Rural Housing: Politics, Public Policy and Planning

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Introduction

In recent years, sustainable management of rural housing has emerged as one of the most controversial and contentious issues in Irish public policy. Dispersed rural dwellings have been a long-standing feature of Irish settlement patterns. However, rural housing has increasingly been in the public spotlight, particularly with background analysis undertaken during the preparation of the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) (Department of the Environment and Local Government, 2002), which suggested that between 1996-1999, over one in three houses built in the Republic of Ireland were built as single dwellings in the open countryside (Department of the Environment and Local Government, Spatial Planning Unit, 2001). The subsequent debate surrounding housing in rural areas has become increasingly polarised between rural community and conservation interests due, in part, to the increased pace of development, the changing population dynamics of rural areas, and the increased pressure to include environmental considerations in the land-use planning process. The key question here is how much development should be accommodated for in rural areas in an equation which attempts to balance the need for homes and jobs and their related developments with the case for conserving the countryside (Gilg, 1996).

This chapter evaluates policy and planning processes applied to managing housing in the Irish countryside and identifies a number of challenges to developing holistic approaches to rural planning practice. The first part of the chapter briefly reviews key issues surrounding rural housing growth, including an assessment of the wider rural development context. Secondly, the chapter examines the contested debate surrounding rural housing, and highlights various selective interpretations of rural sustainable development. The chapter then considers the contemporary policy framework for rural housing at a national level.
level, in particular focusing on the National Spatial Strategy and the recently published *Planning Guidelines for Sustainable Rural Housing* (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2005). The final part of the chapter identifies a series of local planning responses to managing rural housing and reflects on the effectiveness of planning policy to integrate housing policies with wider concerns of sustainable rural communities.

**Rural Housing Growth in Ireland**

Fundamental transformations have taken place in Europe’s rural economy and society, and new patterns of diversity and differentiation are emerging within the contemporary countryside. These may be summarised as (drawing on Marsden, 1999):

- the decline in agricultural employment, and in the relative economic importance of food production, accompanied by structural changes in the farming industry and food chain
- the emergence of environmentalism as a powerful ethic and political force
- the related emergence of new uses for rural space, and new societal demands in relation to land and landscape and the treatment of animals and nature
- increased personal mobility, including commuting, migration, tourism and recreation
- the emergence of new winners and losers from change processes, and especially recognition of ‘excluded groups’ suffering from poverty and economic and social vulnerability.

Given the depth and prolonged character of crisis in the agricultural sector, some commentators have suggested that rural areas are experiencing a shift from a ‘productivist’ to a ‘post-productivist’ era in the countryside (Halfacree, 1997; Hadjimichalis, 2003). In this post-productivist phase, rural localities are now places that people from outside come into in order to consume the diversity of things that now make and constitute rural space (Gray, 2000), and as Marsden (1999: 506) notes:

> This is a general process of externalisation of the consumption countryside, one which exhibits a wide range of external relationships and is subject to wide-ranging demands (not least from new residents, developers, tourists, food consumers).

In this sense, Halfacree (1997) suggests that post-productivism may signal a search for a new way of understanding and structuring the countryside, as non-agricultural interests move central in processes shaping rural space.