

11 July 2008

Mr. Des Mahon,
County Manager,
Mayo County Council,
Áras an Chontae,
Castlebar,
Co. Mayo.

**Castlebar and Environs Development Plan 2008-2014
Ministerial Direction to the Council under
Section 31 of the Planning and Development Act 2000**

Dear Manager,

I am writing to you in connection with the Castlebar and Environs Development Plan 2008-2014 as adopted by joint resolution of the Town Council and Mayo County Council on 1 May 2008.

My Department wrote to your Council on 6 March 2008, outlining serious concerns in relation to proposed amendments to the draft Development Plan which did not satisfactorily address my Department's concerns at the draft Plan stage and conveyed in writing on 14 August 2007.

The Government's National Spatial Strategy sets the overall framework for the spatial development of the country, and the West Regional Planning Guidelines translate these NSS objectives into priorities and policies for the West region. It is crucial that the development plans for the region are consistent with the regional and national policies and objectives.

Given the role and status of Castlebar as part of the Castlebar-Ballina linked Hub under the NSS, it is appropriate that plans for the future development of the town are

ambitious and forward-looking. However, it also increases the obligation on the Council to guide its development in a strategic and sustainable fashion. Plans need to be realistic and must aim to create the type of compact, sustainable, high quality urban centres that are increasingly essential in attracting investment and driving regional development.

With a population of 12,549 persons at the last Census in 2006, the projected population increase for Castlebar over the 6-year period of the Development Plan is 3,357 persons. Castlebar already has existing residentially zoned land to cater for a population increase of approximately 10,000 persons, or three times the expected growth over the Plan period. However, the newly adopted Plan provides additional residential zoning for up to 14,454 persons i.e. a total zoning for an additional 24,454 persons over the 6-year period, the majority of which is for low-density housing on the periphery of the town and outside the existing town boundary. This is an extraordinary and unwarranted level and type of zoning provision without any substantial evidence of need.

The effects of this over-zoning would:

- give rise to serious funding implications for the co-ordination of physical development over such a large geographical area in terms of water and wastewater services, roads, footpaths, lighting, open spaces and amenities which would take years to consolidate;
- contribute to an increased sprawl of Castlebar, with people living further and further away from shops, schools and other essential services and thereby increasing car dependency; and
- threaten the viability of the proposed Northern and Southern Bypass of the town.

Furthermore, such a drift towards suburban-style development is contrary to set national planning policies on sequential development out from town centres.

Taking account of my role in overseeing the implementation of the NSS and RPGs, and the powers available to me under the Planning and Development Act 2000, I have decided to issue a Direction pursuant to Section 31 of the Planning and Development Act 2000.

The attached Direction requires the Council to vary the Development Plan to:

- 1) focus development within the future Northern and Southern Bypass line (which has the capacity to accommodate an additional 10,000 persons); and

- 2) amend the zoning designations on lands outside the Northern and Southern Bypass lines to 'rural character', with the appropriate application of the provisions of the 2005 Guidelines for Planning Authorities on Sustainable Rural Housing.

This Direction should be implemented by way of a variation to the Development Plan. I would be grateful if you would advise me as soon as possible of the steps that you propose to take, and the timescales involved, to implement the Direction. My officials are available to meet with you to discuss the options and approach in complying with the Direction.

Yours sincerely,



John Gormley, T.D.,
Minister for the Environment,
Heritage and Local Government.

c.c. Ms. Nora Coyne,
Town Clerk,
Castlebar Town Council,
Marsh House,
Castlebar,
Co. Mayo.