to tackle vacancy and dereliction but there is scope to make them operate in a more integrated manner.

7.8 Regional and Rural Dimensions

While the focus of much of this report has been on the opportunities for compact growth in a metropolitan context, drawing from international experience, there are also opportunities for interventions at the regional and rural levels in Ireland.

One-off housing represents a large source of housing output, with over 5,000 new houses of this type in 2024 accounting for 18 per cent of national housing output. This share is much higher in some counties, and in some recessionary years the share nationally has exceeded 50 per cent. Much of this housing is self-built and offers individuals a way of providing affordable homes in parts of the country where the levels of output of scheme housing in regional and rural towns and villages and their affordability are comparably weaker. Some of this housing consists of very large houses, as well as second homes. The average size of a single house in Ireland in 2024 (212 square metres) was almost double that of a scheme house (111 square metres).

While there would be – to a degree – consensus on the need for regulation of one-off housing, particularly in the environs or commuting catchments of cities and regional towns, it appears that this type of housing is driven in part by the lack of an attractive, affordable and good-quality alternative such as to offer real choices to rural communities.

As a microcosm of the compact growth opportunities that Dublin and regional cities offer, many Irish towns and villages similarly present significant – if smaller-scaled – regeneration and infill development opportunities within their fabric. However, fragmented ownership, infrastructural deficiencies (particularly water services) and poorly capitalised local development platforms result in a systematic failure to progress such opportunities. Too small for the scope of organisations like the LDA and too risk-laden for private development interests, regional and rural town regeneration can fall between two stools.

Government initiatives like Town Centre First, Croí Cónaithe for Towns and the direct acquisition, site planning, infrastructural coordination and provision of serviced infill and regeneration sites in towns and villages by local authorities are ways of offering more sustainable alternatives to the often-default of self-building. There is an existing scheme for the provision of serviced sites (the Ready to Build scheme) but it is modest in scale.

The role of local authorities is a key issue in relation to communities outside the scope of metropolitan regeneration but no less deserving of regeneration in view of both the environmental and housing benefits. Therefore, broad-based consideration needs to be given to how – building on existing initiatives like Town Centre First – the resourcing, powers and development capacity of local authorities could be expanded so that they can turn around the fortunes of many rural communities, in tandem with wider social and economic interests. Such consideration could encompass the creation of a number of shared service-type development units – perhaps along the lines of the Housing Infrastructure Service Company (HISCO) or supporting a group of local authorities – with both the resources and people needed to prioritise a range of regional and rural town regeneration initiatives linked back to the relevant local authorities’ statutory development plans.

The commitments quoted above from the Programme for Government are also of relevance here. The promise to create a strategic fund to invest in infrastructure and to acquire land, assemble sites and de-risk sites in towns and cities would allow local authorities to do substantially more to promote compact growth if the fund is of significant size. In addition, this recommendation aligns with the broader Programme for Government commitment to consider, through a dedicated taskforce, increasing the range of reserved functions, recognising the important role of elected members, and devolving more powers to local authorities for local services.

The development of rural housing clusters also offers an alternative to the one-off house. Clusters are frequently accommodated within rural nodes; these are small rural settlements with some services such as a school or church but typically lacking public wastewater. Tipperary County Council has published design guidelines for cluster housing schemes in rural villages.

7.9 Public Consultation and Engagement

While the goal of compact growth is supported in a general sense, this is not always so in practice. Developments that accord with the principles of compact growth can on occasions be contentious, especially when they depart from prevailing or historical low-density forms of urban fabric. Improved public consultation and engagement are required at multiple levels, albeit that, with strategic planning, real engagement tends to be more challenging as compared to engagement on projects where the specifics are clearer to the public and to stakeholders.

There was considerable public consultation on the development of the National Planning Framework (NPF). A public consultation on the revision of the NPF ran from 10 July to 12 September 2024. There was engagement with interested parties across the private, public and voluntary sectors and many submissions were made. While the consultation was open to all, it did not engage the attention and interest of the public or the media. In future exercises of this kind, more needs to be done to give discussion of critical public plans a higher profile.

There is further scope for public consultation across the hierarchy of regional, metropolitan, county and local plans. Of particular importance are the county development plans and local area plans (statutory land-use plans for any urban area in need of economic, physical and social renewal or likely to be subject to large-scale redevelopment). There is public consultation on these plans, but it would be desirable to find ways of deepening public engagement so that the plans and the individual developments that are in accordance with these plans have greater public support. Likewise, it would be desirable for the system to be more plan-led so that developers could be confident that plans submitted that are consistent with the development plan would be accepted. This would reduce finance costs and improve viability. Under the legislation used for the Dublin Docklands Development Authority, developments in accordance with the approved plan for the area received swift approval – which was key to the rapid development of the area (Nowlan, 2010). This experience could be drawn upon, with appropriate safeguards.

Of note was the call by the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland for a wider adoption of three-dimensional urban master-planning in Dublin and the larger cities. While already employed in the masterplans for Strategic Development Zones that have guided the regeneration of Dublin's docklands and the Grangegorman campus of Technological University Dublin, a more three-dimensional approach for planning in areas subject to the prospects of significant regeneration and change would help people better understand what is involved in new development and thereby facilitate deeper engagement. Such an approach would also require a step-change in the resourcing of local authority forward-planning departments and a broadening of their multi-disciplinary capability. The *Sustainable Residential Development and Compact Settlement Guidelines for Planning Authorities* (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2024a) provide advice to planning authorities on urban design and encourage the preparation of masterplans for areas. This issue will be addressed further in the forthcoming *Urban Design Manual*.

There is scope for digital platforms to enhance inclusiveness in urban planning. User-friendly online portals and apps can enable citizens to visualise proposed developments, access key data, and provide feedback with ease. Crowdsourcing platforms can gather creative, community-driven solutions, while Geographic Information System (GIS)-based interactive maps allow users to explore project impacts in their neighborhoods and suggest changes.

It would also be desirable to have public discussion and promotion of the ideas of compact growth and the creation of sustainable communities. It is part of the work of the Housing Agency to support the creation of sustainable communities. It is important for the agency to sustain work on this objective along with helping to address the other housing challenges.

Chapter 8



Conclusion

The objective of compact growth represents a major change from the established pattern of development in Ireland. There are substantial arrangements in place to achieve this. These include the vision as set out in the NPF, the associated hierarchy of regional, metropolitan and local plans, and the guidelines for sustainable residential development and compact settlements. The NDP provides funding for investment to support the NPF and a number of dedicated incentives are in place for compact growth. The LDA is undertaking large-scale investment in affordable housing in compact developments and has an important role in land assembly in urban centres.

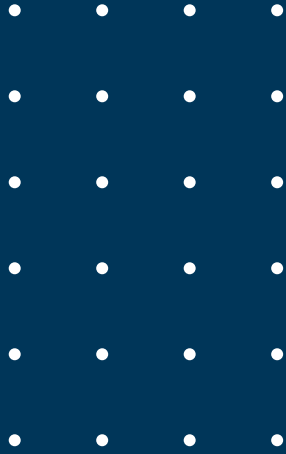
Despite all this, compact growth remains a big challenge. Persistent economic pressure leads people to seek housing far from where they work in areas that are often car-dependent even if formally within the boundary of an urban area. This is one reason why it is so important to provide social and affordable housing at sufficient scale in suitable locations.

Ireland has begun to move to compact growth. It is vital that this re-orientation be sustained and advanced by all relevant departments, agencies, utility providers, local authorities and developers.

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