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Sustainable Development and Dispersed Rural Housing – An Analysis of Policy and Practice

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Thesis submitted to the University of Dublin, Trinity College, for the Degree of Doctor in Philosophy

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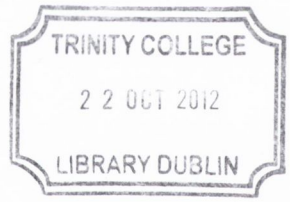
2012



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SUMMARY

Building on analyses of the merits/drawbacks of employing a strategic spatial planning agenda to promote the sustainable development of rural areas (Hadjmichalis, 2003; Scott 2005), this research conducts an in-depth investigation of the uniformity and consistency by which central government sustainable rural development strategies are adopted and implemented across local authority regimes.

This has involved interviewing officials (DoEHLG) and TDs at national government level with regard to framing of national policy approaches, then, based on two counties with strict controls over one-off rural housing development (counties Clare and Galway) and two counties with greater laxity in their approach (counties Roscommon and Cavan), interviews were conducted with planners at county level, county councillors and a range of interest groups which either favour or oppose one-off rural housing development. Finally, based on sampling of planning applications for one-off housing which had been refused in each of the four counties, a large structured questionnaire survey of households was undertaken to investigate the personal impacts of refusal and their experience of the planning system. Then, for comparative purposes, the questionnaire survey was extended in county Clare to include a sample of households whose planning applications for one-off rural housing had been granted permission.

It appears that stakeholders' perceptions of the sustainability of one-off housing are rooted in their background, education, and also position within the planning system. These perceptions when applied to the three dimensions of sustainability; economy, environment and society, lead to hugely contrasting constructions of what construes sustainable development. The outcome of these contrasting definitions is conflict between stakeholders, at national and local level, with regard to the formulation and activation of rural settlement strategies. This, in turn, has consequences for one-off rural housing applicants engaged with the planning system.

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CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

Rural housing policy in Ireland has received significant attention in recent years, essentially in response to the large increase in the construction of one-off housing in rural areas during the 1990s and early 2000s. The *National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020* (NSS), published December 2002, intended to provide for the first time an explicit national framework for dealing with spatial issues. NSS policy for the sustainable development of rural areas focuses on the promotion of concentrated village-type settlements and the restriction of one-off housing construction.

The introduction of such policy has led to a contentious debate, played out at national and local levels. This debate has been characterised by conflicting interpretations of rural sustainability and the perceived imbalance in importance attributed to its social, economic and environmental dimensions. The *Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines for Planning Authorities*, published in 2005, were intended to loosen restrictions on one-off housing construction. However, concerns have arisen regarding a lack of uniformity in adoption and implementation of rural housing policy and guidelines at local level.

This research project addresses these issues which are of considerable importance in contemporary Irish rural studies. It comprehensively reviews national policy relating to sustainable rural development, focusing on single rural dwellings. Particular attention is paid to the manner and context in which national policy has been formulated and the external factors involved in this process.

This thesis investigates the manner in which local authorities have incorporated government policies relating to sustainable rural housing into the settlement strategies and rural housing policies for employment in their administrative areas. It examines the accuracy with which rural housing polices/settlement strategies adopted by local councillors are implemented by planners.

This project considers the consequences for the individual/household of the decision-making power held by the County Manager to grant/refuse planning permission for one-off housing.

This research, in providing a theoretical framework for understanding and interpreting the issues surrounding the formulation and activation of sustainable rural development policies at national and local level draws from pluralist and managerialist interpretations of the state as described in the writing of Kirk (1980) and MacLaran and McGuirk (2003). By connecting managerialist and pluralist philosophies with empirical evidence, this project provides a theoretical context for understanding:

i) The manner in which central government and different local authority managers interpret and operate sustainable development issues.

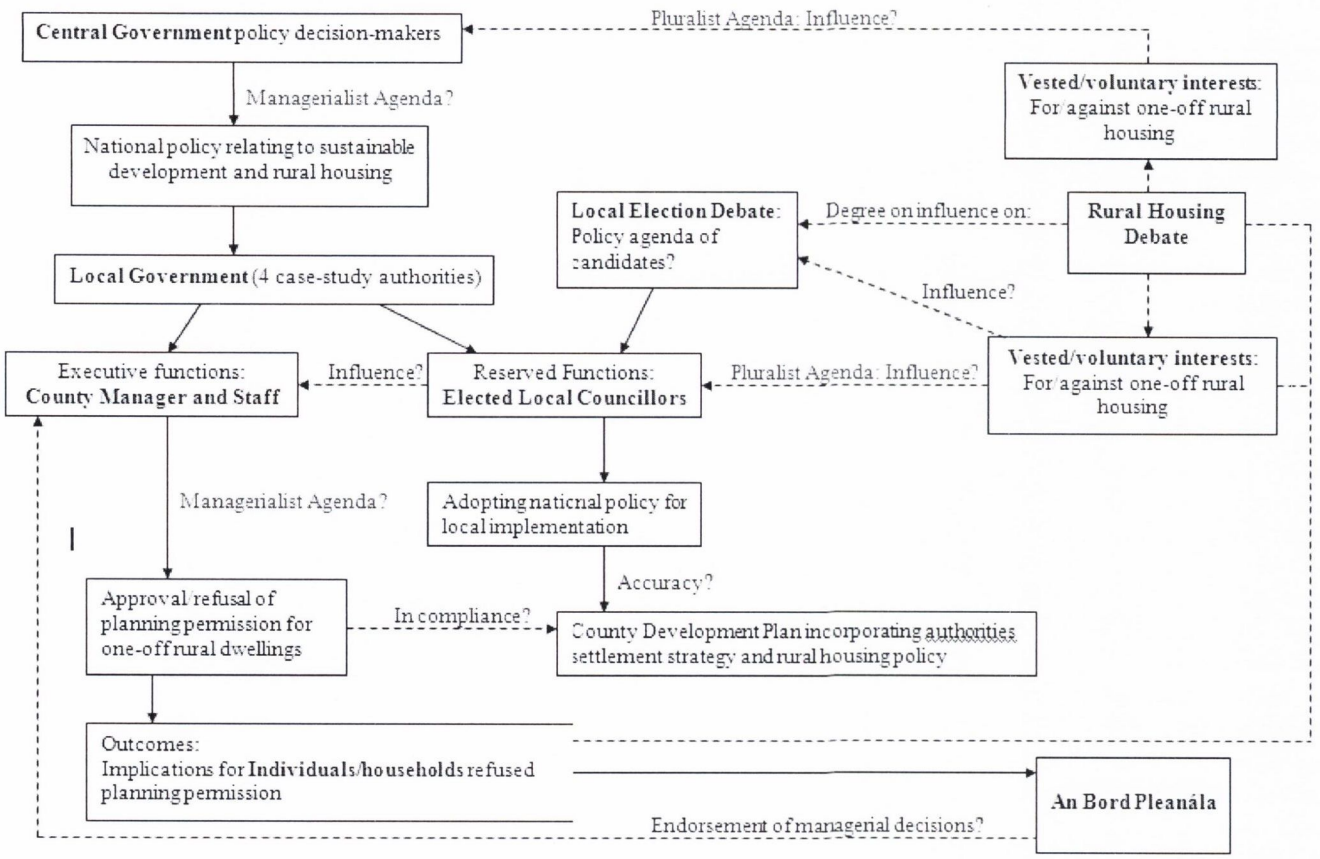
ii) The degree to which national and local sustainable rural housing policy is infused in and shaped by the political agendas of interest groups who are both for and against one-off housing construction in rural areas.

Figure 1.1 summarises:

i) The actors and processes involved in the formulation and operation of sustainable rural housing policies.

ii) The policy which is relevant to this research and its implementation as a context for the research.

Figure 1.1 Policy and Practice – Sustainable Rural Housing



This project presents an opportunity to provide an empirical understanding of the manner in which sustainable rural development is operated in Ireland. The core challenge is to:

i) Identify the manner in which sustainable development, in terms of rural settlement patterns, is interpreted by policy decision-makers at national and local level and the extent to which this is influenced by external factors, i.e. the pluralist political agendas of vested/voluntary interests both for and against rural one-off housing construction.

ii) Identify the extent to which the managerialist agendas of policy activators have resulted in non-compliance with policy and the implications of such for the individual/household.

This thesis is presented in 9 chapters. The present chapter introduces and outlines the rationale for the topic of research. Chapter 2 provides an in-depth review of the theoretical and contextual literature relating to the research subject including: associated legislation and planning systems/strategies in operation from the mid 20th century to date, the history of rural settlement in Ireland as well as literature relating to the events surrounding, and outcomes of, the rural housing debate which originated in the late 1990s. Chapter 3 documents the methodological framework for this thesis. It lays out the research aims and objectives, the procedure for selecting case-study county councils (chosen to illustrate the variety of local planning regimes in Ireland) and the strategies for primary data collection, namely, semi-structured interviews and questionnaire surveys.

The primary focus of this thesis is devoted to examining the workings of the political and planning systems with regard to sustainable development and rural settlement planning in Ireland, at both national and local level, whilst connecting managerialist and pluralist philosophies with gathered empirical evidence, thus providing a theoretical context for understanding the processes in operation. Four categories of interviewee were identified as being involved with, or affected by, policies and planning practices relating to the sustainability of rural one-off housing (central-government elected representatives/central-government officials,

local authority elected representatives, local authority planning officials, and interest groups both for and against one-off housing construction). The perspectives and opinions of representatives from each of these 4 categories are documented in chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 respectively.

Chapter 8 documents the experiences of individuals/households who have been involved with the planning system while applying for permission to construct a single rural dwelling. Although the inclusion of this chapter marks a slight departure from the overall direction of this thesis, the necessity to document the outcomes of the planning system, following an empirical and theoretical analysis of the manner in which it functions (which in turn has implications for the individual) warrants its inclusion.

In seeking to understand the intricacies of the process outlined above, this research provides a unique opportunity to subject to formal analysis the experiences and perspectives of those involved in, and affected by, rural housing policy formation and planning practice.

CHAPTER TWO:
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0. Preamble

This project aims to provide both an empirical and theoretical understanding of sustainable rural development operations in Ireland, particularly the manner in which sustainability is interpreted and rural housing policies formulated at national level, the uniformity and consistency by which these policies are adopted and activated by local authorities as well as the responsiveness of politicians and planning officers to interest groups. This chapter aims to put these issues in context, exploring and defining key themes and concepts relevant to this project, thus providing the background of this study. It aims to provide an overview of the processes, issues and events which have, either directly or tangentially, given rise to contentious multi-scalar debate in Ireland, relating to issues of rural sustainability regarding the issue of one-off housing development.

The primary themes which are covered in this chapter include: rural structure and form (both contemporary and historical); local governance and local planning systems in Ireland; sustainable development and its theoretical and practical conceptualisations, spanning from international to local level in Ireland; rural conflict relating to the sustainability of single rural dwellings; recent (2010) policy publications relating to single rural dwellings and rural spatial patterns; and theoretical conceptions of the state and the role of planning as it relates to sustainable development and rural residential planning.

2.1. Rural Structure and Form

This section explores the various definitions of rural areas which are used internationally. It examines literature relating to international trends of economic and social restructuring in rural areas of the developed world. With regard to the Irish experience, this section reviews literature relating to the emergence of contemporary rural settlement patterns from historical forms and the effects and outcomes of social and economic restructuring on this process.

2.1.1. Defining 'Rural' – Variations in Terminology

The precise definition of 'rural' varies considerably internationally. There is no common international or EU definition of rural areas. Countries have adopted their own definitions of rural areas. The basic territorial units used in national definitions of 'rurality' vary considerably in size, both with regard to area and population. For example, French communes, which are the smallest administrative units in Europe, have an average surface area of 15 square kilometres and an average population of 1,500 inhabitants, whereas in the United States, counties which are used as the basic unit for rural analysis have an average area of 3,000 square kilometres and a population of 80,000 (Economic Commission for Europe, ECE, 2005). When rural definitions consist of, or include, population thresholds, the maximum population of a rural settlement can differ dramatically as illustrated in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1. Official population-based definition of rural settlements

Definition used by	Maximum Population of a Rural Settlement	Notes
Iceland	300	Minimum population of an urban administrative unit
Australia	1,000	
Canada	1,000	(+ population density less than 400 per km^2) Census definition
New Zealand	1,000	
Ireland	1,500	(+ population density less than 150 per km^2) Census definition
France	2,000	
United States	2,500	Census definition
Scotland	3,000	Scottish Executive definition
England and Wales	10,000	Office for National Statistics definition
Italy	10,000	Minimum population of an urban administrative unit
United Nations	20,000	
Japan	30,000	Minimum population of an urban administrative unit

(Sources: European Commission, 1999; Office for National Statistics, U.K. (ONS), 2004; ECE, 2005; Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), 2005; Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2005; Woods, 2005)

In Ireland, the basic territorial unit, upon which rural definitions are based, is the District Electoral Division (DED). A DED is an electoral district which provides a useful mechanism for identifying and collating data at local level. Rural DEDs are defined using the following criteria (Centre for Local and Regional Studies *et al.*, 2000):

Each DED is considered to be rural if:

1. It is not an urban DED as defined by the CSO.
2. It cannot be aggregated to form an urban district or borough.
3. It has a population of less than 150 people per square kilometre.
4. It does not contain a town with a population of 1,500 persons or more.

According to 2002 Census data, around 40 percent of the Irish population live in rural areas, including small towns and villages, a figure which remained constant in 2006 (DoEHLG, 2005; CSO, 2006). In some counties, particularly in parts of the midlands and in the west, a much higher proportion of households, up to 70 per cent, live in the open Countryside (DoEHLG, 2005; CSO, 2007; Scott and Brereton, 2010). Indeed, urbanisation in Ireland remains low in comparison to the rest of Europe. Between 70 and 80 per cent of most EU countries are urbanised and urbanisation in England is at more than 90 per cent (Mc Donagh, 2001; Byrne, 2003).

2.1.2. The History of Rural Settlement Structure in Ireland

In a geographical context, the term 'settlement form' refers to the distribution of individual homesteads. Any possible arrangement of such homesteads falls on a continuum between a scattered (dispersed) type where each family is located amidst its own fields and clustered settlements where families form a village by living adjacent to one another at some distance from their fields (Silberfein, 1989). The history of rural settlement patterns in Ireland is inextricably linked to the history of farming from the earliest times to the present (O'Keefe, 1997; Aalen, 1997; The Heritage Council, 2005). From the sixteenth century, the system of land ownership in Ireland was predominantly based on the estate system which had replaced the earlier Gaelic and feudal land tenures. The principal forms of rural settlement which existed under this system included individual farmsteads and farm clusters and villages (O'Keefe, 1997; The Heritage Council, 2005). Rundale settlements, which developed from the seventeenth century through to the nineteenth century, represent one of the more negative consequences of the estate system due to the fact that there was no controlling intervention of these

settlements by, often non-resident, estate owners. This led to an explosion of '*squalid and unhygienic cabin clusters*' and contributed to the chaotic nature of these rundale villages (Duffy, 2000, 214).

By the 1830s the greatest concentrations of these farm clusters were in the western seaboard counties, the north, in the upland mountains of the east and in other marginal landscapes in the midlands (Heritage Council, 2005). In the late-nineteenth century, the Congested Districts Board (CDB) was established to relieve settlement congestion in these areas. The CDB was in charge of separating and re-organising thousands of rundale house clusters, relocating houses closer to their own farms and fields (Duffy, 2000; Breathnach, 2006), representing the first attempt at planned settlement remodelling in an Irish context.

Following political independence in 1922, rural land reform was allocated to the Land Commission which continued many of the policies of the CBD. However, the biggest achievement of the Land Commission involved establishing settlements in some of the most underpopulated rural areas of Ireland (Duffy, 2000). The sparsely populated counties of Roscommon and east Connaught, and especially the mid-Leinster counties of Kildare and Meath saw '*extensive results of Land Commission policy which were the converse of the congested areas work*' (Duffy, 2000, 218). Thousands of migrants from Mayo, Leitrim, Donegal, Clare and Kerry were relocated to farmhouses in these areas. These farmhouses were grouped close together in distinctive patterns (Duffy, 2000).

The contribution of local authorities to rural settlement patterns has also been significant. Following the creation of county council in 1898, public attempts at local housing reform began. Up to 1921, approximately 50,000 labourers' cottages were constructed singly or in small groups along country roads convenient to the large farms on which they might seek employment (Duffy, 2000). Just as the CDB was catering for the needs of the small-holders in the west, the council cottages were principally constructed in Leinster and Munster where the majority of labourers lived (McKay, 1992; Duffy, 2000; Ferriter, 2004).

The Heritage Council (2005) noted that the main legacies of rural settlement patterns that are evident in the Irish rural landscape today are farm-related settlements and road-orientated settlements.

2.1.3. Economic and Social Restructuring of Rural Areas

This section examines international and national literature which documents the considerable economic and social changes which have occurred in rural areas over the course of the twentieth century (Duffy, 1983, 2000; Aalen, 1997; Scott, 2005; Woods, 2005; Champion, 2007) and the consequences, in the Irish context, for the structure of rural settlement patterns and traditional rural lifestyles.

A major component of the restructuring of rural areas has been the fundamental transformation of agriculture in the developed world which has seen farming move from the centre to the periphery of everyday life (Aalen, 1997; Scott, 2005; Woods, 2005). The decline in the importance of agriculture has been accompanied by a diversification of the economic base of rural areas and an increase in the non-farming rural population (McDonagh, 1998; Marsden, 1999; Scott, 2005, 2008; Mahon, 2007) which has been described as rural areas undergoing a shift from a *productivist* to a *post-productivist* era (Hadjimichalis, 2003; Scott 2008) The reversal of the rural to urban migration flow, or counter-urbanisation, was first observed by population analysts in the United States in the 1970s. These trends also soon became evident in Canada, Australia and much of Western Europe (Woods, 2005; Champion, 2007). In the UK, the fastest population growth during both the 1970s and the 1980s was experienced in predominantly rural counties and some 100,000 people were recorded as migrating directly from urban to rural areas in 1980 (Lewis, 1998).

In an Irish context, the 1970s, but particularly, the 1980s onwards saw a reversal in the trends of previous decades as more people opted to live in one-off housing in rural areas (Hickey, 2004). Scott (2005) has noted that the increased scale and pace of development witnessed in rural areas in recent years has resulted from a number of factors including a negative perception of the quality of life in urban

areas, the lower cost associated with developing a one-off rural house, especially in light of the considerable inflation in urban housing prices from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s, increased mobility and, finally, a desire for living in a rural environment, in particular, with good access to urban centres. Caulfield (2003) further noted that by 1996, only 1 in 10 of dispersed rural dwellings were farming households. The continuing transition of 'rural space' in Ireland from agricultural to a post-agricultural environment has contributed to the emergence of new uses for rural space, the most contentious of which has been the increase in one-off housing construction (Scott, 2005, 2008). From 1991 to 2006, 1 in 5 of the 497,000 housing units constructed in the Irish Republic were individual houses in rural areas (CS0, 2007).

As noted above, the main legacies of historical rural settlement patterns that are evident in the Irish rural landscape today are farm-related settlements and road-orientated settlements (The Heritage Council, 2005). The primary reason road-orientated settlements have been repeatedly replicated in the twentieth century is due to the fact that the prior existence of a road has resulted in a reduction in development costs for the house builder (The Heritage Council, 2005). Duffy (2000) argues that as a reflection of new priorities in the twentieth century such as declining agriculture, increased non-farming population, increased urban-based employment and rising affluence generally, there has been a change in the overall pattern and distribution of dispersed rural settlement. As a result of the '*urban-orientated, functional change*' of rural populations and, in conjunction with lax planning control, there has been a major growth in road-orientated, ribbon-like commuter settlements at the expense of farm-related settlement patterns (Duffy, 1983; 2000, 185).

Woods (2005) states that as the rural population and structure has been recomposed, so the nature of community life has changed. The '*solidarity of rural communities where residents shared common values and reference points...has exploded by the dynamics of population change*' (Woods, 2005, 90). For example, Phelan *et al.* (2005) found that a quarter of all people living in Irish rural areas

commute more than 64 km (40 miles) to work, with many stating that their homes are essentially only a place to sleep. The study also found that over 40 per cent of non-farm rural households played no part in any community organisations and had little or no contact with their neighbours. These statistics appear to support Woods' (2005) assertions and suggest that a breakdown of traditional, more intensive, local social networks may be occurring.

2.2 Irish Local Government and Planning

This section outlines the origins of Ireland's planning system and the roles played by the various tiers of government in its operation. It examines the literature relating to changing emphases in Irish planning policy and examines the manner by which development, particularly housing, was managed in rural areas.

The power and autonomy of local government in Ireland is far more restricted than is the case in many other jurisdictions, such as the United States and France (Quinn, 2003). For the 85 per cent of the population that do not elect a town council, Ireland has a single tier of directly-elected local government which operates within the parameters laid down by central government. Consequently, the Irish system is highly centralised. Although eight regional authorities were established in 1994, they comprise elected members of the constituent local authorities and their remit is limited (Quinn, 2003). However, despite the limited remit in functions of local authorities in Ireland when compared to other countries, the planning system is an area where Irish local authorities have a significant degree of autonomy from central government. Planning legislation is formulated at national level. These policies are then interpreted and incorporated into local planning policy, a reserved function carried out by elected local-authority councillors. Local planning policies are activated through the planning decisions of the County Manager and his/her representatives (planning officers) who comprise the executive branch of the local-authority system.

Ireland's planning system was introduced in 1964, when the *Local Government (Planning and Development) Act, 1963* came into effect. With this Act, physical planning, for the first time, became a mandatory function of local government (Nowlan, 1989; Grist, 2003). Under the terms of the 1963 Act, all local authorities, except town commissioners, were given a full range of planning responsibilities. Therefore, the physical planning system in Ireland was to be run by 87 (now 88) local planning authorities (Bannon, 1989; Grist, 2003). Each local authority was required by 1967 to have prepared a development plan for its area (Bannon, 1989a). Despite the limitations in scope of these first local-authority development plans, progress had been made, and by the late 1960s, much of the territory of the state was covered by planning policies. The 1963 Act also imposed, for the first time, an obligation upon everyone wishing to undertake development to obtain planning permission from the appropriate local planning authority in advance of such development (Bannon, 1989a).

In the 1960s, Ireland's new planning system was viewed as a national development catalyst which would '*pay dividends in economic and social well-being in the years to* come' (Dáil Debates, 1962, cited by Bannon, 1989a, 130), and act as the mechanism which would enable local authorities to function as development authorities (Bannon, 1989a; Tierney, 2003). Planning was described as having '*a considerable significance in helping to foster economic development*' (Dáil Debates, 1962, cited by Bannon, 1989a, 130) indicating the government's perspective at the time which stressed a close and complementary relationship between economic and physical planning (Bannon, 1989a). The importance of protecting the natural environment in the face of development was recognised in the 1963 *Local Government (Planning and Development) Act* by extending the range of preservation and protection objectives which could be written into development plans and, also, by providing planning authorities with a range of special conservation powers, for example, Special Amenity Area Orders (Mawhinney, 1989). However, particular stress was placed on '*the avoidance of economic waste*' (Bannon, 1989a, 130).

The planning system was enthusiastically embraced by the public who believed that physical planning had a positive role to play in the economic development of the country (Bannon, 1989a). However, the 1970s brought increasing discontent with physical planning as the emphasis slipped from 'development planning' to 'development control,' which saw planning become '*increasingly obsessed with details of control and regulation*' (Bannon, 1989a, 135). Bannon (1989a) attributes the failure of 'development planning' to the lack of strong regional planning tier which largely divorced local planning actions from the realities of public policy at national level. Government commitment to national development had also waned, primarily due to an unstable economic climate and their intent in ensuring that all of Ireland remained classified as a European underdeveloped region (Bannon, 1989a).

The 1970s and 1980s saw a gradual shift in physical planning '*away from fundamental issues of national development towards an overriding concern with environmental management and control*' (Bannon, 1989, 150). O'Riordan, (2003) attributed the increased significance of environmental concerns in Irish planning in the 1970s and 1980s to Ireland's entry into the EU in 1973, which saw Ireland become increasingly open to and influenced by ideas from outside the country (Mawhinny, 1989).

Provision has been made for the regulation of the physical development of rural areas since the early 1960s under the terms of the Planning and Development Acts of 1963, 1976 and 1982 (Cawley, 1989). The desirability of concentrating non-farm housing in the environs of existing settlements was included in these Acts (Cawley, 1989). However, there has been a consistent failure to implement such policy at local level, the Irish planning system being described as one of the most lax regimes in Europe (Duffy, 2000). In a comparative context, this situation contrasts markedly with the British planning experience, where strict rural planning in the face of huge urban pressures has been the rule for at least seventy years (Duffy, 2000). The failure to implement similar policies in Ireland, both a national and local level during the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s contributed to

the rapid increase in housing development, comprising both estates and one-off dwellings, in what is now referred to as the Greater Dublin Region, as well as around other large urban centres. Such was the geographical expansion of the capital that Nix (2003a) was led to comment that if housing trends witnessed during the latter part of the twentieth century were to persist until 2010, Dublin would consume as much land as Los Angeles but with a quarter of its population.

The separation of rural and urban space is also practiced in the local planning polices of rural regions in Britain, as new development tends to be concentrated in small towns and large villages (Woods, 2005). In contrast, in Ireland, 'roadside sprawl' is widespread and visible around towns and large villages. The failure to enforce similar local policies in Ireland until the beginning of the twenty-first century has been attributed to a number of factors. Scott (2008) states that historically, rural areas have been overlooked by the planning system, given that there was no housing pressure on the countryside because of high levels of out-migration. It has been suggested that this oversight continued into the late 1980s and 1990s due to a 'sense of relief' resulting from the return of population to areas of the countryside where out-migration had been a prevailing trend for generations (Duffy, 2000). Other reasons put forward include the strong tradition of the single rural dwelling (McGrath, 1998; Duffy, 2000), and the common perception, at the time, of rural areas as agricultural space (Scott, 2008). The resultant liberal planning regime, with relaxed attitudes towards the construction of rural one-off housing (McGrath, 1998), has been described as one of the most lax planning regimes in Europe (Duffy, 2000).

2.3. Sustainable Development – From Planning Concept at International Level to Core Concept of National Policy Framework

This section examines literature relating to the emergence of a sustainable development ethos in Irish planning, documenting its transition from international

to national policy framework and legislation. This section also focuses on the emergence of strategic spatial planning as a strategy for promoting sustainable development, with obvious emphasis on the regulation of rural settlement patterns.

Internationally, in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a shift in focus from purely environmental issues in planning and development to a broader concern for sustainable development (Doyle, 2003). This began in earnest with the UN Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in 1972 and this focus was intensified in 1983 with the establishment of the UN's World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). The Commission's report, *Our Common Future* (also known as the Brundtland Report), published in 1987, called for the need to reconcile the 'twin imperatives' of environmental protection and economic and social development (WCED, 1987; Doyle, 2003).

The UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, was the first formal recognition by the international community of the unsustainable development pressures being placed on the carrying capacity of the earth. Its main product was Agenda 21, a programme of action for sustainable development into the twenty-first century. One of the main agreements reached was that the successful implementation of sustainable development practice was, in the first instance, the responsibility of national governments (Doyle, 2003).

As a result of the Rio process, the EU's 1993 Fifth Environmental Action Programme, *Towards Sustainability*, took a more holistic view towards environmental matters and moved towards a focus on sustainable development (Doyle, 2003). The position of sustainable development in EU policy was strengthened by the Treaty of Amsterdam, signed in 1997. Notably, the goal of 'balanced and sustainable development' was given equal status with 'economic and social progress' in the statement of the EU's objectives (Doyle, 2003).

Recent developments on an international scale include the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg, South Africa. Its primary

objectives were to restate the global commitment to Agenda 21 and sustainable development. At the European level, the EU has developed a sustainable development strategy, adopted at the Gottenburg European Council in 2001. The sixth EU environmental action programme (2001), *Environment 2010: Our Future, Our Choice*, set environmental objectives and priorities as an integral part of the EU sustainable development strategy (Doyle, 2003).

In recognition of the weighting placed internationally and at a European level on the importance of sustainable development strategies, and in compliance with related legislation, recent years have seen significant policy development, introduced by central government, to promote sustainable development. The initial appearance of sustainable development as a planning concept in Irish politics can be seen in the Programme for Government, December 1994, which included a commitment to prepare a national sustainable development strategy addressing all areas of government policy which impact on the environment (Doyle, 2003). Many of the sustainable development policies introduced subsequently have attempted to curb the large increase witnessed in recent years in the construction of one-off dispersed housing in rural areas.

The 1997 policy document *Sustainable Development: A Strategy for Ireland*, stemmed from the 1994 Programme for Government and represented initially an attempt to regulate one-off housing developments in rural areas. This sustainable development strategy indicated that there should be a presumption against urban-generated one-off housing in rural areas close to towns. However, it was later suggested by the DoEHLG that these provisions for controlling the development of one-off rural housing were sometimes being operated over-rigidly by planning authorities (DoEHLG, 2004a).

The publication of the Government's White Paper on Rural Development in 1999, entitled *Ensuring the Future – A Strategy for Rural Development in Ireland*, representing a comprehensive expression of Government policy on rural development, was taken into account in preparing the *National Spatial Strategy* (NSS) (DOEHLG, 2004a). It stated that the Government's vision for the future of

rural society was to be based on the maintenance of dispersed vibrant communities. The White Paper recommended that planning policy should, as far as possible, facilitate people willing to settle in rural areas, in order to achieve a balanced population. It also recognised that, while the aspirations of the rural community must be respected, planning policy must be sensitive to the conservation of the rural environment (Grist, 2003; DOEHLG, 2004a).

The year 2000 represents the start of a reinvention of Irish planning policy (Scott, 2008) and a move away from the lax planning regime associated with the development of one-off rural housing. The primary factors which instigated this change include the increased scale of national economic growth which commenced in the 1990s, a rapidly growing population and a related boom in house building in both urban and rural areas (Scott, 2008; Gkartzios and Scott, 2009; Scott and Brereton, 2010). The *Planning and Development Act, 2000,* represented a new legislative code which stemmed from a comprehensive review of prior planning legislation, initiated by then DoELG Minister Noel Dempsey. Three core principles underpinned the Minister's vision of a planning system for the twenty-first century: '*an ethos of sustainable development can, be strategic in approach and deliver a performance of the highest quality*' (Grist, 2003, 222). The concept of sustainable development was incorporated in the Act with the intention of '*introducing a sustainable development ethos into the Irish planning system*' (Doyle, 2003, 376). The phrase 'proper planning and development' was replaced by 'proper planning and **sustainable** development' throughout the Act (DoELG, 2000; Doyle, 2003).

Under the terms of the *Planning and Development Act*, 2000, each local authority must make a County Development Plan (CDP) every 6 years rather than the previous five-year timeframe (Grist, 2003). The CDP outlines the local authority's approach to development in its county. This means that it must produce a strategy for the proper planning and sustainable development of the entire functional area of its authority. However, sustainable development is not specifically defined in the 2000 Act (Grist, 2003), Noel Dempsey stated that a legal definition would

restrict and stifle a concept which is dynamic all-embracing and is set to evolve over time (Seanad Debates, 14th October, 1999, cited by Grist, 2003). It can be argued that a lack of statutory definition has the benefit of not legally constraining or limiting the process of sustainability but permits it to develop at the heart of the planning and development process (Doyle, 2003). Conversely, Grist (2003) has questioned whether a lack of a statutory definition is likely to result in merely a change of image rather than one of substance, recognising that sustainability is a '*nebulous concept which can mean very different things to different people*' (Grist, 2003, 222), and indeed to local-authority elected councillors and planning officials.

The *National Spatial Strategy for Ireland, 2002-2020* , published in December 2002, set rural housing policy in the broader context of a national framework for promoting sustainable rural settlement, with the intention of delivering more balanced regional and national development. The NSS was the government's first national spatial framework and owed much to the completion of the *European Spatial Development Perspective* (ESDP) in 1999 (Murray, 2004; Scott, 2005, 2008; Gkartzios and Scott, 2009; Scott and Brereton, 2010). As outlined in the ESDP, the current policy proposal of the EU is to tie rural areas much more into their urban and regional context, in contra-distinction to the emphasis which was placed on local development in the 1990s (Scott, 2005) focusing on predominantly agricultural sectoral support policies (Gkartzios and Scott, 2009). Gkartzios and Scott (2009) have stated that strategic spatial planning is highly relevant and has a key role to play in rural planning and development in Ireland, given the economic and social restructuring of rural areas and the declining importance of agriculture.

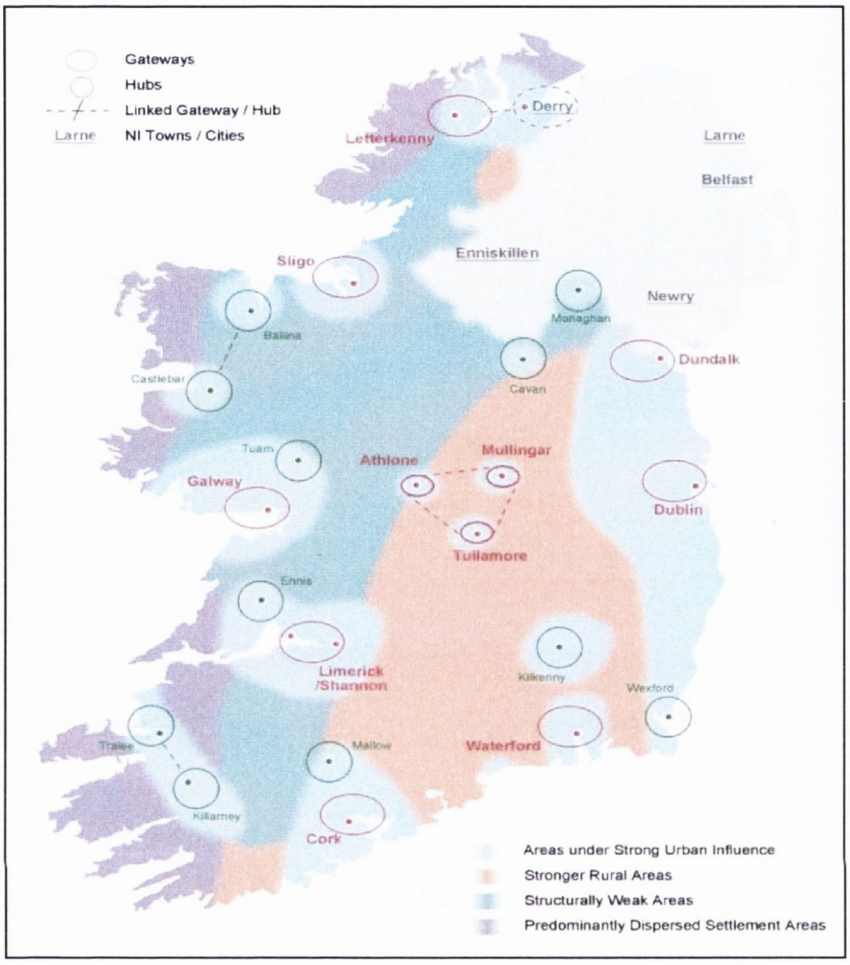
There have also been several critiques of the EDSP in relation to its implications for rural areas in Ireland. It has been argued (Richardson, 2000; Hadjimichalis, 2003) that a polycentric urban model as endorsed by the EDSP (and promoted the NSS) marginalises rural and peripheral geography and could lead to a widening gap between urban and rural areas, especially in Ireland where dispersed

settlement is a permanent feature of the rural landscape. Buckley (2003) describes the reliance of the NSS on the EDSP as a framework for promoting sustainable rural settlement as 'Europeanisation' at the expense of the 'unique Irish tradition' of dispersed housing.

While avoiding detailed policy prescription (Scott, 2008), the NSS addressed housing development in rural areas in broad terms. It considered concentrated village-type settlements to represent a more sustainable option for housing additional population than dispersed settlements as concentrated settlement supports, *inter alia*, the capabilities of public transport and local infrastructure (DoELG, 2002). The NSS also differentiated between urban- and rural-generated housing needs and stated that rural-generated housing needs should be accommodated when they arise. The NSS also acknowledged differing development circumstances and identified four broad categories of rural area types: rural areas under strong urban influence, stronger rural areas, structurally weaker rural areas and areas where there is a tradition of highly dispersed rural settlement (see Figure 2.3.). It then stated that tailored local settlement strategies were required for these areas in the development plan process (DoELG, 2002).

The overall spatial objective of the NSS was to counteract the dominance of the Greater Dublin Area by promoting concentrated development in 8 designated gateways (urban centres), chosen on the basis of their location (in other regions of the country) and scale (potential for achieving critical population mass necessary to sustain job production in the regions), thus ensuring sustainable and balanced national growth and development. In addition, 9 medium-sized hubs (urban centres) were also designated, selected to support (and be supported by) the gateways to link out to rural areas, servicing their rural hinterlands (DoELG, 2002; Scott, 2005, 2008) (See Figure 2.3.)

Figure 2.3. Illustration of Rural Area Typologies and Gateways and Hubs (Not to Scale)



(Source: DoEHLG, 2002)

However, Scott (2008) and Gkartzios and Scott (2009) have stated that the potential success of the NSS has been undermined by conflicting public policies suggesting a lack of commitment on behalf of the Government to the strategy. An obvious example of these conflicting policies was the decentralisation programme for Government departments announced in 2003. It was stated that Government departments would not decentralise to the 8 gateways or 9 hubs as might be expected given the NSS, but to 53 locations in 25 counties (Gkartzios and Scott, 2009).

The activation of the NSS falls under the remit of the regional and local authorities (Gkartzios and Scott, 2009). Provisions were made in the Planning and

Development Act, 2000, for the preparation of statutory regional planning guidelines (RPGs) which were completed, for all regional authorities[1], in accordance with the prescriptions of the NSS. Gkartzios and Scott (2009) have stated that the RPGs could have assisted in revitalising regional governance in Ireland. However, under the Planning and Development Act, 2000, local authorities are only obliged to 'have regard' to the RPGs when preparing county development plans (CDPs). This has resulted in a situation where all too frequently no serious notice has been paid to the *Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines for Planning Authorities* (RHGs) during CDP preparation, especially with regard to residential development. In addition, the regional authorities have little statutory power or the resources to deliver rural-development and spatial-planning initiatives (Moore and Scott, 2005), leading Gkartzios and Scott (2009) to question whether this lack of coordination between regional and local tiers of governance in Ireland is likely to have consequences for the achievement of desired planning goals as laid out in the NSS.

The Government's intention to produce rural-housing guidelines for planning authorities, as indicated in the NSS, ensured that rural housing was to remain a high- profile national issue (Irish Planning Institute, 2004; Scott 2005, 2008). *Sustainable Rural Housing, Guidelines for Planning Authorities* was published in April 2005, Draft guidelines having been published in 2004. The objective of the Guidelines was to set out in detail the manner in which the Government's rural housing policies were to be implemented by planning authorities. This applied both to the formulation of development plans and to the operation of the development-control system (DoEHLG, 2005).

The RHGs made provisions for:

i) Facilitating people who have roots to or links to, are part of or contribute to the rural community throughout the county (regardless of area type as defined by the NSS) in obtaining planning permission for one-off housing, subject to good planning practice.

[1] The 8 Regional Authorities were established by the 1991 Local Government Act and came into existence in 1994; Border, Dublin, Mid-East, Mid-West, Midlands, South-East, South-West, West.

ii) Accommodating, subject to good planning practice, any demand arising for housing in structurally weak areas suffering from population decline.

iii) Respecting and consolidating the traditional forms of housing development in dispersed rural areas (with relatively few towns and villages) where the key objective is to maintain vibrant rural population.

iv) (DoEHLG, 2004b; DoEHLG, 2005)

Gkartzios and Scott (2009) have suggested that the RHGs were guided by pressures from interest groups as opposed to empirical research. According to the DoEHLG (2005), the RHGs were intended to loosen up the planning system, stating that previsions provision for one-off housing management had become overly restrictive. However, academic literature and research rather suggest the contrary (see Duffy, 2000; Gkartzios and Scott, 2009).

2.4. Rural Conflict

This section examines the literature with regard to the rural conflict which occurred as a result of the change in Irish national planning and development direction in 2000. It examines the reasons for rural conflict and the rationalities behind the positions of the debating parties. Finally, it examines conflict in the context of the activation of sustainable rural settlement strategies at local level.

Social and economic restructuring has turned rural areas into a far more complex space than they once were (Woods, 2005; Scott, 2008). The past dominance of agriculture and the relative homogeneity of rural communities meant that 'rural' had long been perceived and represented as a homogeneous agricultural space (McDonagh, 1998; Woods, 2005; Scott, 2008). However, the process of restructuring has challenged such simple representations (Woods, 2005). There are now many co-existing perceptions and representations of rural space informed by '*different social constructions of rurality*' (Woods, 2005, 210). This has given rise

to what Mormont (1990, cited by Woods, 2005, 210) described as '*the symbolic battle over rurality.*'

The social and economic restructuring of rural areas has led to the emergence of new uses for rural space, the most contentious of which, in an Irish context, has been the increase in one-off housing construction (Scott, 2005). Corcoran *et al.* (2007) write that the 1960s and 1970s marked a distinctive shift in the 'territorial pattern' of housing growth in rural areas. Prior to this, rural housing was almost exclusively associated with farming or related activities. They suggest that economic changes throughout the State resulted in the development of the idea of the one-off, non-farm dwelling house on a 'half-acre site' in close proximity to a town.

Restrictive rural-housing policies, introduced to curb this trend, have been met with fierce public resistance and brought about the foundation of the Irish Rural Dwellers' Association (IRDA), a pro-dispersed rural housing group which has successfully campaigned against what it perceives as an interference with private property rights (Scott, 2005). In addition, other previously-established organisations emerged as interest groups in the conflict relating to the sustainability of one-off housing. These organisations namely: An Taisce, Irish Rural Link, Irish Farmers' Association, Irish Countrywomen's Association, Friends of the Irish Environment and The Heritage Council, have established themselves as being for or against rural housing, or indeed occupying a middle-ground with regard to the rural housing debate. The experiences and perspectives of these interest groups are examined in chapter 7.

This Irish situation stands in sharp contrast to that in England where rural lobby groups have long campaigned for restrictive settlement patterns (Scott, 2005) and, indeed, for restrictions on house building in the countryside, commonly citing the destruction of the English countryside (Woods, 2005).

2.4.1. The Rural-Housing Debate in Ireland

According to Corcoran *et al.*, (2007), the rate of construction of one-off housing in Ireland is one of the highest *per capita* in the world and is 'unprecedented' for any Western economy in the 21st century. The recent attention afforded by the Government to rural-housing policy and the resulting concerns which have arisen relating to the promotion of concentrated settlement and the discouragement of dispersed rural housing for reasons of sustainable development, together with the introduction of a national spatial planning framework, have ensured that a contentious rural housing debate ensued both at national and local scales (DoEHLGa, 2004; Scott 2005; Corcoran *et al.*, 2007).

Sustainable development is a notoriously difficult concept to define. Indeed, Fowke and Prasad (1996, cited in Williams and Millington, 2004) have identified at least 80 different, often competing and sometimes contradictory definitions. Probably the best known is that given in the Brundtland Report (1987), where it is suggested that sustainable development means '*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*' (WCED, 1987, p.43). This definition has been recognised in Irish policies relating to sustainable rural housing (see DoEHLG 2004a, 2005). However, as previously stated, this definition does not have legal standing in Irish policy, and what is construed as sustainable development is therefore open to interpretation by local authorities which are responsible for the local implementation of national policy.

Sustainable development has economic, social and environmental dimensions which together can contribute to a better quality of life. For development to be sustainable, it is essential to strike a balance between these three dimensions (DoEHLG, 2004a; Scott and Murray, 2009). The rural housing debate has been characterised by a conflict in constructions of sustainable development (Scott, 2005). Two competing rationalities of sustainable development have emerged (Scott, 2008). On one hand, pro-conservation interests favour restrictive policies towards dispersed rural settlement as a means of reducing car dependency and

protecting landscapes and, on the other, pro-dispersed housing interests criticise the Government's and planners' preoccupation with the environmental aspect of sustainable development and favour policies which will enable the continued maintenance of rural communities and protect against the further loss of services (Scott, 2005). Essentially, in the post-productivist era, with the emergence of alternative uses for rural space, pro-conservation interests envisage rural space as a place of consumption for tourists with the preservation of landscape and heritage of primary concern. Conversely, pro-dispersed housing interests envisage rural areas as places of consumption for residents, emphasising the importance of social and cultural space (Woods, 2005; Scott, 2007).

Figure 2.4.1 One-off housing (Location: Cross, Co. Clare)

Pro-Conservation Interests

Several national agencies and bodies with interests in environmental protection and/or land-use planning have become involved in the debate against dispersed rural settlement. These groups include An Taisce, The Heritage Council, Friends of the Irish Environment, Feasta, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Irish Planning Institute. These groups have put forward a number of reasons justifying the imposition of restrictions on one-off housing construction. The most common of these are discussed below.

The most common argument put forward for restricting one-off housing development is the impact of this settlement type on important landscapes and rural amenities. Keaveney (2007) comments that the incidence of rural one-off

housing in Ireland is a significant feature of the landscape in many locations and that these constructions are 'overwhelmingly' new-build housing which, she states, has been the favoured planning approach in Ireland. Gkartzios and Scott (2010) state that the unprecedented increase in single rural dwellings in recent decades in Ireland, particularly in areas within commuting distance of major urban centres, is largely due to an increase in counter-urbanisation. McDonald and Nix (2005) note that, the housing built in rural areas in 2000 alone consumed 2,700 hectares of agricultural land and resulted in the loss of an estimated 540km of natural hedgerows in order to create new site boundaries.

The impact of the proliferation of septic tanks and individual waste water treatment system on ground water is another common cause for concern. Again, McDonald and Nix (2005) have pointed out that the national total of septic tanks in 2000 was estimated at 400,000, increasing at an estimated rate of 18,000 per year.

Another common argument against the continuing development of dispersed settlement patterns is the almost exclusive reliance on the car for all journeys. The areas of the highest densities of single rural dwellings are found in the urban belts surrounding the five major cities (Dublin, Waterford, Cork, Limerick and Galway) and the areas of lowest density are those at the greatest distance from the national road network (Keaveney, 2007; Scott and Murray, 2009; Gkartzios and Scott, 2010). A report by Banister and Berechman (2000) states that Ireland is already the most car-dependent country in the world, covering 24,400 km per year compared to the US average of 19,000 km, the UK at 16,100 km, France at 14, 100 and Germany at 12, 700km. Finally, pro-conservation interests frequently cite the increased costs in service delivery associated with dispersed settlements. For example, a report by O'Grada (2003) stated that the overall cost of the postal service for rural Ireland is twice as high as it is in urban areas.

The general consensus expressed by pro-conservation interests is the one-off housing will not regenerate an area, attract employment, or maximise services and

the provision of necessary facilities. The IPI (2004) stated that such development, if permitted, would further exacerbate deficits in this regard.

Pro- Dispersed-Housing Interests

Advocates of continued rural housing construction include many local councillors (Scott, 2005) and interest groups, some of which are specifically focused on rural housing issues, for example, the Irish Rural Dwellers' Association and Rural Resettlement Ireland, while others have a wider functional remit, such as the Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA) and the Irish Farmers' Association (IFA). These groups have put forward a number of arguments which promote dispersed settlement, the most common of which are discussed below.

Perhaps the most common argument forwarded by pro-dispersed-housing interests is their criticism of the *modus operandi* of planning officials, described as having a mentality aligned to the British Anglo-Saxon planning model which emphasises settlement in urban areas. It is argued that the current Irish planning model is based on the urban population being 90 per cent, as in the UK where nucleated rural settlement predominates (Byrne, 2003) and fails to account for the tradition of dispersed rural settlement in Ireland (Buckley, 2003; Irish Auctioneers and Valuers' Institute, 2003).

Another criticism, relating to the NSS has been that the spatial planning framework represents 'Europeanisation', at the expense of the unique Irish tradition of dispersed housing (Buckley, 2003). Regional development and the tying of rural hinterlands much more into their urban context is the current development policy focus of the EU, as illustrated in the European Spatial Development Perspective (EDSP, 1999). It has been argued by Hadjimichalis (2003) that a polycentric urban model as endorsed by the EDSP and promoted the NSS marginalises rural and peripheral geography and could lead to a widening gap between urban and rural areas, especially in Ireland where dispersed settlement has long been a feature of the rural landscape.

Pro-dispersed housing interests have also stated that the use of small wastewater treatment plants no longer presents a serious threat to the environment because new systems, such as the Puraflo system, have been approved and people building one-off houses have to sign contracts stating that they will use this system before planning will be granted (Moylan, 2004). Finally, in a positive assessment of the role of one-off housing, it has been suggested that such housing allows for the continued maintenance of communities, especially family ties, in areas of dispersed settlement, ensuring a local population for local schools, sports clubs and other facilities. Areas where one-off housing restrictions apply to non-locals could experience difficulties in this regard in coming years as locals choose to move away, while numbers fail to be replenished (Moylan, 2004).

2.4.2. The Activation of Sustainable Rural Housing Policy at Local Level

The *Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines for Planning Authorities*, first published in draft form April 2004, were intended by government to loosen restrictions on one-off housing in rural areas. Their publication has meant that the national debate has subsided to some extent. However, as mentioned previously, concerns have arisen with respect to the accuracy and consistency in which they are being adopted and implemented at local level.

Many inconsistencies exist from county to county with regard to the granting of permission for one-off housing. Setting aside considerations for CDPs and settlement strategies (and the accuracy with which they are adopted), the granting of planning permission by local planning officials is still subject to normal planning requirements and good planning practice as laid out in the CDP. However, each planning authority determines its planning requirements and good planning practice individually (Scott, 2005). Therefore, the views of individual planners regarding sustainable development must be considered. For instance, the weighting attributed by an individual planner to each dimension of sustainable development, including social, economic and environmental elements, in relation to one-off housing can affect planning approval. Research from Northern Ireland

(Murray and Greer, 2000) and England (Owen, 1996) suggests that planners generally favour restrictive policies for rural settlement planning as a selective interpretation of what construes sustainable planning practice (cited by Scott, 2005). Drawing on the findings from an Irish study, Scott, (2008, 14) questioned the role of local planners in implementing rural spatial development, suggesting that local rural settlement strategies were '*based on a shallow assessment of rurality with an overriding concern for landscape protection and a professional planning ethos which is at odds with recent national planning guidelines and wider rural development concerns.*'

Flexibility exists within the Irish planning system, yet applicants deemed to be suitable candidates under the *Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines for Planning Authorities* can still be refused planning permission on various grounds (Cummins, 2004). Indeed, Moylan (2004) believes that some planners will refuse planning permission for rural one-off housing if they can find any way of doing so. Interestingly, the Irish Planning Institute, which represents the majority of professional planners in Ireland, has taken a strong stance against dispersed rural housing (Scott, 2005).

The lack of a strong regional tier in the Irish Planning system has meant that local planning actions are often divorced from the realities of public policy at national level (Quinn, 2003). The implications of the decision-making power held by the County Manager and his/her nominees to grant/refuse planning permission for one-off housing may be significant in terms of the loss of social and economic benefits which may have accrued to the individual or household if planning approval had been granted and this is of major concern to pro-dispersed housing interests in the current climate of rural housing policy and planning practice.

2.5. Policy Publications Affecting Single Dwellings and Rural Spatial Patterns – 2010

Two notable policy publications have been released in 2010, which have implications for the manner in which rural settlement strategies are operated at local level. The first of these is the *Planning and Development (Amendment) Act, 2010*, which was signed into law in July 2010. Archiseek[2] (2010) states that the Amendment Act, marks a new era in how Ireland plans for the future.

There are a number of additions and changes included in the *Planning and Development (Amendment) Act, 2010*, which have the potential to impact rural spatial strategies at county level. The main addition is the 'core strategy,' a provision which requires development plans to include a statement of compliance demonstrating how local policies are in keeping with the prescriptions of the Regional Development Plans (RDPs) and the National Spatial Strategy (NSS). Archiseek (2010) has referred to this as 'consistency.' Before the introduction of the 2010 Amendment Act, development plans only had to '*have regard*' to RDPs. Now planning authorities must show how they are translating key government policy into county plans for local implementation and justify instances where they are unable to do this (Archiseek, 2010; Irish Planning Institute, IPI, 2010). Archiseek (2010) has described the *Planning and Development (Amendment) Act, 2010* as the promotion of a hierarchical spatial planning system and the introduction of a much stronger regional dimension to spatial land-use planning.

The second policy-related publication of note is the NSS update entitled *Implementing the National Spatial Strategy: 2010 Update and Outlook - Harnessing Potential, Delivering Competiveness, Achieving Sustainable Development*, published in October 2010. This document examines the progress of the NSS since its introduction and examines its role moving into the future. Kitchin (2010, 1) has stated that the publication of the NSS update is very timely, especially given the economic downturn and the need for '*mid-to-long term spatial*

[2] Website for Irish Architecture news and discussion; http:// http://two.archiseek.com/

planning to provide a co-ordinating framework for managing scarcer resources and stimulating economic growth.' He also suggested that in a manner similar to the treatment of the NSS, the NSS update will also be ignored by Government departments outside the DoEHLG and the Department of Transport, particularly the Department of Finance.

Writing in the Irish Times (10th June 2010), O'Brien showed that the NSS update found that local planning authorities largely ignored the NSS in the four years from 2002-2006. Almost half of all national population growth in this period occurred within the commuter belts of Dublin, Cork and Galway, while the urban areas where growth was supposed to be promoted (under the prescriptions of the NSS) grew by only four percent. The 'NSS update' has stated that a hierarchy of regional plans will support enactment of the NSS and that this will be facilitated by the *Planning and Development (Amendment) Act, 2010.* (DoEHLG, 2010).

However, Breathnach (2010) does not believe that the NSS update constitutes a useful document. He has asserted that it reproduces an abundance of weaknesses that were evident in the original strategy, notably the lack of Government commitment to its promotion. While he has recognised that the NSS update provides a statement of what needs to be achieved moving forward, it offers little guidance on how this is to be accomplished. Despite his concerns, Breathnach (2010, 1) did concede that the NSS offers '*probably the only feasible long-term path to autonomous self-sustaining development in the Irish regions*' and he additionally commented that for the NSS to be successful, a major realignment of the State's governance structures would therefore be required (Breathnach, 2010).

2.6. The Theoretical Context - Conceptions of the State and the Role of Planning

The theoretical framework for understanding and interpreting the issues surrounding the formulation and activation of sustainable rural-housing policies at

national and local level is drawn from the pluralist and managerialist interpretations of state as advanced in the writings of Kirk (1980) and MacLaran and McGuirk (2003). Clark and Dear (1981) have categorised these perspectives as being part of a 'subjectivist' approach, a mode of analysis which addresses the functional aspects of the State, a key concern of this project. Pluralism describes '*the structure and characteristics of the distribution of power in society and in whose interest power is wielded*,' while managerialism describes '*the relationship between groups with qualitatively different kinds of power*' (Clark and Dear, 1981, 47).

Other conceptualisations of the State and indeed the role of planning officials were reviewed with regard to the subject of this research. These include theoretical perspectives which are considered part of an 'economic' approach, for example reformism and the Marxist political economy, in that these perspectives attempt to describe theories of democracy which account for 'exchange relationships' in society (Clark and Dear, 1981).

The strengths of the reformist approach, whose theoretical roots are derived from a '*humanistic liberal egalitarianism and some variant of Marxism*,' are that it stresses the inevitability of inequality among the populace of capitalist societies (Kirk, 1980, 73). Unlike pluralism and managerialism, reformism recognises the important influence of economic factors (in conjunction with social and political factors) on the *modus operandi* of the local state and hence, the planning system. Reformism views the state as an institution whose function is to maintain the viability of the economic system while using 'corrective action' to offset some of its more negative effects (Kirk, 1980; MacLaran, 1993; MacLaran and McGuirk, 2003). In addition, the reformist approach '*recognizes the transformative potential of the state, viewing it as having an inherent tendency to foster reform*' (MacLaran and McGuirk, 2003, 74). However, criticisms of this approach point to its weakness in terms of theoretical base and its lack of acknowledgement of the limitations of the state, constrained by economic and political systems (Kirk, 1980).

The Marxist political economy focuses on the relationship between the state and society. It regards the state as an establishment which emerged historically to moderate conflicting elements of society (MacLaran, 1993). Its function and role is rooted in the capitalist mode of production and the States primary function is to assuage the constant conflict between the interests of capital and labour over the distribution of 'social product' (MacLaran, 1993). The role of the state in this perspective is to legitimise capitalist society and guarantee the relations of production (MacLaran and McGuirk, 2003).

Further theoretical frameworks such as the employment of interpretive and discursive approaches to policy analysis were also considered. These approaches theorise that policy decisions are illustrative of situations where competing interests struggle against one another to ascertain a construed 'version of reality' so as to forward their specific agenda (Jacobs, 1999; Scott; 2008).

As '*planning is a function of state activity*,' individual conceptions of the role of the State will invariably determine one's understanding of the role of planning officials in the physical planning system (MacLaran, 1993; MacLaran and McGuirk, 2003, 70). The role of the planning official has many different interpretations. Kirk (1980) has suggested that the most common self-conception among planning officials themselves is that they play a technical, non-political role and implement democratic decisions on a strictly technical, professional basis.

One interpretation of the role of the planning official, examined in addition to the pluralist and managerialist perspective, is that pursued in advocacy planning. The advocacy role is generally associated with the reformist approach to the distribution of power in society but also has associations with the pluralist perspective (Kirk, 1980). The role of the planning official is to represent and speak for clients, to act as a 'translator' between the bureaucracy and unrepresented sections of opinion (Kirk, 1980). Planning officials attempt to use their training, experience and position to secure some benefit for unrepresented sections of the population (Kirk, 1980). However, as Kirk (1980) suggests, this perception of

planning as an instrument for benefiting the community as a whole is often used as an argument to resist interest group demands as sectional, and hence secondary to the wider public interest.

Another interpretation, the Marxist political economy perspective views planning officials as state agents operating within the confines of the capitalist system. As agents of the local state, their actions favour dominant classes or interests, giving '*legitimisation to outcomes which are intensely unequal*' (MacLaran, 1993, 83).

Despite the examination of the alternative theoretical perspectives discussed above as possible frameworks to enable a theoretical understanding of the empirical data collected during the course of this research, it was felt that a theoretical framework which draws on aspects of pluralist and managerialist interpretations of the state of the planning system was better suited to this research, as the primary focus of this study was to examine the manner whereby policy relating to sustainable rural-settlement patterns is formulated and operated at national and local level.

It should be noted that the headings *Pluralism* and *Managerialism* merely provide structure within which the different contributions can be discussed and do not denote distinct, articulated bodies of theory (Kirk, 1980). While these theoretical approaches are commonly associated with urbanism, they have not necessarily been formulated in this context. As with urbanism, applications of these perspectives in a rural context can also be developed. Pluralist and managerialist interpretations provide an understanding of the processes involved in formulating and activating sustainable rural-housing policies, both offer a degree of validity and insight to the intricacies of such processes. The following section examines the pluralist and managerialist approaches in the context of understanding the key conceptual issues which emerged during the course of the literature review.

2.6.1. Pluralism

Pluralism, originally developed with reference to the American political system, views the central objective of the state as being the maintenance of the stability of

society as a whole (Kirk, 1980). Society comprises a spectrum of conflicting interest groups vying for influence over government policy via the electoral process (Kirk, 1980; MacLaran, 1993; MacLaran and McGuirk, 2003). Pluralists maintain that conflicting interests can be accommodated as power is '*distributed in a diffuse way so as to guarantee that no one group can dominate any particular segment of society*' (Kirk, 1980, 57). The characteristics of the political process as understood in pluralism are of an open and democratic nature. Policy decision-makers are easily accessible and there are many means of interaction for individuals and groups (Kirk, 1980; MacLaran, 1993; MacLaran and McGuirk, 2003).

This researcher does not contend that the state solely operates within a pluralist framework. However, understanding pluralist theory aids comprehension of many of the processes and issues surrounding political and planning systems in operation in contemporary Ireland. The following text analyses the current system of policy formulation and planning practice and the issues raised during the course of the rural housing debate while laying out the themes associated with this perspectives and examining the strengths and weaknesses of this approach.

Dunleavy (1977) identified three central themes underlying pluralism:

i) The state is considered to be '*a weak unit lacking in any developed ideology, operating in an environment of strong external influences and controlled by politicians who concentrate overwhelmingly on building and maintaining an electoral majority*'

ii) (Dunleavy, 1971, cited by Kirk, 1980, 58).

iii) There is an assumption that political influence is exerted from the bottom up. It is public opinion that plays a central role in acquiring policy formulation/change.

iv) The public determines political activity. Pluralism stresses the right and ability of people to organise around the issues that concern them. As individuals/groups will mobilise and react to political issues which concern them, influencing a state which is responsive to external pressures, the outcome of policy formulation will reflect the wants and needs of the public.

The validity of the pluralist perspective has been widely evaluated and criticised (Kirk, 1980; MacLaran, 1993; Campbell and Marshall, 1999; MacLaran and McGuirk, 2003). Kirk (1980, 60) has pointed to three major criticisms of the perspective, involving concern regarding:

i) The question of the equality of different interest groups
ii) The assumption of the one-way nature of political influence from the bottom upwards
iii) The stress on activity at the expense of any consideration of apparent inactivity and associated methodological emphasis on 'key issues' for study.

Addressing the first of these criticisms, within the context of this research project, the issues which have arisen surrounding the sustainability of one-off housing and associated policy and practice have attracted attention and activism at all levels of society. In contrast to many urban studies relating, for example, to inner-city regeneration and gentrification, where inequality between the various interest groups has been apparent (see Punch, 2001; Redmond, 2002; Brudell *et al.*, 2004), this has not, in the main, been the case in the rural-housing debate. In these aforementioned urban studies, community interests are often upheld by individuals/groups of a working-class background which may not have, at least initially, the organisational structure, financial resources or professional expertise to mount a viable public campaign (Kirk, 1980) against the professional, established organisational and operational structure of the opposition, including local government, developers, etc. Furthermore, these community groups may often be isolated from similar local campaigns in operation in other urban areas.

In contrast, the restriction of dispersed dwelling types as a means for achieving sustainable rural development is an issue which of consequence to the large proportion of rural dwellers and those seeking to live in the countryside. The broad implications of such measures for individuals and communities across rural Ireland have meant that the pro-dispersed settlement movement transcends class. This implies the availability of a wide range of resources (e.g., financial, professional, educational), allowing for the prompt creation and organisation of an opposition movement to pro-conservation interests. For example, the Irish Rural Dweller's Association (IRDA), founded in response to perceived difficulties in obtaining planning permission for one-off rural housing, has achieved a level of political and public recognition which has included its appointment as a nominating body for An Bord Pleanála (Scott, 2007).

The second criticism of the pluralist perspective relates to an assumption of political influence being exerted solely from the bottom up. While not always the case, this has been seen to occur with regard to rural housing policy. The intense lobbying by the pro-dispersed rural housing movement has seen the government shift to a less restrictive position on dispersed housing with the publication of *Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines for Planning Authorities*. In this context, Brindley *et al.* (1989, cited by Healey, 1992, 411) describing the planning system as a '*flexible mechanism for mediating conflicting interests within which different interests come to dominate at different periods*.'

As mentioned, the IRDA, a grassroots organisation set up to lobby against perceived stringent planning policy and practice, have campaigned relentlessly and successfully, in conjunction with other dispersed rural-housing supporters, for a loosening of the restrictions on dispersed rural housing, arguing that planning policy and officials place too much emphasis on the environmental dimension of rural housing and fail to recognise the importance of community viability and traditional dispersed rural settlement patterns (Scott, 2005). However, concerns have arisen as to the accuracy and consistency by which rural-housing policies are

being adopted and activated at local level through the settlement strategies of CDPs and local planning decisions.

The success of groups in influencing local land-use policy and planning practice is described by Kirk (1980) as being dependent on several factors and limited in several ways. As discussed, it is partly dependent on size, organisational ability, expertise and resources available to the groups and partly on the group's aims. Secondly, it is dependent on the responsiveness of councillors and planning officers (often independently of each other) to the organisation's demands. Thus, a weakness of the pluralist approach becomes apparent in that it does not distinguish between politicians and administrators (Kirk, 1980). This distinction is important in the context of Irish local-authority structure, because although councillors are elected by the voting public, the county manager and planning officials are not. Therefore, while potential and successful councillors may be intent on addressing the issues of concern to the electorate, planners are not necessarily responsive to pressure-group activity at local level. This point is expanded upon in the following section reviewing managerialism. The important question of (equality in) access to local-authority councillors and planning officials by pro-conservation and pro-dispersed housing interests will be investigated in the course of this project. The third criticism of pluralism addresses the emphasis placed by the pluralist approach on activities and its associated methodological emphasis on 'key issues' for study (Dunleavy, 1980; Kirk, 1980; MacLaran and McGuirk, 2003). In the context of this study, this criticism does not detract from the fact that an understanding of the pluralist perspective allows for an in-depth analysis of the manner and extent by which individuals/groups mobilise around the issues which are important to them, as seen with the rural housing debate.

Critical assessments of pluralism (Kirk, 1980; MacLaran and McGuirk, 2003) argue that it does not offer satisfactory interpretations of inactivity, which is attributed either to satisfaction with the system as it currently operates or to disinterest. Kirk (1980) argues that the pluralist approach does not allow for the fact that people may be inactive because they perceive themselves to be powerless

and without influence. This is an important argument in the context of rural-housing policy and planning practice. The contentious national debate concerning rural housing has subsided to some extent in light of the publication of *Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines for Planning Authorities* which 'loosened' restrictions on dispersed rural housing. An important and central question which this research project addresses is whether these 'concessions' have been incorporated and adhered to at local level.

It is important to stress that this research does not adopt the pluralist perspective as a definitive and unwavering definition of planning operations. Rather, pluralism, in conjunction with managerialism (reviewed in the following section), is employed to achieve an in-depth understanding of these processes.

2.6.2. Managerialism

Managerialism stresses the '*complex and impenetrable structure of the state machinery which renders it impervious to influence from its citizens*' (MacLaran and McGuirk, 2003, 73). In contrast to the weak institutions underlying the pluralist perspective, it is assumed that state agencies are complex structures, largely unreceptive to civic activism (Kirk, 1980; MacLaran, 1993). In the context of this research project, the role of grassroots activists in bringing about change in national rural housing policy has already been acknowledged and discussed. However, concerns have arisen as to the manner, accuracy and consistency by which these policies have been adopted and implemented at local level. Considering these circumstances, the managerialist perspective provides a potentially useful understanding of these processes and of the administrative structure at local level.

The strengths of managerialism lie in the attention paid to the ways in which government bureaucracies operate, their power, the complexity of their structure and the fact that they are not necessarily responsive to pressure from below (Kirk, 1980, 72). The Irish local-authority structure consists of two primary strands: the county manager and his/her staff who are responsible for executive functions and

the elected representatives who are responsible for reserved functions. Essentially, elected councillors make policy decisions and the county manager must then ensure that decisions made by his/her staff provide an accurate translation of these polices (Grist, 2003). For example, while the granting of planning permission is an executive function, each application should be evaluated in the context of the CDP adopted by the elected councillors, to ensure that it complies.

However, as noted above, although county councillors are elected by the voting public, the county manager and planning officials are not. The fact that planning officials are removed from the electorate and from civic activism raises the possibility that planning decisions may not reflect the balance of interests in a locality (Kirk, 1980), as assumed by the pluralist perspective, or reflect the settlement strategies adopted by local councillors. Planners may instead adopt their own agenda as managers of the planning system, '*accountable not to the electorate nor to the politicians who employ them, but to a body of professional knowledge and practice*' (Kirk, 1980, 135).

Managerialism cites '*the professionalism of decision-making and its reliance on expert knowledge systems*' as being the underlying force of public bureaucracies (MacLaran and McGuirk, 2003, 73). Planning decisions may be taken by planning officers and councillors in accordance with their prejudices, convictions and technical expertise. However, the managerialist thesis implies that elected councillors, due to a lack of detailed knowledge about planning, become reliant on the expertise of professional planning officers, chosen for their education and training. In this capacity, councillors may become insensitive to the needs of their constituents (Kirk, 1980, MacLaran, 1993; MacLaran and McGuirk 2003) and this may be reflected in the settlement strategies of CDPs.

Following on from this, the use of scientific, technical terminology, prevalent in the planning world, is also cited by managerialism as a barrier-creating process, discouraging non-professionals from challenging the *modus operandi* of the planning system (MacLaran and McGuirk, 2003), giving further credence to the

idea of detachment from the public. Despite this, some pressure groups are better able than others to cope with the bureaucracy and are less intimidated by the complexity of the organisational structure (Kirk, 1980), for example, the IRDA which has a proven record of exerting influence.

Planning officials are perceived under the managerialist perspective to comprise independent agents guided by an '*allegiance to a body of 'scientific' knowledge and code of practice at variance with the requirements of the democratic process*' implying a departure from the political control of elected councillors (Kirk, 1980, 113). Planning decisions reflect the views, values and agendas of these bureaucratic administrators. MacLaran and McGuirk (2003, 73) have argued that an underlying element of careerism may lead to managers and planning officials to promote their own interests rather than pursue an '*apolitical and technical management function*'.

Despite the introduction of more lenient rural housing guidelines, many planning officials have voiced a reluctance to abandon established planning strategies (Ó Murchú, 2004). Such policy shifts have been described by MacLaran and McGuirk (2003, 74) as posing a threat to established bureaucratic systems and administrative power structures and, they have argued, may lead to resistance from planners, sometimes amounting to an '*outright subversion of public policy*'.
This project examines the processes involved in formulating sustainable rural housing policy at central-government level, considering external factors such as civic activism which are involved in this process, also investigating the manner in which local authorities have incorporated these policies into the settlement strategies and rural-housing policies for employment in their administrative areas. It investigates the accuracy with which rural housing polices/settlement strategies adopted by local councillors are implemented by planners and examines the responsiveness of elected councillors and planning officials to the concerns of interest groups.

Drawing on pluralist and managerialist interpretations of the state and the role of planning, this research allows for an in-depth understanding of the processes outlined above and aids analysis of empirical data obtained in each of four case-study local authorities.

2.7. Conclusion

This research addresses issues which are of considerable contemporary importance in Irish rural studies. Building on analyses of the merits and drawbacks of employing a strategic spatial-planning agenda to promote the sustainable development of rural areas (Buckley, 2003; Hadjmichalis, 2003; Scott, 2005) by connecting managerialist and pluralist perspectives with empirical data, this project provides a theoretical context for understanding:

i) The manner in which central government and local-authority managers and representatives interpret and operate sustainable-development issues relating to rural settlement.

ii) The degree to which national and local sustainable rural-housing policy and planning practice is infused with and shaped by the political agendas of interest groups which are both for and against one-off housing development in rural areas.

Currently, there is a lack of empirical knowledge relating to the intricacies and implications of these processes. While working towards addressing this deficit, this research compliments the small, yet significant, research movement addressing issues relating to the political processes involved in promoting sustainable rural development (e.g., Scott and Brereton, 2010).

This project aims to provide empirical evidence from which the strengths and weaknesses of current policy direction and operations for promoting sustainable rural development can be identified and acted upon at central government level including, for example, the introduction of measures designed to improve

uniformity in the process of adopting and implementing sustainable rural development policies across local authorities. Failure to address these issues may result in a 'patchwork' effect with regard to rural settlement structure which will have considerable implications for the effectiveness of a strategic spatial planning agenda and will have consequences for all local authorities, operating either strict or lenient planning regimes with respect to one-off rural housing construction, in terms of the social, economic and environmental sustainability of their functional areas.

CHAPTER THREE:
METHODOLOGY

3.0 Preamble

There are two core research questions upon which this thesis is based:

i) What are the important factors which need to be considered when examining policy formation and activation relating to sustainable development and rural settlement patterns?

ii) What are the implications of inconsistencies in operating sustainable development strategies?

The parameters within which the sustainable development of rural settlement is to be governed is laid out in national and local policy documents, guidelines, development plans, settlement strategies etc. However, given that sustainable development is not legally defined in Irish legislation suggests leeway for interpretation in the formulation of central government policy relating to sustainable rural settlement patterns. This, in turn, implies scope for interpretation at local government level in the adaptation of central policy relating to sustainable rural settlement patterns for local settlement strategies and rural housing policies. In addition, external factors, such as the role of lobbyist groups (both for and against one-off rural housing) in influencing national and local policy decision-making must be taken into account when considering the process of sustainable rural settlement policy formulation.

This study aims to provide a theoretical context for understanding the role and *modus operandi* of national and local government in planning, promoting and operationalising strategies for rural sustainability as it relates to rural settlement planning and also the perceptions of rural residential planning of persons/agents involved with or affected by the contemporary planning system in Ireland. This

will be made possible by connecting theory with empirical evidence. The interpretive framework draws on major theoretical conceptions of the state (namely pluralism and managerialism) and the role of planning, as advanced by Kirk (1980) and later MacLaran and Mc Guirk (2003).

While an examination and comparison of national and local policy documents give an indication of the system within which sustainable rural settlement is to be achieved, it provides no indication of the actual processes at work within this system or the resultant outcomes of the system. Planning files and local statistics relating to decisions made on applications for single-dwellings are extremely useful in that they provide insight into the role of planning officers in activating local policy as well as an overview of the strictness/leniency of local authorities in terms of granting permission for single rural dwellings. Furthermore, they are constructive in establishing the spatial patterns of approved and refused planning applications for single rural dwellings.

However, while the conditions attached to refused planning applications for single rural dwellings provide an overview of the thought process involved in individual decisions, they provide little reasoning for apparent inconsistencies within and across local authority planning regimes and the resultant outcomes for spatial planning. Hence, the extent to which individual interpretations of sustainable development play a role in planning practice must be examined.

In addition, while an examination of planning files allows for a clinical analysis of the day-to-day operations and outcomes of the planning system, the personal outcome and consequence for the individual of refused planning permission for a single rural dwelling cannot be determined through an examination of this data and requires further investigation.

The primary theme of this thesis centres on the interpretation of sustainable development; how this interpretation can be manipulated both subconsciously and consciously by factors internal and external to the planning system; what this

means for rural settlement policy formation and activation; and the effects of the above processes at national, local and personal levels.

This is an area which, until recently, there has been little investigation (see Scott and Brereton, 2010). In order to address this deficit and to satisfy the core research questions, it was necessary to construct a concise research framework identifying the areas of relevance for which data had to be both generated and accumulated. The specific aims and objectives of this study are detailed below.

3.1 Aims and Objectives

As detailed below, a number of research aims emerged from the core research questions. Each aim was then translated into a number of specific research objectives which allowed for a methodological framework for achieving the aims to be formulated.

(i) Research Aim

To examine the processes by which policies relating to sustainable development and rural settlement patterns are formulated at central government level.

Research Objective

In order to achieve this aim, it is necessary to examine:

i) How sustainable development is interpreted at central government level.
ii) The extent to which conflicting interest groups engaged in the rural housing debate have influenced national policy decisions.
iii) The perceived effectiveness of present policy in promoting sustainable development.

(ii) Research Aim

To investigate the manner in which local authorities have incorporated central government policies and guidelines relating to sustainable rural settlement patterns

into the settlement strategies and rural housing policies for their administrative areas.

Research Objectives

In order to achieve this aim, it is necessary to examine:

- The extent to which local policy complies with national policy.
- The degree of consistency/uniformity in the translation of national policy for local implementation across local authorities.
- The extent to which vested and voluntary interests have been able to influence policy decisions at local level.

(iii) Research Aim

To investigate the extent to which the different political agendas of vested and voluntary interests, both for and against one-off housing construction, infused local election debate and influenced the political agenda and election of candidates.

Research Objectives

In order to achieve this aim, it is necessary to examine:

- The opinions and experiences of successful (i.e. local councillors) and unsuccessful candidates on the degree to which their stance on rural housing determined the outcome of their election campaign.
- The views/opinions of vested/voluntary interests on the degree to which candidates were receptive to their appeals.

(iv) Research Aim

To examine the accuracy with which planners implement rural housing polices/settlement strategies adopted by local councillors.

Research Objectives

In order to achieve this aim, it is necessary to examine:

- The degree to which planning applications are proofed against rural housing policies adopted by the elected councillors to ensure that they comply (i.e. the consideration given to local rural housing policy when making planning decisions).
- The personal opinions of the planner with regard to the relative importance of the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development and the extent to which these views influence planning decisions..
- Satisfaction with local rural housing policy as it currently stands,
- The consistency by which planning decisions are reached across local authorities.
- The extent to which the Planning Appeals Board have endorsed the executive planning decisions of local authorities in contented one-off housing planning applications.

(v) Research Aim

To examine the consequences for the individual/household of the executive decision-making power held by the County Manager and his/her nominees (planners) to grant/refuse planning permission for one-off housing.

Research Objectives

It order to achieve this aim, it is necessary to:

- Identify the reasons for seeking planning permission for a one-off dwelling, i.e. economic gain, social benefits, etc. Examine what refusal of planning permission has meant in terms of the loss of benefits which would have accrued had planning approval been granted.

3.2 Methodological Framework

This section outlines the strategies employed and information sources utilised throughout this thesis in the completion of the above objectives.

3.2.1 Analysis of Secondary Source Material

The initial step in formulating a methodological framework best suited to conducting the primary research component of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the processes and issues which together comprise the core problematic of the study. Firstly, it was necessary to establish, as clearly as possible, how the planning system in Ireland is operated and to identify the primary parties involved with this process. Secondly, the role of the planning system in promoting and legislating for the sustainable development of rural settlement patterns was clarified. Thirdly, it was necessary to identify the issues and conflicts which have arisen in response to the manner in which the current system is operated and to gauge an understanding of the effects of these operations.

3.2.1.i The Planning System in Ireland

In examining the operation of the planning system, the secondary source material was sub-divided into two categories: Planning legislation and material relating to and analysing planning legislation.

In order to gain an understanding of the scope of Ireland's planning system, which was introduced in 1964, planning legislation with relevance to the regulation of rural areas was consulted. This legislation was considered with reference to material explaining and analysing the planning system. This material stems from a variety of sources, including: web-based materials, for example, the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government website; books; periodicals/journals and media coverage. Of particular importance was the documentation (Grist, 2003) of the evolution of the Irish planning system, highlighting existing and potential problems in the current operation of the planning system.

3.2.1.ii The Role of the Planning System in Promoting the Sustainable Development of Rural Settlement Patterns

The initial phase in understanding the role of the planning system in promoting the sustainable development of rural settlement patterns was to become familiar with

related developments at international, national and local scales. This involved documenting the emergence and employment of a sustainable development ethos within the planning arena by means of legislation and related policy guidance. Some of the key material consulted included: World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, 1987; European Spatial Development Perspective, *Towards Balanced and Sustainable Development of the Territory of the European Union*, 1999; Government of Ireland, *National Spatial Strategy for Ireland, 2002-2020*, 2002 and County Development Plans for various counties and time frames. In addition, research material analysing the incorporation of sustainable development practices into planning policy; the effects of such developments on rural spatial planning; and the forecasting of predictions for rural spatial planning in Ireland, was consulted.

3.2.1.iii The Role of Interest Groups in Influencing Policy Decisions

In order to gain a better understanding of the role of external factors in influencing the planning system in Ireland, it was necessary to identify the primary parties involved in the rural housing debate, a conflict which arose in response to the attention afforded by central Government to rural-housing policy. This involved analysing the literature of organisations which formed both sides of the debate, both pro and anti one-off rural housing. This included materials from state-sponsored bodies, non-government organisations and local community groups, for example, Environmental Protection Agency, An Taisce, Irish Rural Dwellers' Association, Irish Rural Link.

The in-depth examination of secondary source material has been instrumental in formulating the research problematic of this research. It has allowed for a broad understanding of the Irish planning system, the incorporation of sustainable development practices into planning policy, and the parties involved, both internally and externally, in shaping rural settlement policy in Ireland. The analysis of such material ensured that an informed effort could be made in identifying case-study local authorities; identifying relevant interviewees;

informing the content of interview questions and questionnaire survey; allowing for an up-to-date knowledge of emerging issues as the research progressed.

3.2.2 Selection of Case-Study Areas

As a significant proportion of this research has been undertaken at local level, it was necessary to focus the primary data collection to allow for detailed analysis. Therefore, 4 local authorities were chosen as case-study areas. For comparative purposes, it was decided to select 2 local authorities who exhibited evidence of employing strict regimes with regard to one-off housing construction, and 2 local authorities who exhibited evidence of employing lax regimes with regard to one-off housing construction. The local authorities were selected based on the following:

Stage 1: The identification of local authorities with a significant proportion of the administrative area falling into one or both of the following categories:

i) Areas which are structurally weak as defined by the National Spatial Strategy (NSS).

ii) Areas where there is a tradition of dispersed settlement (defined in NSS).

Stage 2: County Development Plans (for the inclusion/exclusion of clauses relating to one-off housing)

Stage 3: Local authority planning application statistics for rural one-off housing approval rates.

Stage 1: Identification of counties who meet rural area typology criteria

Each local authority was examined with regard to the *National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020* (NSS) rural area typologies map.[3] Local Authorities with a significant proportion of their administrative areas falling into one or both of the following rural area typologies were selected for further examination (as, in theory, anyone can build in these areas):

[3] See Appendix 1.

i) Areas which are structurally weak

ii) Areas where there is a tradition of dispersed settlement

The counties selected were Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon, Longford, Cavan, Monaghan, Mayo, Galway, Clare and Kerry.

Additional analysis was carried out, using a rural area typology constructed by Walsh *et al.* (2007), which is similar to the one used in the NSS, to allow for a more-in depth examination of the rural area types of selected counties[4].

Stage 2: Examination of county development plans

The CDPs of counties selected in Stage 1 were examined to see if they contained clauses relating to one-off housing construction. Specific attention was paid to the inclusion of a 'local need' clause. This is a clause which ensures that one-off housing applicants have a genuine need to build a one-off house in a rural area. This clause is designed to protect against urban-generated housing. In theory, this clause is only to be applied in areas under strong urban influence and stronger rural areas, as defined in the NSS.

The existence of an occupancy clause in the CDPs was also examined. This was to establish whether local authorities' had made provisions to ensure the permanent occupancy, by the applicant, of the single dwelling once planning permission had been approved. Table 3.2.1 details the inclusion/omission of a local need clause and an occupancy clause in the CDPs of each of the selected counties. These examinations allowed for the identification of local authorities who are operating strict/lenient planning regimes with regard to one-off housing.

[4] See Appendix 2.

Table 3.2.1 Local Need Clause and Occupancy Clause

County	CDP	Local Need Clause	Years living in area to be considered local	Occupancy clause	Minimum occupancy requirement
Donegal	2006-2012	Yes	7	Yes	10 years
Sligo	2005-2011	Yes	Not stated	No	N/A
Leitrim	2003-2009	No	N/A	No	N/A
Roscommon	2002-2008	No	N/A	No	N/A
Longford	2003-2009	Yes	Not stated	Yes	Occupied by the applicant
Cavan	2003-2009	No[5]	N/A	No	N/A
Monaghan	2006-2012	Yes	5	Yes	7 years
Mayo	2003-2009	Yes	Not stated	No	N/A
Galway	2003-2009	Yes	Not stated	Yes	10 years
Clare	2005-2011	Yes	10	Yes	Permanent occupancy
Kerry	2003-2009	Yes	Not stated	Yes	Primary residence

The counties highlighted in pink can be seen to be operated a strict regime with regard to the inclusion of clauses relating to one-off housing construction. The counties highlighted in blue have adopted a more lax approach to one-off housing construction within their functional areas.

Stage 3: Local authority planning statistics

In this stage, planning approval statistics for single rural dwellings in each of the selected counties were examined. Table 3.2.2 details the findings.

[5] The CDP of Co. Cavan mentions local need but there a no provision in place for the implementation of a local need requirement to apply for permission to build a single rural dwelling.

Table 3.2.2. Planning Approval Statistics, Single Dwellings, 2005[6]

County Council	(A) Permissions Granted for single dwellings (% of Total Housing Permissions Granted 2005)	(B) Ratio of Applications Granted; Multi-development Houses : One-off Houses, 2005	(C) Total Permissions Granted for Single Dwellings 2005
Mayo	51.3	0.9:1	1206
Galway (excl. cities)	50.3	0.9:1	1722
Donegal	42.3	1.4:1	1859
Kerry	39.1	1.6:1	1203
Leitrim	38.5	1.6:1	589
Clare	36.8	1.7:1	608
Monaghan	33.3	2:1	526
Cavan	28.2	2.5:1	803
Roscommon	27.8	2.6:1	836
Sligo	24.2	3.1:1	531
Longford	15.6	5.4:1	429

Stage 4: Final selection of case-study counties

Based on the preceding three stages four local authorities were chosen for inclusion in the study. These counties were chosen to allow for the research agenda to be operationalised in environments which are illustrative of the variety and complexity of local authority planning regimes in contemporary Ireland. Counties Clare and Galway were chosen as examples of strict planning regimes. Counties Cavan and Roscommon were chosen as examples of lenient planning regimes.[7]

[6] The counties heighted in pink operate a strict planning regime with regard to the inclusion of one-off housing clauses in the CDPs. The countries highlighted in blue operated a lenient planning regime with regard to the inclusion of one-off housing clauses in the CDPs.

[7] For a detailed examination of approval and refusal statistics in the four case-study authorities, see Appendix 3.

3.3.3 Strategies for Primary Data Collection

To meet the aims of this research, two key strategies were utilised as a means of primary data collection, semi-structured interviews, and a postal questionnaire surveys. The interviews were employed as a means of subjecting to formal analysis the viewpoint of those involved in the formulation and activation of rural settlement policy. The questionnaire survey was constructed as a means of obtaining information relating to personal experiences of the planning system and the consequences (e.g. social, economic) for the individual of being refused permission to build a single rural dwelling.

3.3.3 (i) Semi-Structured Interviews

In order to achieve the first four research aims of this study, it was necessary to establish a methodology best suited to acquiring data relating to the formulation and activation of rural settlement policy from the experience and perspectives of those both involved both directly and indirectly with the Irish planning system and rural settlement policy. Given the lack of empirical data relating to these aims, it was decided that in-depth, personal, semi-structured interviews with a sample of each of the relevant parities was the most appropriate way in which this study could be completed.

It was essential to document interpretations, perceptions and experiences during the course of interviewing given their central importance to this study. They are essentially the crux upon which sustainable rural settlement policy is formulated and activated given that the concept of sustainable development has no legal definition in Irish politics. In addition, it is conflicting interpretations of sustainable development which led to political activism at national and local scales by interest groups both in favour of and opposed to single rural dwellings. Therefore, it was considered important that each individual interviewed should be given the opportunity to express all aspects of his/her opinions on each topic raised, which would have been hindered had a structured interview format been employed. Hence, a semi-structured interview style was adopted.

Set questions were drawn up to tackle the specific topics that needed to be addressed in relation to the research aims. However, given the discursive style of interviewing and the close relationship between the various topics addressed, it was not always necessary to ask specific questions as they were often answered sufficiently over the course of the conversation. The qualitative nature of responses ensured a more rounded impression could be gained of the manner in which rural settlement policy is formulated, how it is activated, the outcomes of the planning system as it stands and how its role is perceived.

Selection of Interviewees

In order to fully accomplish the aims of this research, a sample of respondents from each of the relevant parties involved with or affected by, either directly or indirectly, rural settlement policy formation and activation . Potential interviewees were classified into one of seven categories. Therefore, sets of interview questions were prepared. The questions included in each set of interviews were comparable and covered the same interview topics, though in varying detail, depending on the interviewee category and the knowledge of the respondent. The following lists the categories of interviewee which were chosen:

- Central-government elected representatives/ Central-government officials
- Local authority elected representatives
- Local government planning officials
- Interest groups

Central-government elected representatives/ Central-government officials

The first category of interview was comprised of central-government officials and central-government elected representatives. In order to gain an understanding of the processes involved in formulating national rural settlement policy, central-government officials, employed by the DoEHLG, involved in researching and drawing up national policy were interviewed. These officials were based in the Heritage and Planning Division. It was hoped that a significant number of officials

would agree to be interviewed, despite the small sample frame. However, there appeared to be a reluctance to participate in the study and contact, by post, email and/or telephone requesting participation was either ignored or refused. Therefore, just one official, involved with the spatial planning division in the DoEHLG, was interviewed. However, two more government officials working within the DoEHLG were also interviewed. Despite the low number of respondents representing central-government officials, it is not considered that this led to an information deficit with this category. The respondents interviewed were generous with their time and the detail of their responses. Each made himself/herself available for follow-up questions/clarification where necessary.

With regard to central government-elected representatives, it was conceived that interviews would be undertaken with TDs who represent the case-study areas, to impart their knowledge and perceptions of central government policy formation while providing their opinions and perceptions of the effects of such policy on their electorate and rural settlement patterns in their electoral area. Also, TDs who demonstrated knowledge and informed opinions of the issues in question (selected based on Oireachtas transcripts and media coverage) were to be interviewed. Contact with these interviewees, while initially disappointing, proved successful in the long-term with four interviews being completed in total. It was found that most interviewees were more agreeable to participating after being contacted by a colleague (also an interviewee) than when initially approached by the researcher. While this method of contact proved most effective, it did, unavoidably, determine, to a certain extent, which TDs were interviewed. However, given the small total population size from which potential interviewees could be chosen, it was considered unlikely that such an approach would introduce an element of bias in responses.

Throughout the course of this thesis, quotations attributed to central-government officials are denoted by the letters CGO and a number which represents the interviewee, e.g. CGO1. Quotations attributed to central-government elected

representatives are denoted by the letters CGER and a number which represents the individual interviewee, e.g. CGER1.

Local authority elected representatives

Given their role as local policy-makers, but also as elected representatives answerable to their electorate, local councillors from each of the case-study areas were interviewed. This category of interviewee was far more receptive when approached for interview than the previous two categories with all councillors who were contacted agreeing to participate. Again, contact made with perspective interviewees on behalf of the researcher was also availed of. In the case of all four study areas, it was ensured that the interviewees were representative of all electoral areas within the county and all political parties (were affiliated). Twenty-one interviews were completed with this group. A wide range of perspectives relating to the sustainability of continued one-off housing construction were identified, some prior to conducting the interviews given media coverage, council meeting transcripts, and so on. However, it was felt, on completion of the interviews, that the diversity of perspectives were represented, particularly given the percentage of local authority representatives interviewed in each case-study area (see Table 3.3.1).

Table 3.3.1 Number and Percentage of Councillors Interviewed in Each Local-Authority

Local Authority	**No. Councillors Interviewed**	**Total No. Councillors (Total Possible Interviewees)**	**Percentage interviewed**
Co. Clare	7	32	21.86
Co. Galway	6	30	20
Co. Roscommon	4	26	15.38
Co. Cavan	4	25	16
Total	21	113	18.5

Quotations attributed to county councillors are distinguished by case-study authority and by a number assigned to each individual. When excerpts relating to a respondents political affiliation are included, the councillor will be distinguished by their political party and then by an individually assigned number. In both cases, the letter *C* will precede the identification code to distinguish from interviews conducted with individuals categorised in another group of interviewee (see Table 3.3.2).

Table 3.3.2 ***Councillor Identification Codes***

County	**Authority code**	**Example of Identification Code**
Clare	C	CC2
Galway	G	CG5
Roscommon	R	CR1
Cavan	Ca	CCa4
Political Party	**Example**	
Fianna Fáil	CFF6	
Fine Gael	CFG4	
Sinn Féin	CSF1	
Labour	CL1	
Non-Party	CNP1	

Local government planning officials

Making contact with planning officers employed by the case-study local authorities proved to be the most difficult and time-consuming of all the interviewee categories, given that contact details were not publicly listed, and in instances where they were acquired, attempts at contact did not produce a response. Therefore, a number of approaches were utilised. Contacts within each county council approached planning officers, requesting an interview, on behalf of the researcher. Local councillors also made requests for interviews with the planning office on behalf of the researcher. In one case-study area, where other methods of contact had been exhausted, the county manager was approached for interview regarding planning matters. However, he referred the matter to his senior

planning officer who then agreed to be interviewed. The need to involve the assistance of a county councillor to have a county manager delegate a planning officer to take part in the interview can be seen, in this instance, to have only positive implications for the information elicited, given the seniority of the planning officer in question.

Combining these methods of contact, six interviews in total were completed with planning officers in the case-study areas which was considered quite successful given the limited size of the target group and difficulties experienced. Each of the interviewees had worked for their respective council for a minimum of 6 years which meant they were very familiar with the planning procedures in place and the day-to-day running of planning matters in their particular councils. Given the small sample of interviewees, the planning officers will not be identified by the local authority for which they work. Instead, the six interviewees are assigned numbers, for example, PO1, PO2, etc.

Interest groups

The degree of success in obtaining interviews with parties in the interest group category varied considerably depending on the stance of the group in the rural housing debate. In general, environmentally-focused groups were more reluctant to agree to a request for interview. This was particularly apparent when contacting local branches of national organisations. In total 7 interviews with interests groups were conducted. Of the seven interviewees, four represented groups that can be classed as rural community advocates, who have, in varying degrees, shown support for dispersed settlement patterns (Irish Rural Dwellers' Association, Irish Rural Link, Irish Farmers' Association, Irish Countrywomen's Association), and three represented groups that have publically criticised the continued construction of one-off housing (Friends of the Irish Environment, An Taisce, The Heritage Council).

While it was originally envisaged to interview representatives of local community groups within each of the four case-study areas, it was decided that this may

introduce an element of bias, given the large volume of such groups across each of the four counties and also the improbability of being able to produce an accurate spatial representation of all perspectives. Therefore, only interest groups who had come to national attention with regard to the issue of the sustainability of one-off housing were approached for interview. During the course of interviewing, the majority respondents from this category made mention of the local 'grass-roots' membership of their respective organisations. Furthermore, it is felt that the views and opinions of local representatives are also adequately represented by both a questionnaire survey distributed to individuals/households who have been both approved/refused planning permission for single rural dwellings (discussed in Section 3.3.3 (ii)) and by interviewing 21 elected local authority representatives.

Throughout the course of this thesis, quotations attributed to each of the interviewees in these groups are identified by the name of the organisation which they represent, e.g. An Taisce, Irish Farmers' Association (IFA), etc.

Interview Topics[8]

As the primary method of enquiry employed, the interviews had to include the respondents' perspective, experience and interpretation of the following:

- Position on dispersed rural housing
- The role of interest groups
- The importance of the rural housing issue in local elections
- Position and understanding of sustainable development
- Assessment of national policy relating to rural settlement
- Assessment of local policy relating to rural settlement – formulation
- Assessment of local policy relating to the promotion of sustainable rural settlement – operations and impact
- Implementing local policy – the role of planners

[8] For a master copy of interview questions, see Appendix 4.

The topics outlined above were addressed in varying range and detail depending upon the individuals/parties interviewed. Given the relatively small size of the target groups from which interviewees were selected, it was not possible to conduct pilot surveys on the sample because of the limited total number of interviews which could be arranged. However, the interview questions were tested for clarity of meaning and feedback from planning officers and councillors working outside the case-study areas and only minor changes were necessary prior to commencing the interview stage. In addition, the presence of the researcher eliminated any potential misinterpretation of questions as interviews were conducted.

Analysis

Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim following the meetings. The open-ended method of questioning meant that the data collected was of a qualitative nature thus making it quite difficult to order for analysis. To combat this problem, a computer problem *Nvivo* was employed. The transcripts were initially categorised by the broad topics of enquiry listed above, and then sub-categorised by key words in the questions. This allowed for relationships and discrepancies in answering to be established both within and between each interviewee category. Following this, the entire dataset was categorised by key words/responses which had emerged as having significance during the first stage of analyses. This enabled relationships and patterns in the data, which may have been overlooked if using a more structured interview format, to be established.

The data in this thesis is ordered and discussed according to the groups of respondents, firstly in relation to their particular opinions on a given topic and then with regard to their reasons for having these opinions. This allowed for contrasts in opinion within each category to be highlighted and patterns in answering relating to, *inter alia*, political allegiance, external influences and organisation affiliation to be discussed.

This approach was chosen, as it was most suited in allowing for opinions to be expressed and interpretations of the key topics to be documented without restriction. The conversational interview style allowed for options to be recorded before they had been rationalised and this was apparent in many instances, usually when topics were revisited. Given the aims of this topic, frank, uncensored responses were of primary importance.

3.3.3 (ii) Questionnaire Survey[9]

In order to achieve the fifth research aim and gain an empirical insight into the consequences for the individual of the power held by the county manager and his officers in planning issues, this study aimed to document the perspectives of those who had experienced of the outcomes of the planning system relating to single rural dwellings.

A postal survey was deemed the most appropriate method in achieving this aim as it enabled for the anonymous distribution to a geographically dispersed (predominantly) rural population across each case-study area. This cross-sectional survey was sent to a sample of individuals/households who received a decision regarding their application for the construction of a one-off dwelling in 2005.

Construction of a Sampling Frame

The total population, from which a sample frame was constructed, was established by reviewing all planning files for the year 2005 in each of the case-study area. File numbers were noted and then placed in one of two categories: *Application Approved* or *Application Refused*. The target sample size was set at 35 households who had been refused planning permission in each case-study authority. For comparative purposes a postal survey was also distributed to households in Co. Clare who have been approved planning permission for a one-off dwelling in 2005 (target sample size=35).

[9] For completed questionnaire survey forms for both refused and approved applicants, see Appendix 5 and Appendix 6.

Similar to random sampling, systematic sampling was employed when compiling a sampling frame. This was considered the most appropriate system given that the population of potential respondents was logically homogeneous and the chosen sample interval would not, therefore, hide any potential patterns. Considering the accepted general response rate for postal surveys (c. 18-20%), and the total population of potential respondents, a sample unit of 5 was chosen, allowing for the target sample-size to be comfortably reached. The starting point, chosen at random between 1 and 5, was 2. Therefore the 2nd planning file, and thereafter every 5th file, was chosen for inclusion in the sampling frame.

Key Issues Identified for Inclusion

The focus in designing the survey was centred on capturing the individuals' experience and perspective of the planning system in place in their local authority. Firstly, the key themes/issues for inclusion were identified. These included establishing:

- Whether the applicant met the criteria necessary to apply to build a single rural dwelling, as set out in the County Development Plan of the local authority in question
- The previous planning history of the site in question
- The links of the applicant to the local community in which planning permission was sought
- The applicant's reasons for selecting the site in question
- The consideration given by the applicant to alternative housing options
- The extent to which the applicant utilised the planning services available to them during the application process
- The use of third-party representation during the application process

In the case of respondents who were approved planning permission for a single dwelling, there were two further key issues of importance: the (proposed) occupancy of the site now that permission has been granted and whether the construction stage has commenced/been completed.

In the case of respondents who were refused planning permission for a single dwelling, it was necessary to establish the consequences of this decision in terms of the loss of benefits which would have accrued had permission been granted and also the options which were availed of in light of refusal, for example, the submission of an amended application, an appeal to An Bord Pleanála and/or approaching a local representative for assistance.

Questions relating directly to the concepts of sustainable development and the sustainability of one-off housing were deliberately omitted from the questionnaire survey for a number of reasons. Firstly, the concept of sustainable development, as applied to rural one-off housing, is difficult to convey in a postal questionnaire survey. Secondly, the primary focus of this thesis was to elicit respondents' opinions on the impact and consequences, if any, of their interactions with the planning system in their application for permission to construct a single rural dwelling. Thirdly, the parameters of the questionnaire survey and the styling of the questions which were included in the final draft are in keeping with the general criteria considered a necessity for the sustainable development of rural one-off housing construction, both at national and local level.

Survey Design

Following the identification and analysis of the core issues to be addressed, survey questions were developed to engage the respondents accordingly. Given the large volume of surveys intended to be retrieved, questions were constructed, where possible, to be closed-ended in style. This ensured a greater consistency of response across respondents and meant that the resultant quantitative data was easier and faster to tabulate. Closed-ended questions are also known to be most popular with respondents, especially important when administering a postal survey which has the poorest response rate of all survey types. However, given that closed-ended questions tend to limit the breath of responses, multiple-response questions (generally utilising a rating system) were also employed, were necessary, in the survey.

Also, considering the questionnaire survey was intended to elicit responses detailing experiences and perspectives of the planning system with which the respondents' were engaged, it was important to incorporate open-ended questions into the survey design. Where appropriate, these questions were included as follow-on questions to closed-ended or multiple-response questions to reduce the level of difficultly involved in tabulating and synthesising the responses.

Distribution of the Survey

Initially, a pilot survey was distributed to 60 households in Co. Clare (30 refused permission, 30 approved permission) with the sample systematically selected from the sampling frame. The responses received highlighted no issues with misinterpretation of questions or problems with the format of the survey so no changes were deemed necessary when proceeding to survey distribution stage.

The survey was initially to be administered in five phases, 35 questionnaires to be distributed to each of the case study areas in each phase (35 refused permission, 35 approved permission in the case of Co. Clare). The number of surveys distributed in each phase was related to the anticipated response rate for postal surveys. However, in the case of the surveys administered to households where planning permission for a single rural dwelling was refused, a sixth phase of distribution was necessary, in each of the four case-study areas, in order to meet the target sample size of 35. The following table lists the response rates for each of the case-study areas. Given that no changes to the questionnaire survey were made between the pilot and actual survey distribution stages, responses from the pilot surveys in Co. Clare were also included in the final analysis.

Table 3.3 Survey Response Rates

Case-study area	Co. Clare	Co. Clare	Co. Galway	Co. Roscommon	Co. Cavan
Survey type	Approved	Refused	Refused	Refused	Refused
No. distributed	175	200	200	200	200
• Incl. pilot	205	230			
No. Returned	37	41	36	38	38
• Incl. pilot	40	45			
Response rate	21.14	20.5	18	19	19
• Incl. pilot	19.51	19.57			

Problems Encountered

The major issue of concern when distributing the pilot survey was the low response rate (10% 'approved permission' surveys Co. Clare; 13.34% 'refused permission' surveys Co. Clare). Initially, in the pilot survey stage, information regarding postal addresses was acquired from the planning files. The addressed that was used was the existing address of the applicant on the file if permission was refused and, if planning permission was granted, the site address of the proposed dwelling. However, this was an untrustworthy system, as the refused applicant may have moved to different location, and in the case of the approved applicant, the construction of the proposed dwelling may not have commenced. Options for improving the response rate were considered, including incorporating an on-line web-link to the survey with the postal surveys distributed as well as involving local councillors in the distribution of the survey. These methods were eventually disregarded as they were thought to introduce an unwarranted element of bias in the selection of respondents.

Instead, to increase the response rate, it was decided to employ the electoral register, in conjunction with the telephone directory and addresses obtained from planning files. Planning files selected for survey distribution, using the systematic sampling method, had to have an address which could be cross-matched with, at least, two of the above sources in order for a survey to be administered. These

measures improved the survey response rate considerably while minimising the degree of bias introduced to the research.

Analysing Questionnaire Survey Responses

The surveys were analysed using comparative analysis. The findings from the questionnaire surveys were subjected to simple statistical analysis and the results displayed visually on graphs. This allowed for the similarities and differences between the groups from the four case-study authorities, who had been refused permission for a single dwelling, to be identified. Particular attention was paid to variances between the two planning authorities who were considered to be operating a strict planning regime with regard to one-off housing construction (counties Clare and Galway), and the two authorities who were considered to have a more lax approach to one-off housing (counties Cavan and Roscommon).

This approach also enabled for the identification of similar and divergent trends in responses between the group from Co. Clare, who had been approved planning permission, and the other four groups who had been refused planning permission for one-off housing (counties Clare, Galway, Roscommon and Cavan).

3.4. Compilation, Interpretation and Utilisation of Existing Data

To allow for a visual analysis of the work carried out by planning officers, in refusing and granting applications for one-off housing, this project utilised existing data available from various sources:

1. Planning files relating to refused and approved (Co. Clare) applications for one-off housing in case-study areas (2005)

   Using the GPS references which are supplied with every planning application and which detail the location of the proposed dwelling; it was possible to convert these coordinates to the Irish National Grid (ING) system. This process

was completed for each relevant 2005 planning file, thus allowing for a comprehensive dataset to be constructed for each case-study area. This information was then imported to a GIS software package (*ArcView*) which allowed for patterns of refusal to be visualised on maps of the case-study areas.

2. CSO data (Census 2002 and 2006) relating to population size of towns and cities in case-study authorities

   By converting coordinates of towns and cities, obtained using *Google Earth*, to the ING system it was been possible to map the urban centres within the case-study areas detailing population size. An urban centre was defined using census criteria; a cluster of 50 or more occupied dwellings not more than twenty metres apart. This work provided further information for analysis of dispersed-settlement patterns: the growth/decline of villages (census towns) in the period between census' and also patterns of single rural dwelling approval/refusal rates in the immediate areas surrounding these centres, thus aiding the identification of strict/lenient planning practices

3.5 Conclusion

Given the core research questions of this thesis, upon which this thesis is based, the important factors to be considered with regard to the formulation and activation of sustainable development policies as applied to rural settlement patterns and the implications of inconsistencies in the operation of such policies, it was necessary to ensure the case-study areas represented the variety of planning regimes in Ireland, given that a significant proportion of this research occurs at local level. Therefore, as documented, detailed attention was applied to the selection criteria for case-study authorities. This ensured that the local authorities which were chosen, namely Co. Clare, Co. Galway, Co. Roscommon and Co. Cavan, enabled the examination of the core themes of this research, in environments illustrative of the complexities of local planning regimes in

contemporary Ireland, both strict (e.g. Co. Clare and Co. Galway) and lenient (e.g. Co. Roscommon and Co. Cavan), with regard to conditions attached to applying for, and granting, permission to construct a single rural dwelling.

By far the most challenging aspect of commencing the primary research agenda of this project was identifying and soliciting interviews from the four groups of candidates deemed as suitable authorities on the subject matter, namely: central-government elected representatives/central-government officials; local authority elected representatives; local government planning officials; and interest groups. However, initial contact difficulties, particular with regard to the central-government elected representatives/central-government officials' category and the local government planning officials group were overcome.

The information provided by interviewees in each of the 4 categories, in addition to the responses supplied in the questionnaire surveys enabled the examination of sustainable development, as a central concept in rural spatial planning and its application (as policy) to rural settlement patterns, from the perspective of the various actors/agents involved with the Irish planning system. In addition, the methodological framework allows for an examination of the effects of the outcomes of planning processes for lay-people who have been involved with the system.

Overall, the three methodological strategies employed in this research, semi-structured interviews, questionnaire surveys, and the use of existing data to compile maps for the visual representation of spatial patterns, allowed for the aims and objectives of this thesis to be operationalised and realised.

CHAPTER FOUR:
THE PERSPECTIVE OF CENTRAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AND CENTRAL GOVERNMENT ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES

4.0. Preamble

One of the primary aims of this research project was to examine the processes by which policies relating to sustainable development and rural settlement patterns are formulated at central government level. It was, therefore, necessary to document the experiences and perspectives of central-government officials with an in-depth knowledge of, and practical experience in, formulating national policy relating to rural settlement structures. Central government elected representatives were also selected for inclusion in this interview category, given their detailed knowledge of the processes involved in central-government policy formulation and also their connection with local government through their constituencies. In total, there were seven interviews conducted; three with central government officials working in the DoEHLG and four central-government elected representatives.[10] In order to assess the perspectives of these interviewees with regard to the level of success which has been achieved in promoting the sustainable development of rural settlement patterns, issues relating to local policy formation and activation are addressed in this chapter.

This chapter also examines the operational agenda of this category of interviewee with regard to their role as national policy decision-makers. Given that the acquisition of the position is through election raises the question of whether central government elected representatives (TDs) are susceptible to the pluralist agendas of vested/voluntary actors, such as interest groups who have positioned themselves as either being for or against one-off housing construction. Conversely, central

[10] Quotations in this chapter attributed to central-government officials are denoted by the letters CGO and a number which represents the individual interviewee, e.g. CGO1. Quotations attributed to central-government elected representatives are denoted by the letters CGER and a number which represents the individual interviewee, e.g. CGER1.

government officials are not elected to their posts, instead occupying a professional position. This may suggest less susceptibility to outside interests as suggested by the managerialist thesis of thought. Rather, such professional occupations are considered to be largely unreceptive to civic activism.

4.1. The Personal Position of Central Government Officials and Central Government Elected Representatives with regard to One-Off Housing

Each of the seven interviewees made statements to the effect that one-off housing was the least sustainable of all rural housing options. A number of reasons were put forward for this assessment including the adverse environmental and economic costs in terms of landscape amenity, groundwater pollution and service provision. Interviewees also made reference to the social isolation associated with dispersed settlement patterns.

Perhaps the most notable feature identified when examining these responses, was that the majority of interviewees qualified their answers with reference to aspects of both national and local policy. Three interviewees commented that allowing for the unrestricted construction of one-off housing is inconsistent with the prescriptions of the NSS, the prime objective of which is to promote sustainable and balanced regional development and spatial functioning: '*I realise that there is the need for one-off housing in some instances but the construction of single dwellings must be in keeping with the parameters set out in the National Spatial Strategy. Under no circumstances should urban-generated housing be allowed in areas surrounding cities and towns and rural-generated housing in these areas needs to be closely monitored*' (CG01).

While all seven interviewees were of the opinion that one-off housing was the least sustainable rural housing option, three were also of the opinion that the sustainability of one-off housing was dependent on the proposed locations of their

construction: '*One-off housing may actually help to consolidate an area of dispersed settlement where there are problems with population decline. However, the opposite applies in areas where there is a strong urban influence. Additional housing would only add to the problem*' (CGER1).

4.2. The Role of Interest Groups at National and Local Level

4.2.1. Influence at National Level

Each of the seven interviewees were of the opinion that interest groups had a significant role to play: '*Interest groups do and have played a role in guiding the content of national policy relating to rural settlement structures, and the input is welcomed as it helps us to prepare policies which are best suited to the needs of Irish society*' (CGO3).

Several interviewees pointed out that there were formal systems in place for public consultation and participation during the preparation of the NSS: '*The formal channels of public participation are where interest groups' attention are best placed for voicing their opinions and concerns relating to national policy direction*' (CGER1).

Four interviewees spoke of the formal channels available to interest groups for voicing their views on rural settlement structure and spatial strategy during the NSS preparation process. Public participation during this process was possible at various stages during the preparation of the NSS. Initially, individuals and groups could become involved in the decision of what subject matters should be included in the NSS following the publication of a public report outlining the scope of issues to be included. As one interviewee stated; '*Interest groups were able to respond in written form to this consultation report citing issues they felt deserved emphasis in the strategy or highlighting issues which they felt were of importance but had been overlooked at that stage. These responses were of great help with regard to the identification of issues which required attention'* (CG01). The

research stage also involved interaction with interest groups and *'many were of great assistance with regard to data collection and analysis'* (CG01). The third phase of the preparation process was dedicated to public consultation. A national conference and regional roadshows were held and a public consultation paper was published setting out the primary objectives of the strategy and the methodology to be employed in implementing it. Over 250 submissions from individuals, interest groups and other concerned parties were received in response to this paper. Also during this phase, consultative forums were established to draw on the perspectives of interested parties. The feedback from the consultative paper and the forums were used in the finalising the NSS.

With regard to interest groups influencing the content of the *Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines for Planning Authorities* (RHGs), several interviewees cited the publication and content of these guidelines as '*an example of the government succumbing to public pressure'* (CGER3). One interviewee commented that *'the pro- one-off housing lobby mounted an excellent campaign and made full use of media outlets. The government are obviously elected to their position and I think the publication of these guidelines was illustrative of the government attempting to gain favour with the public particularly given the timing, two months prior to a local election*' (CGER2).

Another interviewee remarked that the timing of the publication of the RHGs was very significant: '*There was a high level of dissatisfaction with central government at that time and the rural housing debate was at its height. The government realised that the public dissatisfaction with central government would result in the loss of local seats. So, not surprisingly, the draft RHGs, which were designed to appease the public, were published eight weeks before the local elections*' (CGER3).

4.2.2. Influence at Local Level

Turning to the role of interest groups at local level, each of the seven interviewees felt that interest groups were in a position to exert '*a great deal of influence*' with regard to rural housing policies and settlement strategies at local level.

The formal channels available to interest groups for making submissions relating to rural housing policy during the CDP formulation process were mentioned by a number of interviewees. However, by far the primary topic of discussion related to the direct lobbying of local councillors by interest groups. In this regard, the majority of interviewees commented on the dual role of councillors as elective representatives and policy makers for the local authority: '*Councillors are sitting ducks for lobbyists at local level especially if these groups manage to drum up local support because they attract the attention of councillors and can promote their agenda*' (CGER3).

Another issue raised by two interviewees was the priorities of councillors at local level. One commented that '*Many councillors seem more focused on maintaining the support of the electorate than on any of the other duties that comprise their role as councillors. In this sense pro one-off housing groups have it easy because a large proportion of the public are against any form of restrictions on one-off housing and councillors, in a significant number of local authorities, seem to be acknowledging this with the rural housing policies they are producing*' (CG03).

4.2.3. The Significance of the Rural Housing Issue during Local Election Campaigns

Finally in this section, interviewees were asked to comment on the extent to which the rural housing debate manifested itself at local level during the 2004 local elections campaign. However, four of the seven interviewees stated that they did not feel they were in a position to comment due to a lack of awareness of the significance of rural housing as an election issue.

Each of the interviewees who felt they were in a position to comment stated that they did not believe it to have been one of the major issues, one interviewee commenting that '*I think the government has succeeded in taking this issue off the agenda with the introduction of the Rural Housing Guidelines. While rural housing may have been an issue for those in the process of applying for permission for a one-off house, or those who intend to apply, it was an issue which attracted special or particular attention in rural areas*' (CGER2).

In summary of this section, central government respondents believe that interest groups do have an important role to play in guiding the direction of national policy, citing formal channels for communication as the best route for exerting influence. However, the influence exerted by interest groups at national level through informal channels has been acknowledged. Interestingly, this recognition was voiced by the TD interviewees who are elected to their position and not the central government officials who occupy professional positions.

This category also asserted the ability of interest groups to exert influence at local level. A topical issue was the dual role of councillors as both elected representatives and local-policy decision makers. Yet, while this point was raised by central government elected representatives, this issue failed to be mentioned with regard to their own situation at national level. Also, despite the perception of outside influence on local policy formulation, rural housing was not construed to be an issue of concern amongst the electorate during local election campaigns, perhaps as a result of successful lobbying at national level for changes to national policy relating to rural housing.

4.3. Position and Understanding of Sustainable Development

4.3.1. Defining Sustainable Development

The definitions of sustainable development provided by interviewees were very general in nature and provided little embellishment. In addition, the definitions put

forward were well rounded in that each of the interviewees, without prompting, made reference to all three dimensions which, together, comprise sustainable development: environmental protection, economic growth and societal cohesion. One commented that '*Sustainable development is development which promotes economic prosperity, ensures social inclusion and does not compromise the integrity of the natural environment*' (CGO3).

It was suggested that while the overall aims of sustainable development remain constant, the importance placed on the three individual dimensions it encompasses can change depending on a number of factors, for example, the background, education and outlook of an individual and that it was the role of policy-makers to ensure that the correct balance between environmental, societal and economic considerations was achieved when formulating rural settlement strategies.

It was also suggested that geographic location is a major factor in determining the weighting placed on the three dimensions of sustainable development, as one interviewee remarked: '*the concept is, and has to be interpretive given that it is applied to a wide variety of environmental, societal and economic situations, for example with one-off housing, the cost of environmental degradation, even if minimal, has to be considered against the social and economic benefit of introducing new houses into areas of dispersed settlement which are suffering from population decline*' (CGER1).

4.3.2. Sustainable Development and One-off Housing – The Economic Dimension

With regard to the economic dimension of sustainable development, each of the seven interviewees were in agreement that one-off housing was '*a drain on the local economy*' (CGER4), particularly in terms of service provision. One interviewee commented that '*The cost of providing services, like group water schemes, to areas of dispersed settlement is many times greater than the costs associated with the provision of similar services in areas of concentrated residential settlement like towns of villages*' (CGO3).

Several interviewees suggested that the continued construction of one-off housing was having a detrimental effect on the structure of local rural towns and villages with regard to falling population numbers: '*Rural towns and villages need to be consolidated. Yet, lax planning regimes, with regard to one-off housing, have meant that many people are choosing to build in the countryside, given that it is a cheaper housing option. This situation is not conducive to attracting employment to an area, nor is it conducive to maintaining the services and facilities that are currently in place*' (CGO2)

The micro-economics of living in a dispersed dwelling were also mentioned by two interviewees. As one remarked; '*People who live in single dwellings incur a lot of extra costs that urban dwellers don't have to deal with, for example, the cost of maintaining water wells and septic tanks. Also, you have to consider the transport costs that people who live in rural one-off housing are faced with given that they are almost exclusively reliant on the car for all journeys. These costs add up*' (CGER4).

Three interviewees also suggested that one-off housing was having a negative effect on one of the most established industries in rural Ireland, that of tourism. One interviewee remarked that '*The proliferation of one-off housing has affected the character of many rural towns and villages, not to mention the scenic beauty of the more isolated rural landscapes. The rural landscape is a profitable resource in terms of rural tourism and it's one which we are completely disregarding with the haphazard planning regimes currently in place. Rural tourists are seeking out more remote locations to experience the rural Ireland the tourism industry promotes to the detriment of many towns and villages who have been affected by urban sprawl*' (CGER2).

4.3.3. Sustainable Development and One-off Housing – The Environmental Dimension

With regard to the environmental dimension of sustainable development, the primary focus of interviewees was the impact one-off housing is having on rural landscapes and the environmental integrity of rural areas.

All interviewees were in agreement that given the wide geographical range over which dispersed settlements are spread, the potential for negative environmental impact was very considerable. One interviewee remarked that '*You only have to think of the volume of individual septic tanks that are in existence, close to half a million and this is increasing by around 15,000 every year. This is not sustainable, the potential to pollute groundwater is enormous, and particularly when you consider that the majority of local authorities don't have a monitoring system in place to ensure the maintenance of these septic tanks. Also, many local authorities do not properly veto the assessors who carry out the site characterisation testing on proposed dwellings*' (CGO1). There are therefore major long-term ramifications which are, perhaps, inadequately appreciated by those favouring greater tolerance from local planners with regard to the development of dispersed settlement.

Interviewees also commented on the need to protect the environment as a visual amenity. One interviewee remarked that '*One-off housing should fit in with the surrounding landscape not dominate it. I can't understand how some of the monstrosities which are dotted around the country were granted permission*' (CGER2). Another commented: '*The building of one-off housing needs to be strictly regulated, more so than at present, to protect and maintain the visual landscape of rural Ireland. Consideration should be given at national and local level to promoting the other housing options available to people who wish to live in the countryside, such as grants for individuals willing to buy existing single dwellings or restore run-down houses*' (CGER3).

A final issue relating to the environmental dimension of sustainable development was connected to the reliance on car use for all journeys by those living in one-off housing: '*This has serious implications for the environment in terms of pollution through emissions. Another factor which needs to be considered is that dispersed rural settlement offers very little possibility for the use of more sustainable modes of transport, such as bicycles or buses*' (CGER1).

4.3.4. Sustainable Development and One-off Housing – The Social Dimension

The primary focus, with regard to the social dimension of sustainable development, was the social cohesion of rural areas. Each of the interviewees were in agreement that allowing one-off housing construction to occur in an area with the sole aim of maintaining the rural community was not guaranteed to be successful. One interviewee commented that '*People who have never lived in a rural area have little idea of the realities of rural living, the lack of services and facilities and the isolation. It's common for people who find themselves in this situation to sell up and return to urban living when they realise that this lifestyle is not for them*' (CGER2). Another remarked: '*You see countless instances of people who move into rural areas but don't contribute to the social fabric of the area at all, they continue to work and socialise in the towns where they are from*' (CGER3).

All interviewees were in agreement that clustered rural settlements were far more sustainable in terms of social inclusion and negated a common occurrence in areas of dispersed settlement, that of age-related isolation.

To summate this section, the two actor groups within this category hold similar perspectives with regard to their position and understanding of sustainable development as a concept. Single rural dwellings are considered to be a drain on the economy. Environmentally, the potential for degradation, both aesthetic and physical are considered significant. Construction of one-off housing is not believed to be beneficial to promoting social cohesion in rural areas.

4.4. Assessment of National Policy Relating to Sustainable Rural Settlement Patterns

Interviewees were invited to discuss both the *National Spatial Strategy for Ireland, 2002-2020* (NSS; published2002) and the *Sustainable Rural Housing, Guidelines for Planning Authorities* (RHGs; published 2005) in relation to the components pertaining to rural settlement structure. Interviewees were asked to provide details on the processes involved in the preparation of the NSS, from its conception to its publication while providing an assessment on the successes and drawbacks of this policy framework in terms of the promotion of sustainable rural settlement patterns. They were also asked to provide an assessment of some of the critiques of the NSS and were asked to comment on the benefits and shortcomings associated with the introduction of the RHGs.

4.4.1. The National Spatial Strategy – The Formulation Process

This section is devoted to questioning the processed involved in preparing the policy framework for the NSS. This was to include information on parties involved in the preparation and those involved in drafting the approved strategy. Not surprisingly, the central government officials were most knowledgeable in this area and were very detailed in their answering. The TDs provided a more generalised account. The following text is an overview of the various stages involved in the creation of the NSS, summarised from the interviews.

'*The primary aim of developing a national spatial strategy was to achieve greater balance in regional development in Ireland. The strategy was over three years in the making, from conception to publication*' (CGO2). The NSS preparation model comprised four stages. The first of these was the scoping stage which was initiated with the publication of a public consultation paper entitled '*The National Spatial Strategy – What are the Issues'* in early 2000. '*This paper laid out a number of core areas for consideration by the public. These related to spatial planning and development and commentators were asked to evaluate and provide feedback, and also highlight other issues which they felt needed to be considered*' (CGO1). The

feedback received was used in preparing a methodological framework for drawing up the NSS which was detailed in a report, '*The National Spatial Strategy Scope and Delivery'*, published in May 2000. '*This paper laid out the objectives and challenges of the strategy. From a rural perspective, the points of interest related to rural development, particularly infrastructural and residential development. The thinking was to promote the continued development of Ireland's diversifying rural economy while providing protection for the environment and cultural heritage and also promoting social inclusion. So the strategy's aims were always focused on the ideal of sustainable rural development*' (CGO1).

The second stage of the NSS formulation, which took place in the second half of 2000, was devoted to researching the existing spatial patterns and trends in Ireland. Relevant information relating to Irish spatial structure was collected, analysed and laid out in reports which focused on different aspects under consideration, for example, travel patterns and land use.

The third stage of the NSS formulation process involved categorising the information collected in the research phase and the drawing up of policy papers based on the findings. The objective of these papers was to '*evaluate the different options for balanced regional development taking into consideration the primary objective of ensuring sustainable development and then come up with a range of policy recommendations for inclusion in the strategy*' (CGO1). This phase has previously been discussed in detail in Section 4.2.1.

The final stage of preparing the NSS entailed the preparation of the final draft. The submissions obtained in phase three were used in the process of finalising the NSS.

Interviewees were asked to cite the various actors who had been involved in the various stages of the NSS formulation process. Interviewees confirmed the involvement of a large number of participants. These participants can be classed into two groups, those involved in an advisory or consultative capacity and those

involved in an operational role, for example, external researchers and specialist in relevant fields, such as cartographers and demographers.

With regard to the first of these groups, one interviewee remarked: '*the preparation of the National Spatial Strategy was a collaborate process. The consultative forums allowed for the participation of various interested parties, including, the regional and local authorities, the social partners and other groups, for example, environmental groups and those involved in the planning professions*' (CGO2).

Agents involved in an operational capacity were utilised in the completion of background research and the preparation of associated reports: '*Outside consultants are brought in when the level of expertise required, for example to conduct specific research or analyse specific information, is not available within the Spatial Planning Unit. There was also the issue of adhering to the timeframe so external assistance was necessary*' (CGO1). Relevant parties were also consulted during the research stage; '*research relating to infrastructure and services would have required the input of the ESB and telecommunications companies amongst others*' (CGO2).

With regard to the drafting of the NSS for publication, the following interview extract, provides an overview of the details supplied in discussions with interviewees: '*The process of finalising the strategy was overseen by a steering group which was made up of representative of government departments who had policy and functional interests in the strategy. The chair of this group was the Assistant Secretary of the Planning and Development Division* [DoEHLG]. *The actual writing of the policy framework was undertaken by a technical working group, operating within the Spatial Planning Unit* [DoEHLG], *made up of planning officers and experts in policy formulation. An advisory group, comprising experts in the fields of regional development and spatial planning, were also on hand during the final drafting stages to advise on the structure and content details of the strategy*' (CGO1).

4.4.2. The Implementation of the National Spatial Strategy

This section examines a number of issues relating to the National Spatial Strategy's implementation which have come under public and media scrutiny. The first of these relates to the concept of sustainable development. Interviewees were asked if the fact that sustainable development, as a planning concept, does not have a statutory definition has restricted the promotion of sustainable rural settlement strategies as laid out in the NSS.

Each of the seven interviewees were in agreement that the lack of a statutory definition of sustainable development in national planning and development policies was not a factor which affected the promotion of sustainable rural settlement patterns. One interviewee commented that '*There is no feasible way that sustainable development could be legally defined in planning policy. There is a huge diversity of rural environments and situations in Ireland which must be catered for in rural settlement policy. A legal definition of sustainable development would not cater for these variations and could lead to policy being applied over-rigidly or incorrectly, which would have an adverse effect on the sustainable development of rural Ireland resulting in an increased imbalance between the east and the west* [of Ireland]' (CGER4). Another observed that '*The objectives of the National Spatial Strategy were established within a defined context of sustainable development which was detailed in the Scope and Delivery report. Environmental sustainability was described as living within the capacity of natural environment systems. Economic sustainability was defined as ensuring continued prosperity and employment opportunities and social sustainability, the ensuring of social inclusion and personal well-being. These principles of sustainable development are intended to be carried through for local implementation of the National Spatial Strategy*' (CGO1).

A second issue raised with interviewees was the criticism that urban centres are the driving force of regional development in the NSS, which results in the marginalisation of rural areas. All the interviewees voiced opposition to this criticism, one having commented that '*Urban centres have to be the focus in order*

to drive regional development. These centres must be consolidated to attract industry and for viable service provision, not just for the benefit of these urban centres but also for their rural hinterlands' (CGER3). Another remarked: '*The objective of the National Spatial Strategy is to strengthen settlement patterns in a manner which is environmentally sustainable, distributes economic growth and its benefits across the regions and creates a resurgence in rural areas and smaller urban centres. Allowing the unrestrained growth of dispersed settlement forms does not comply with these objectives and will affect the cohesion of towns and villages*' (CGO2).

Interviewees were asked to assess the success of the NSS both in terms of its formulation and implementation. Each agreed that the NSS was, in theory, an excellent policy framework for the promotion of sustainable development and spatial functioning across Ireland. One success of the strategy, mentioned by two interviewees, related to the increased co-ordination of local authorities with regard to the formulation of county and local area plans: '*Policy makers at local level are drawing on the same policy framework when drafting local planning and development policy, including their rural settlement strategies. This had led to a greater level of uniformity in spatial functionings across Ireland as local authorities move towards an ethos of sustainable development*' (CGO3).

However, five interviewees believed that while there had been an increase in uniformity of spatial planning across local authorities, a serious problem existed in many local authorities with regard to the relaxed and selective manner by which the prescriptions of the NSS, particularly in relation to residential settlement structure, were being translated and implemented into local policy. The first of these concerns related to the promotion of concentrated settlement patterns as the most sustainable settlement form, one interviewee having observed that '*A number of authorities have no restrictions on applications for dispersed housing other than the usual 'good planning' practice. This means that many towns and villages are nowhere near the critical mass necessary to attract economic benefits. This is directly associated with the levels of one-off housing been approved*' (CGO2). A

second concern related to the NSS centres for designated growth, known as gateways and hubs. It was suggested by three interviewees that a fundamental problem with the NSS was the large number of these centres included in the strategy: '*This was problematic from the start. There was an element of trying to please everyone. Growth should have been limited to a smaller number of urban centres so that attaining critical mass was actually realistic*' (CGER1). Another related point, mentioned by four interviewees was the total disregard on the part of local authorities for the growth of the designated gateway and hub urban centres as designated by the NSS for sustainable and balanced regional development; '*Local Authorities across the country are zoning vast amounts of land for residential development, which is detracting from the directive of the strategy, the promotion of growth in designated gateway and hub centres*' (CGO1).

Yet another issue raised by four of the interviewees related to the undermining impact on the NSS resulting from the programme of decentralisation of government departments which had been announced in December 2003. The following interview excerpt encapsulates the opinions of interviewees who spoke on the issue: '*Decentralisation ruined the credibility of the National Spatial Strategy. There were nine designated gateway urban centres and nine designated hub towns, yet the government made the decision to disperse their staff to over fifty different locations across the country which completely contradicted the strategy. It was an attempt to keep everybody happy which completely backfired*' (CGER2). A final point, mentioned by five interviewees was that the NSS was an extremely ambitious work; '*The National Spatial Strategy was essentially an aspirational piece of work given that the funds were not available to support its implementation and probably won't be for a very long time to come*' (CGER3).

4.4.3. Assessment of the Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines for Planning Authorities

In the final topic of discussion relating to national policy, interviewees were asked to provide an assessment of the *Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines for Planning Authorities* (RHGs). The majority of interviewees agreed that the

categorisation of rural areas according to population pressure and other relevant factors represented a useful addition to the national framework guiding the sustainable development of rural Ireland: '*The guidelines were necessary as rural housing policy was, at the time of their introduction, being operated very rigidly, to the detriment of people with genuine rural housing needs. Even though dispersed housing may not be the most sustainable of housing options, it is a prominent settlement form in rural Ireland. The guidelines allow for differentiation between urban- and rural-generated-housing which means that the housing needs of rural dwellers can be met*' (CGER1).

However, two interviewees cited serious problems with the implementation of the RHGs '*The guidelines marked a step backwards with regard to sustainable development and spatial functioning in rural Ireland. Many local authorities have used these guidelines to implement lax policies with regard to one-off housing construction and are failing to apply the differentiations set out in the guidelines relating to rural typologies and urban- and rural-generated housing need*' (CGO1).

Several interesting points, relating to the manner by which national policy is formulated and implemented were raised in this section. While it was acknowledged that advisory groups such as interest groups do have an important role to play in national policy formulation, particular attention was placed, by the two actor groups within this category, on actors/agents who performed an operational role, with the importance of the level of expertise they brought to the formulation process heavily emphasised. It is perceived that the roll-out of the NSS has led to greater uniformity in rural spatial planning at local level. There is, however, a belief that local authorities are acting in a relaxed manner with regard to the way the prescription of the NSS are being implemented into local policy. The central government decentralisation programme is also considered to have been flawed, and to have undermined the implementation of the NSS, given the large amount of urban centres to which civil servants were relocated.

4.5. Assessment of Local Policy relating to Rural Settlement Patterns – The Policy Formulation Process

This section documents the evaluation of the formulation of local policy relating to rural settlement structure. Interviewees were also asked to provide views on the extent to which the personal opinions of local councillors actually influence the content of local rural housing strategy. Many of the issues cited by interviewees when discussing this topic were also covered in relation to the activation of national policy relating to rural settlement. The first of these, the manner by which local authorities have translated national policy locally, was a dominant and recurring theme.

Five of the seven interviewees stated that many local authorities had not paid due attention to the prescriptions of the NSS or given adequate attention to the RHGs in the development of the rural settlement strategy component of their CDPS. However, it was acknowledged by one interviewee that the current CDPs of the majority of local authorities were already in place at the time of the publication of the RHGs but he also stated that in many instances county councils had not yet drawn up a document to inform planning authorities of their role.

It was further suggested that the reasoning behind the apparent lack of attention paid to national policy direction was related to the dual role of elected representatives at local level, first as public advocates for their electorate but also as policy decision-makers within their functional areas: '*Councillors have the unenviable task of trying to keep the public happy so to ensure their re-election while also taking on the role of policy-makers whose directive is to promote sustainable rural development. Given the public derision towards any curtailing of one-off housing construction, this has to affect the detailing of rural settlement strategies. Councillors want to be seen as a voice for the public*' (CGER1).

Conversely, two interviewees did not believe that councillors' personal opinions or their political situation were influential factors in the drawing up of local rural-

settlement strategies; '*Councillors have a job to do in incorporating national policy for local use. Councillors are in the best position to do this as they are aware of social and economic needs, which they strive to accommodate, while ensuring the environmental security and stability of the county. Again, it's about getting the balance right. Councillors are attempting to realise the common good when formulating local policy and I don't think their personal opinions on one-off housing are a factor*' (CGER3).

A second issue, raised by two interviewees, related to the huge social, economic and environmental variations existing within a given county, which made it '*extremely difficult to implement a policy framework as generalised as the National Spatial Strategy*' (CGER4). One interviewee commented; '*The Rural Housing Guidelines have helped in the understanding of the manner by which the National Spatial Strategy is to be applied at local level. However, a level of flexibility is still necessary in policy at local level to take into account the various landscape and social and economic situations which come into play*' (CG03).

A final issue when discussing local policy formation relating to rural settlement, also mentioned by two interviewees, was the difficulty encountered in ensuring uniformity in rural settlement strategies across local authorities due the lack of a strong regional tier of government. The main issues raised are summarised in the following interview excerpt:

'*All of the work relating to rural settlement policies is expected to be translated directly from national level to local level. Regional uniformity in rural settlement strategies is, in theory, directed by the regional authorities, but, in reality, they are little more than an idea on a policy document when it comes to rural settlement direction. They are comprised of county council members from within the region and are financed by their constituent local authorities, so that says it all really. The system is unworkable given that the regional-authority members will prioritise the needs of their own county above all else and also the funding is not available, from the local authorities, to help make these regional authorities a viable tier of government'* (CGER2).

The dominant grievance in this section relates to the translation of national policy for local implementation, both the policy prescriptions and the perceived disregard for the growth of designated centres. The issue of a disproportionately high number of NSS growth centres was considered to be a situation which occurred due to the succumbing, by central government, to pressure from outside interests.

4.6. Assessment of the Application of Rural Settlement Policy at Local Level

Regarding the local need clause, each of the seven interviewees felt that it was a useful addition to local planning policy to prevent a proliferation of one-off housing construction, as one interviewee commented: '*When used in conjunction with the rural-area typologies, it ensures that only rural applicants with genuine housing need are eligible to apply to build in pressure areas, defined in the NSS as areas under strong urban influence and stronger rural areas. This clause is a necessity in local planning policy to ensure compliance with national policy*' (CGO1).

However, three interviewees expressed reservations with the manner by which the local need clause was being applied in certain local authorities. The main concerns of these interviewees is aptly summarised in the following interview extract: '*I am aware of a number of local authorities who have not yet mapped their functional areas with respect to the rural area typologies defined in the National Spatial Strategy and the Rural Housing Guidelines and yet, they are applying the local need clause to planning applications for single rural dwellings. This is very unfair on applicants. It suggests that these local authorities are picking and choosing components of national policy for inclusion in their rural settlement as they see fit. This has a serious knock-on effect for the vision of national spatial functioning, as defined in the National Spatial Strategy*' (CGER4).

Another issue, mentioned by two interviewees, also related to the association between the rural-area typologies and the local need clause. These interviewees were concerned that local-authority planning officers were '*paying little heed*' to the rural-area classifications and refusing applications for one-off housing, on the basis that applicants did not meet eligibility requirements in areas where the local need clause should not apply: '*We have local authorities where the local need clause is being applied far too severely. This does not meet the criteria for sustainable development either as environmental protection appears to have precedence over social cohesion and economic growth, to the detriment of rural communities. If this is to continue, there will be negative implications for the provision of services and facilities, for example, the closure of schools due to falling numbers*' (CGER1).

A second issue related to the occupancy clause. Again, each of the seven interviewees felt that the occupancy clause was a useful addition to national policy and of benefit in the promotion of the sustainable development of rural areas: '*This clause ensures that the applicant is committed to making the property their home and that they will be in a position to contribute to their local rural area, both in an economic and a social capacity*' (CGO2). However, several interviewees questioned the level of adherence to this clause: '*I am aware of numerous incidences where this clause has been broken through selling on the property or the transference of deeds and so on, but very little can be done because there just isn't the manpower in the council*' (CGER3). Another interviewee suggested that approved applications for single dwellings should be recorded each year using commencement notices showing that construction has occurred. He continued by noting that a follow-up should be conducted a number of years later and '*if the original applicant is found not to be living at the premises, a heavy fiscal penalty should be imposed*' (CGO1).

A third issue concerned the suggestion that government policy promoting village-type settlements had encouraged the development of large housing estates at the edge of towns and villages and that these were causing environmental problems

due to inadequate infrastructure. Each of the seven interviewees agreed that they were aware of such situations and that they had become a significant problem in many local authorities. However, the promotion of village-type settlements in national policy was not considered to have resulted in the environmental problems caused by inadequate infrastructure servicing new housing developments. Indeed, many of these developments were considered to be symbolic of a lack of regard, on the part of local authorities, for the prescriptions of the NSS: '*Local authorities have, in the past number of years, rezoned vast amounts of land, as residential use, in the immediate areas surrounding towns and villages. This has been happening at a rate far over and beyond what is required to meet housing needs and has been done at the behest of land owners and development interests. Then a developer comes in and gets planning permission for a housing estate, connects it up to the local authority mains, and low and behold, this is where all the problems start but by this stage the developer is long gone and a lot richer*' (CG01).

Interviewees suggested that the '*onus of blame for this situation must be placed solely at the feet of local authorities*' (CGO2) which should not grant planning permission for housing estates if there was inadequate infrastructure to facilitate them and a lack of financing to upgrade the existing infrastructure: '*The local authorities are to blame. They cite lack of funds as the reason why facilities have not been upgraded to cater for new developments but what are they doing with the development contributions? I realise that they don't have to show a connection between the development contribution paid and the work done to facilitate the development but, in instances where there are serious infrastructural weaknesses. At least a proportion of the contribution should be allocated towards rectifying the problem*' (CGO3).

A final issue which was raised relating to the problems associated with new housing estates at the edge of towns and villages concerned the lack of occupancy of such estates. One interviewee commented: '*So much land has been zoned and so many estates built, yet the demand is just not there to fill them. Many have been left lying vacant for long periods. This situation has led to the introduction of rent-*

to-buy schemes and other incentives by developers in an attempt to entice prospective buyers' (CGER2).

To summarise this section, the local need clause is considered to be a useful addition to rural housing policy to prevent the proliferation of one-off housing. However, there are some reservations with regard to manner by which the clause is being applied by certain local authorities. The inclusion occupancy clause is also perceived as a positive policy tool which can help promote sustainable rural residential development. Yet, questions have been raised regarding local adherence to this clause. A prominent issue raised at this juncture was the observation, by this category of interviewee, that central government policy promoting concentrated settlement has led to a situation whereby inadequately infrastructure housing are becoming common place in areas adjacent to rural towns and villages, some of which now resemble ghost towns.

4.7. Assessment of the Performance of Local Authority Planning Officers

This section of the interview documents opinions with regard to the assessment of the functions carried out by planning officers in their role as activators of rural housing policy.

The general consensus was that planning officers were carrying out their role adequately under what are often trying circumstances. The primary focus which emerged during this line of questioning was the difficulties faced by planning officers in performing their duties. The first of these pertained to their role as policy activators. It was suggested by two interviewees that planning officers were often forced to work within the confines of local rural settlement policy which falls below their own expectations of what constitutes sustainable rural development. One interviewee stated that this was due to a total disregard on the part of councillors for the policy recommendations put forward by planning

officers with respect to rural settlement: '*It must be extremely frustrating for planning officers to have their recommendations ignored by councillors who are not experts in planning matters and who are often politically driven. Planners are then forced into a situation where they have to make planning decisions based on flawed or inadequate policy*' (CG01).

Another point mentioned by three interviewees was the situation whereby councillors are entitled to make representations or enquiries, to the planning officer, on behalf of planning applicants seeking to build a one-off house: '*This situation is ridiculous. You have the people who are making the policy directing planning as to how or when it should be applied but planners are obliged to meet with them. This takes up a lot of time as well putting planners under stress to get decisions out on time. I've heard planners describe this situation as pure and utter harassment and I'm sure some have granted applications that they're uneasy about just to get councillors off their backs*' (CG02).

Three interviewees, all central government elected representatives, were critical of the manner in which planning officers assessed planning applications for single dwellings. It was suggested that, given their background and education, '*planners are naturally inclined to come down hard on planning applications for one-off housing*' (CGER1). As one interviewee commented: '*Planners are trained to see things in black and white, a development is either sustainable or unsustainable. However, local policy is designed to have an element of flexibility because of the variety of situations that present themselves at local level. Planners don't like this flexibility and tend to be quite strict when making decisions regarding one-off housing*' (CGER1). Another interviewee was even more strongly critical: '*Given the level of flexibility within local policy, some planners apply it in a strict and rigid manner when making planning decisions, which is not how it was intended. Even with the introduction of the Rural Housing Guidelines, which were intended to ease restrictions on one-off housing, the situation has not changed. Planners are able to use these guidelines to restrict one-off housing construction within their authorities, even in areas where it is not warranted. They need to implement*

more flexibility into their planning decisions. This is not to say that they're not performing well because, for the most part they are. They just need to be more realistic and in tune with local need rather than hiding behind their professional qualifications when making planning decisions' (CGER4).

In summary, both actor groups within this category believe planning officers are performing adequately giving the often frustrating circumstances which they encounter. Interestingly, the suggestion that planning officers, given their background, will be naturally inclined to take a negative view of single rural dwellings, and perhaps act in accordance with this attitude was put forward solely by central government elected representatives. This may be connected to the fact that, like planning officials, central government officials are employed for their professional expertise and do not see themselves, or others in similar occupations, as being swayed in the carrying out of their duties by personal outlooks.

4.8. The Role of An Bord Pleanála

Interviewees were asked whether they believed An Bord Pleanála to be a necessary component of the planning system. All agreed that An Bord Pleanála was a necessary body: '*It is essential to have an independent body to which an individual or group can appeal a planning decision which they feel is incorrect*' (CG02). One interviewee commented that the composition of the Board ensured that decisions were made in the best interest of the public: '*An Bord Pleanála is comprised of Board members who are representative of all sectors of society. The majority of these members are nominated by organisations representing professional, environmental, local government, rural and local development and general interests*' (CG01).

Four interviewees suggested that the main advantage of An Bord Pleanála was that it was removed from local-authority level, thus ensuring its independence: '*A lot of factors can come into play at local level which can have an effect on decisions*

made on planning applications, for example, a changeover of planning staff involved with a particular application during the decision-making process. An Bord Pleanála is removed from the local situation. Therefore, their decision is guaranteed to be unbiased and solely based on the suitability of the proposed development and its compliance with local policy and guidelines' (CGER3). It was also noted that An Bord Pleanála allows for third parties to appeal granted planning applications: '*It is a democratic right that a third-party should be able to appeal, whether this be an individual who, for whatever reason, feels that a local decision is incorrect, or the environmental watchdogs who monitor planning decisions at local authority level to ensure that they are in keeping with local and national policy*' (CG01).

Conversely, two interviewees stated that the fact that An Bord *Pleanála* is removed from the local area may not be beneficial to the applicant appealing the decision. They questioned the knowledge which an inspector representing An Bord Pleanála has of the location for which development is proposed: '*A planning inspector visiting an area to assess a planning appeal may be doing so for the first time and have little or no knowledge of the social economic background of the area in question*' (CGER4). In addition, it was suggested that the inspector may interpret local policy in a manner different to what was intended: '*They were not there when the County Development Plan was drawn up. They do not have the same detailed knowledge of an area as local councillors or planners so I don't feel that they are as qualified to make decisions*' (CGER4).

4.9. Conclusion

Central government officials play a key role in driving national policy relating to the sustainable development of rural settlement patterns and TDs, given their position, as central government representatives of local constituencies, are best placed to have informed opinions of the processes involved in national policy formations and the impact of their translation to national policy.

While accepting there was a need in some situations, this category of interviewee described one-off housing as the least sustainable of all housing, the unmanaged construction of which went against the prescriptions of national policy. Interviewees noted the adverse economic costs of dispersed settlement patterns including the cost of service provision and the fact that the continued proliferation of this form of settlement would affect the cohesion of small towns leading to a further loss of services. Given the geographical spread of dispersed settlement, it was described as the most likely to have far-reaching and disastrous environmental consequences, in terms of the effect on landscape character and also widespread pollution, for example, groundwater contamination. Social isolation was also mentioned as one of the adverse affects of dispersed settlement patterns.

However, it was also noted that the sustainability of one-off housing was dependent on the proposed location of construction given the huge variations at local level. It was these huge variations, in terms of population and housing pressures and also landscape sensitivity, which were cited as being one of the main difficulties associated with translating national policy for local use. In this sense, interviewees commented that it is imperative that local authorities pay serious attention to rural area typologies when developing CDPs as, in some situations, one-off housing may help to revitalise an area suffering from population decline.

Although, as interviewees noted, there is no statutory definition of sustainable development, the NSS was prepared in the context of ensuring a balanced approach to achieving the highest level of economic and social prosperity which can be contained within the capacity of environmental systems and ensure its protection. Under this framework, interviewees contend that urban centres have to be the focus of national policy.

This group of DoEHLG officials and TDs stated that interest groups have played a role at national level in guiding the content of the NSS and that their input was necessary to prepare policy that is best suited to the needs of society. It was suggested that the best channels for communication was through the formal system

for participation. This perspective is in keeping with the managerialist body of thought given the perceived importance, placed by this category, on the established formal structures for communication and on the management of public participation, while also highlighting the relationships between groups with 'qualitatively' different power.

Despite being deemed necessary to clarify the need for differentiating between rural areas experiencing different population pressures and also between rural- and urban-generated housing need, the publication of the RHGs following an intense public campaign against the prescription of the NSS relating to one-off housing were not, according to interviewees, solely concerned with ensuring the sustainable development of rural areas, but were also a timely attempt by the government to gain favour with the rural public in the run up to the local elections. The recognition of the influence exerted by outside agents was voiced by TDs, who are elected to position, and not by government officials. This finding adheres to pluralist theory whereby the State and its functionings are operated by politicians who are focused on building an electoral majority.

It was suggested that interest groups are in an excellent position to exert a high level of pressure and forward their agenda at local level due to the dual position of local councillors as public representatives and policy makers. The assertion that interest groups have the ability to influence rural housing policy at local level is again grounded in pluralism as emphasised by the perceived responsiveness of councillors to interest group demands.

According to interviewees, the success of the NSS is being compromised by the selective manner by which the prescriptions of the rural settlement strategy components of the NSS are being translated for local implementation in a significant number of authorities. It was contended that the introduction of the RHGs has exacerbated this problem as they promote a more lax regime than the one that was previously in place. These findings suggest the dominance if pluralist operations within these local authorities; the local State being a weak unit

controlled by external factors. However, it was also suggested that certain local authorities are operating too rigid a system with regard to one-off housing as the 'local need' clause is being applied in instances where the rural area typologies, as set out in the NSS and RHGs, have not, as yet, been implemented. In this instance and in keeping with the managerialist understanding of State, it appears the local decision makers are adopting their own agenda as managers of planning policy formulation and implementation.

Interviewees commented that planning officers at local level are operating under difficult circumstances, within the confines of local policy that falls below their own abilities and expectations. In addition, they were described as being overworked with regard to the volume of applications they receive and must constantly hear representations from councillors on behalf of applicants which results in further time pressures. The fact that councillors, as local policy makers are able to make these representations on applications which may contravene local policy was considered unjust. This perspective suggests an allegiance to the managerialist approach to rural settlement planning given the appreciation for professionalism in decision making and disapproval for interference in this regard.

Chapter four has examined the processes involved in central and local government policy formation and application, relating to sustainable rural settlement patterns, from a central government perspective. Chapter five examines these issues from the perspective of county councillors who are responsible for translating national policy for use at local level.

CHAPTER FIVE:
THE PERSPECTIVE OF LOCAL ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES

5.0. Preamble

Given their role as local policy-makers, but also as elected representatives answerable to their electorate, local councillors from each of the four case-study areas were interviewed during the course of the primary research component of this project. As previously discussed, the questions they were asked centred on the following themes:

- The personal position of councillors regarding one-off housing
- The role of interest groups at local level
- The significance of the rural-housing issue during local election campaigns
- Position and understanding of sustainable development
- Assessment of national policy relating to rural settlement
- The position of the sustainable development concept in planning policy
- Assessment of local policy relating to rural settlement – the policy formulation process
- Assessment of the application of rural settlement policy at local level
- Implementing local policy – the role of planners

In order for this chapter to facilitate an examination of the differences (with regard to the experiences and perspectives of local councillors) within and between local authorities who are considered to have strict and lenient planning regimes, interviewees from counties Clare and Galway are grouped together where possible, as are interviewees from Cavan and Roscommon.

Through analysis of responses provided by this category of interviewee, this chapter provides an interpretation of both the general mindset and operational

agenda of local authority elected representatives with reference to the managerialist and pluralist approaches to rural settlement planning. The dual role of councillors as both elected representatives and policy decision-makers raises the issue of whether councillors consider themselves to be advocates for their electorate or managers of the common good, or indeed both.

5.1. One-Off Housing and Rural Settlement Patterns – Categorising Councillors' Perspectives

The first theme which was addressed was the personal opinion of each councillor regarding one-off housing and their individual perspectives on rural settlement patterns more generally. The responses illustrated a wide range of opinions and perspectives. These responses illustrated the complexity of the subject. Given the range and scope of answers, it was not possible to categorise interviewees as simply being in favour of, or against, one-off housing developments. Instead, the respondents have been categorised into three broad groups.

Category A represents those who were strongly in favour of one-off rural housing development; *"Any type of housing development in rural areas, whether it be permanent or a holiday home, will contribute to stimulating the economy and vitality of an area... even if it's only during the holidays, it's better than nothing"* (CC1)[11]. Category B comprises councillors who are generally in favour of one-off rural housing but with conditions, for example, they do not agree with one-off holiday home developments, applicants must prove they intend to contribute to the social fabric of the area; *"All other factors aside, at the end of the day anyone who applies for planning permission should have the same chances of being approved as the next person, whether they were born and bred in the locality or not"* (CR2). Category C represents interviewees who have stated that they are strongly against one-off rural housing development, except for locals, and returning ex-patriots

[11] For coding of interview transcripts, see Chapter 3. Section 3.3.3 (i): *Selection of Interviewees – Local Authority elected representatives*

from the area; *"I would agree with the principle that someone who is living and working on the land, i.e. a farmer, should be able to build a one-off house. Now, my personal view is it should be very restricted"* (CC7).

Table 5.1. Councillor Categorisation by Individual Position on Rural One-Off Housing

Local Authority	**Category**		
	A. In Favour	**B. In Favour w. Conditions**	**C. Against**
Clare	2	3	2
Galway	2	3	1
Roscommon	2	2	0
Cavan	0	3	1
Total	6	11	4

These categories provide an overview of opinions. It must be stressed that the three categories discussed above are categories designed to provide a general overview of opinion. The councillors were categorised based on a general overview of their opinions. On occasion, conflicting statements regarding a councillor's personal position on one-off housing were put forward. In these instances, the researcher made an informed decision as to which category best suited based on the overall impression garnered from responses.

Some observations have been considered relating to the categorisation of councillors according to their position on rural one-off housing. Two councillors representing the local authorities of both Co. Clare and Co. Galway respectively asserted their personal position as being favourable towards one-off housing development, thus falling into Category A. This was also the case for one councillor in Co. Roscommon. However, none of the councillors interviewed in Co. Cavan were in this category. It is suspected that these findings may be related to the strictness/leniency of the CDPs for each respective case-study county council. In addition, the planning practices of their respective planning authorities,

illustrated by refusal rates for one-off housing, may also be a factor in these findings.

5.2. The Personal Position of Councillors Regarding One-Off Housing

This section of interviewing called for councillors to share their perspectives on one-off housing within the context of a broader consideration of the sustainability of this rural settlement pattern.

5.2.1. Perspectives of Councillors in Favour of One-Off Housing – Co. Clare and Co. Galway

The majority of arguments put forward by the ten councillors from Co. Clare and Co. Galway favouring one-off housing, related to societal and economic concern for the future of rural areas. The most common, mentioned by the majority of interviewees, pertained to the tradition of dispersed settlement in rural Ireland; *"It has been the way for thousands of years, to attempt to change it is like squaring a circle, it won't work"* (CG2).

Another common argument was that the continued construction of one-off housing assisted the maintenance of rural communities. *"Rural society should not be penalised because we do not conform to the urban organisational structure"* (CC3). The outflow of young people from rural areas was also a recurring topic; *"many youngsters go off to college, then get jobs and settle in urban areas...there's a gap left behind which needs to be filled"* (CG5). However, the main bone of contention, was that current restrictions relating to the eligibility requirements of one-off housing applicants has resulted in *'starving rural communities of fresh blood'* (CG1). *"I think it's unfair and unjust to classify people into pre-defined boxes. Each application should be considered on its merits"* (CC3). Concerns were also raised relating to the closure of schools, sports clubs and other amenities in rural parishes due to falling numbers; *"Communities*

are the backbone of rural Ireland. They are what make the parishes, the GAA teams, the Ceoilteoirs" (CG5) *'The countryside needs to be allowed to develop'* (CC5).

There was acknowledgment that an intervention to curb one-off housing development was necessary given the so-called 'bungalow blitz' of the 1990s and early 2000s; *"The problem is the huge increase in applications. In the past, you would only have had one or two from outside applying for planning permission in a rural area in any given year"* (CG4). However, others felt that the 'bungalow blitz' was as a result of bad planning practice at the time: *"The problem was that people were being given permission willy-nilly to build in areas which weren't suitable, you know the shores of a lake or the like, or given the go-ahead to build ridiculous monstrosities. This situation wasn't caused solely by outsiders but now, because of this, everyone's chances of being successful* [in their planning application] *are affected. It's like a lottery now"* (CC2). While such a crackdown was considered understandable, the prevailing attitude was that *"we don't need to continue with this level of rigidness...we need to let people back into the countryside"* (CG2).

With regard to urban-generated housing in rural areas, it was felt that, subject to good planning practice, people should be *"given the opportunity to decide what lifestyle they wish to build for themselves whether that be rural or urban"* (CG1). The general consensus was that even if such people work in urban areas, they are still involved in the rural community if their children attend school there, are part of sports clubs and so on. This situation is often the case with people born and raised in rural communities. In today's society, within a decline in the agricultural sector, the focus for employment will be primarily on urban centres *"whether it be people living and working in town and wishing to build in the countryside or locals looking to build but working in town"* (CG3).

Turning to the issue of urban sprawl, the majority of councillors in favour of one-off housing were of the opinion that the character of villages and towns should be

preserved. Therefore, there should be a zone of no one-off housing development surrounding these centres; *"People can't have it both ways; you either live in a town or in the countryside. It* [urban sprawl] *affects the quaintness of Irish villages which is important for tourism"* (CG4). Despite these assertions, it was universally acknowledged that the individual's land rights should not be affected; *"If a local person has a family site, they should be allowed to build on it, even if it is in an exclusion zone so to speak"* (CC4).

Turning briefly to the primary economic factors which have influenced this group of councillors' opinions in favour of one-off housing, there are two strands which were explored throughout the course of interviewing, perhaps best described as micro-economics, at the level of the individual, and macro-economics affecting the broader society.

At the individual level councillors have argued that if a person owns or has access to a family site, it is a lot cheaper to build than to buy a pre-built house. *"I have enormous sympathy for young couples who have a site but can't get permission to build. What are they supposed to do, fork out another hundred grand to buy a ready-made model?"* (CC4). At societal level, it was argued that a vibrant rural community is necessary to support the rural economy and its main contributors, for example, tourism. One councillor went so far as to suggest that rural dwellings and dwellers were vital to tourism;

"Strong rural communities are essential for rural tourism so that they can provide the kind of experience that the tourist is looking for...at the end of the day that's what visitors to rural Ireland will talk about, the welcome they received from the local community. The rural dweller plays a huge part in the tourist's' vision of rural Ireland, rural dwellings are part of the scenery and the landscape that environmentalists go on so much about protecting...it's ironic really" (CC2).

5.2.2. Perspectives of Councillors in Favour of One-Off Housing – Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon

The range of arguments put forward in favour of one-off housing construction by councillors representing this stance in Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon, of which there were seven, concentrated on the social element of sustainable development. It was frequently suggested that one-off housing construction assisted the maintenance of viable rural communities, many of which were suffering from depopulation, as a result of greying populations and migration; *"Many rural communities are in dire need of new blood so people wishing to settle here should be allowed to do so and not be subjected to planning prejudice"* (CCa1). Councillors also commented on the tradition of dispersed settlement in Ireland, and the necessity to ensure such a tradition continues; *"Given where we started, I don't think it would be possible to make the transition to an urban-based country, even if we wanted to, despite the Government's best efforts...It wouldn't be good for the country"* (CR2).

Despite the fact that, in theory, the authorities' of Co. Roscommon and Co. Cavan have lenient policies with regard to who can apply for permission to build a single dwelling when compared to the planning authorities of Co. Clare and Co. Galway, there was a definite feeling of consternation displayed with regard to planning practices and the manner by which decisions were reached where single dwelling applications were concerned; *"There may not be a 'locals only' policy in the [County] Development Plan in Co. Cavan, but there appears to be in practice, well non-locals have a far higher rate of refusal"* (CCa2) Another councillor commented that; *"they have what can only be described as a refusal box, and if there's even only a small problem with the application, they'll reach in and whip out several reasons for refusing it"* (CCa1).

Problems associated with one-off housing, for example, urban-generated development, ribbon development and urban sprawl were mentioned as issues of which planners were wary when considering applications. With regard to urban-generated development, two councillors raised the point that *"a large amount of*

people born, bred and living in rural areas are working in towns and villages. It's the ways things have gone so people who will contribute to an area, even if they don't work in the immediate vicinity, should be allowed to live there" (CR3). With regard to urban sprawl, each of the four councillors representing Co. Cavan and one of the interviewees from Co. Roscommon felt it was important to preserve the character of towns and villages; *"It's important to be able to distinguish where the town ends and the country*[side] *begins"* (CCa2). There was agreement amongst these five councillors that a zone of no one-off housing development surrounding urban centres would ensure the continued separation between urban and rural. However, each of the four councillors from Co. Roscommon stated that the right of an individual to build on family land should not be affected by such a development exclusion zone.

In contrast to the opinions relating to urban sprawl and the preservation of town/village character documented above, three of the four councillors from Co. Roscommon were of the opinion that as long as housing was in keeping with the surrounding environment, and conformed with good planning practice with regard to housing design, road safety, etc., the construction of single dwellings should not be constrained; *"Locals living in the areas surrounding towns and villages shouldn't be restricted from building or selling their land to those looking to build"* (CR1). Another commented; *"There isn't a problem there so long as the house sits neatly into the landscape and isn't, you know, drawing attention to itself with design faux pas, castle gates or features like that"* (CR4).

With regard to the economic considerations which influenced councillors' opinions in favour of one-off housing construction, the sole consideration, mentioned at this juncture, related to the necessity of ensuring a strong rural community to support the rural economy, particularly the tourist industry.

5.2.3. Perspectives of Councillors Against One-Off Housing

Given that just four councillors out of the 21 interviewees were against one-off housing construction, the findings from all four case-study authorities will be documented together here.

Of the four councillors who expressed opinions against one-off housing construction, two represented Co. Clare and one each represented Co. Galway and Co. Cavan. None of the councillors interviewed from Co. Roscommon identified themselves as being against one-off housing construction. It is important to reiterate that by categorising these councillors as being against the construction of single dwellings, it is intended to convey that they are against instances of single dwelling construction, except in cases where the applicant lives in the area or returning emigrants.

Given the fact that councillors are elected representatives, expressing opinions on one-off housing which are contrary to the general consensus was considered by several councillors to be politically unwise. One councillor, against one-off housing commented; *"My political view, and what I would say on radio is that everyone should be able to build one-off houses, simply because that's what people want to hear"* (CG6). Indeed, a second councillor stated; *"People are afraid to express negative opinions on one-off housing or address the issues, even with you* [the interviewer]*...even if they have a strongly held personal opinion, you'll find you get refused for interview or you'll get regurgitated tripe"* (CC7).

Interestingly, environmental degradation was not the primary concern of councillors who were against one-off housing construction. In fact, of the four councillors interviewed, not one mentioned concern for the environment, until the subject was specifically broached later in the interview. Instead, the most common opposing arguments to single dwelling construction were linked to the negative consequences facing rural economies if such a settlement type were allowed to continue unchecked. Councillors also mentioned the situation facing many local rural people who are unable to obtain planning permission for a one-off house due

to housing pressures caused by the proliferation of one-off rural housing at the turn of the 21st century, particularly holiday homes and urban-generated housing.

The issue of maintaining rural communities was mentioned frequently as an argument which the pro-single dwelling lobby put forward in support of one-off housing construction. Yet, the consensus amongst those against the construction of single dwellings was that allowing one-off housing construction to occur without constraint was not the way forward; *"We have a situation in certain areas of Clare where the population of the Census has actually declined and at the same time over half of the houses in the parish are empty because they are holiday homes"* (CC6). Another councillor from Co. Cavan commented; *"People go on about maintaining communities, but we already have a greying population and if we continue to allow anyone who has a couple of acres to build a single dwelling, what happens when they become elderly, how are we going to service them, where will we get the money from? It's becoming an issue, not so much yet but it's going to be a lot more exacerbated as time goes on"* (CCa4). One councillor disregarded the argument that one-off housing was a traditional rural settlement pattern in Ireland. *"The tradition was the farming community lived on the land, or a teacher beside the school, not a person working in a bank in town, living out here, that's hardly traditional, is it?"* (CG6).

It was suggested that so-called 'bungalow blitz' of the late 1990s and early 2000s have left the countryside in an *"awful state of disrepair"* (CC6) and that *"building on top of what is essentially a bad problem"* (CG6) is not best practice in terms of future settlement patterns. While councillors did respect the right of local people to build a single dwelling on family land, it was stated that, even in these instances, it was important to ensure that the construction of such dwellings were in the best interests of the surrounding area; *"I have to say I'm torn just a bit in terms of the arguments for one-off housing considering what we're leading ourselves into in the future...I mean you've got to respect the right of an individual, if they've been born and raised in an area, who've farmed in an area or worked in an area, to be*

able to build an affordable house. Sure there is a right there, but it's a right that needs to be developed with caution" (CC7).

Interviewees expressed concern with regard to the cost of dispersed settlement patterns on the rural economy, with regard to providing infrastructure; *"It's impossible to support one-off housing in all circumstances and expect that the state will provide the proper infrastructure to support them...it is not a cost-effective type of settlement'* (CC6). There was also a suggestion that one-off housing construction was detrimental to the rural tourism industry, a major contributor to the rural economy; *'At the end of the day, in terms of generating capital from tourism, the idea of a green, scenic landscape is one of the most valuable commodities rural areas possess. It doesn't make sense that we compromise this staple of rural economies by granting planning permission for one-off housing, which is often unnecessary"* (CG6).

The issue of holiday homes and the construction of large mansion-style single dwellings was a major bone of contention with the councillors interviewed; *"The volume of development, particularly second or holiday home development have thwarted the any favourable argument in terms of one-off housing"* (CCa4). Another councillor commented; *"The numerous, very poor, 'designer houses' which sprung up in the late 90's and into the early 2000s have given the whole concept of one-off housing a bad name"* (CC6). Related to this point, and an issue which three of the four councillors mentioned, was the situation in which many young local people, looking to build on family land, have found themselves in recent years; *"What has happened is a local person who has met all the criteria can't get planning permission now to build in the area. Why? Issues of population because of all the permissions which were given out in the late 90s, a lot of them are now empty most of the time, except the summer months. And if they* [local people] *want to buy, they can't afford to because the area is popular and has scenic value and the price range has gone through the roof"* (CC7).

The consensus was that continued, unnecessary, one-off housing construction is a national problem and that not enough is being done at national level to curb one-off housing construction across local authorities. The main reason given for this occurrence was that politicians were unwillingly to come out against popular public opinion on the issue. As one councillor commented; *"If I were the Minister for the Environment, and not seeking re-election, I would be ensuring that future legislation focused on developing the villages and the towns, as opposed to spreading it everywhere else"* (CC6).

Just 4 out of 13 councillors representing strict regimes and 1 of the 7 representing lenient regimes classed themselves as being opposed to one-off housing construction. This translates as one councillor representing strict administrations against single rural dwelling construction for every 4.34 in favour and one against for every 7 in favour in lenient administration. These figures may be indicative of the reasoning for the differences in the manner by which these contrasting regimes are operated as councils with significant numbers of councillors whose personal stance suggests they are in favour of one-off housing may be less likely to pass policy which they consider to be overly restrictive.

5.3. The Role of Interest Groups at Local Level

The debate surrounding one-off housing and its viability displays two clear factions, those in favour of single dwelling construction and those against. Councillors were asked to express their opinions on both the significance and role of interest groups at local level; how they would delineate the purpose of such groups and measure the success of these groups in achieving their aims. A number of reoccurring themes emerged from these discussions which will be considered in the following paragraphs:

- The manner by which lobbying took place
- The factors which determined the degree of responsiveness of councillors

- The over-riding factors which determined the level of success achieved by groups in meeting their aims.

In general, there was a high level of uniformity in the views and opinions expressed by councillors across the four case-study authorities. Therefore, the findings from each of the four case-study areas are documented together. Any salient variations are noted.

Turning first to the councillors' general impressions of lobby groups, they were recognised to have a presence at local level, *"there is a balance of opinions for and against one-off housing out there, and yes, these views are brought to our attention by interest groups"* (CC5). It was asserted that such groups had a role to play at local level with regard to passing on knowledge; *"Interest groups have a role in educating people, councillors included, in that if there are any concerns, at least they're brought to your attention and then you can decide what you're going to do then...whether you listen and then act on their behalf, if you share their point of view. If you have an opposing point of view, at least you can take their opinions in board"* (CC7).

Another councillor commented; *"In fairness to a lot of the groups, they are working on a day-to-day basis, trying to improve their community or the environment...that's where you'll get a lot of information from so it's good to have groups like that, otherwise you mightn't get the on-the-ground info"* (CG4).

Interest groups were considered a necessary presence, in that they allowed councillors to experience a well-rounded view of public opinion on the rural housing situation; *"As an individual, you can have a certain train of thought...you can be pulled back very quickly by a group then asking you to hold on a minute now, maybe there's another side to this story...and that's where groups come in handy, you know they can focus your mind a little bit that way"* (CCa3).

The motives of the interest groups encountered were called into question by some. Councillors were quick to distinguish between those who had genuine interests and those who had a set agenda, *"You'll have a group of people that will take up a position and they won't move from it, but the common sense lobbyist groups, they're the ones we listen to mostly"* (CG3). Another councillor from Co. Galway commented; *"If you spend ten minutes talking to them* [Interest groups], *you'll know very quickly what their agenda is, and people do have an agenda. You'll know very soon who the, I suppose, the extremists are, and those groups who take the balanced approach"* (CC6).

While councillors, in general, did relay opinions which appeared to favour the lobby in favour of one-off housing, there was a consensus that the common-sense approach must be taken when considering the views of lobbyists; *"It's a matter of trying to see what works best for the county, not what one individual or group wants, but what's best for the county and its development"* (CR4).

5.3.1. Interest Groups in Favour of One-Off Housing Construction

There was a mixed response when discussing pro- one-off housing groups. Some councillors, most notably in Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon expressed the opinion that these groups *"do good work, but they don't tend to make much of a difference around here"* (CCa1). This was attributed to their lack of organisational structure and their small size. However, it was frequently stated that their attributes could be beneficial, *"the thing with many of these local groups is they are often the most knowledgeable, they are people from the area and know what's on the ground"* (CR4). Another councillor commented that *"Local groups are the best source of information and these are the people who have to live with the decisions we make, it affects them directly, so their point of view...and the information they provide had to be considered"* (CG1).

A reoccurring topic of concern, prevalent across all local authorities was the 'frequent' establishment of local groups for the purpose of objecting to housing developments, *"You have individuals or groups, trading under the banner, pro-*

one-off housing, yet their sole purpose is to object to housing developments in the area, saying it prevents locals from getting permission to build their own houses. This isn't the case and these are not the best groups to be listening to but you've got to give everyone the time of day" (CC1).

There was also an element of distrust among local people, revealed in councillors' responses, which it was felt related to the strictness of planning regimes with regard to one-off housing development. One councillor from Co. Cavan commented; *"You'll find people are disgruntled when land nearby is given planning permission as they think it'll harm their chances with over-population and the like'* (CCa3). Another, from Co. Clare noted; *'At times you'll have people set themselves up as a development association or a residents association just to object to whatever their neighbour is doing, but you'll quickly identify these"* (CC1).

From the interviews, it became apparent that the pro- one-off housing lobby comprised mainly local groups, for example, residents' associations and local community groups. Their manner of lobbying, according to councillors, was to approach them directly, expressing their views, in the hope that they would represent their opinions at CDP negotiations. These groups were also found to make frequent representations to councillors on behalf of individuals who were experiencing difficulty securing planning permission for a single dwelling. There was a high degree of empathy expressed by councillors for local pro- one-off housing groups. *"I do, I suppose have a sympathy for these groups. They are normal people trying to do what's best for their community"* (CG6). The high level of empathy expressed is perhaps connected to the personal opinions of councillors regarding one-off housing construction, given that the vast majority of councillors interviewed held similar views. Therefore, not surprisingly, many councillors considered themselves advocates for these groups;
"When you have a scenario like this, obviously, the more vocal group is going to be more successful. It's our job to represent the underdog, who may not have the resources or the backing of a large organisation" (CR1).

The presence of larger groups with interests favouring one-off housing was noted, particularly in Co. Clare. However, they were less frequently noted as having a presence at local level. The role of Irish Farmers' Organisation (IFA), for example, was mentioned by councillors in each of the four authorities. It was suggested that, given its broad remit, its primary focus was generally not the issue of rural housing but local representatives did tend to make submissions during the negotiation stages of the CDPs *'They keep a very low presence with regard to the rural housing issue but, if need be, they will make their feelings known, and they have the following so that people sit up and notice'* (CC2). The point was also made that organisations such as the IFA or the Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA) have a large following at local level with members also being involved with local community groups or residents' associations so that councillors are made aware of their opinions on one-off housing through several channels.

The Irish Rural Dwellers' Association (IRDA), a prominent group devoted solely to promoting the continuance of single dwellings in the countryside, was also mentioned by councillors in each of the four local authorities. Again, aside from Co. Clare, the IRDAs base, it was felt that the organisation did not have a strong presence or following locally, its appearing to concentrate its efforts at lobbying nationally. In Co. Clare, the responses of councillors were varied. One charge put against them, and reiterated by a large minority of councillors was, *"they lack credibility for various reasons...people get involved with politics...and they are seen as being a nuisance...you don't like having to meet with them"* (CC7). They were frequently painted as being very extreme in their views and confrontational in their lobbying techniques; *"It's all or nothing with them, they just don't seem to understand they can't have it all their own way allowing every Tom, Dick and Harry to build. But they won't hear of it, they just keep pushing 'til you're sick to death of dealing with them"* (CC6).

Despite the negative assertions regarding the IRDA, its *modus operandi* with regard to its lobbying style was viewed in a positive light by many councillors in Co. Clare as the following illustrate;

"At least they're being proactive and doing something about a cause they believe in. I mightn't agree with all of their views but I do commend that" (CC5).

"They're the only ones being heard off their own cuff and with very little or no funding. It's important that they continue to do what they do so that people see there is a need for rural housing" (CR1).

"They are a necessary presence, they balance out the environmentalist lobby ensuring, I suppose, that both sides of the coin are heard" (CC4).

Rural Resettlement Ireland (RRI), a sister group of the IRDA, received a similar mixed reaction. This group was singled out for comment by councillors in Co. Clare predominantly, but also Co. Galway and Co. Roscommon. One councillor from Co. Galway commented: *"They don't really get the time of day, we have enough trouble trying to get planning permission for locals, never mind complete strangers to the area and this can be seen with the amount of refusals they get"* (CG3). Another from Co. Roscommon commented; *"They appear to force the issue, insisting on planning permission for people they want to resettle. These people would probably be happier in villages where they have a connection to the urban lifestyle they are used to"* (CR3). However, it was also suggested that such groups kept the issue of one-off housing alive; *"They're right, people should be allowed to live wherever they choose, so long as they're not, you know, building monstrosities. They meet huge resistance from planners but they are trying"* (CG1). Another commented; *"They are one of the few groups that are making the effort of actually injecting some life back into the countryside and facing huge opposition as they do so"* (CC2).

5.3.2. Interest Groups Against of One-Off Housing Construction

In contrast to opinions on groups in favour of one-off housing construction, the feeling directed towards groups who are against one-off housing construction, was almost universally negative, even among councillors who shared some of their views.

Groups which positioned themselves against one-off housing construction were referred to in conversation as the 'environmental groups.' Councillors displayed no knowledge of any such groups having local roots, rather they existed as *"national organisations with local branches"* (CCa2). Perhaps due to the fact they are a national organisation which also feature locally, An Taisce received the brunt of criticism directed towards environmental groups. Most of this centred on their apparent *"tendency to put in a lot of objections"* (CC4) against planning permissions for single dwellings which had been granted; *"Some very powerful interest groups, for example, An Taisce, have lacked credibility in many ways because of the haphazard way they have gone about things. They object to things they shouldn't object to, that there is no sense in objecting to"* (CG5).

It was repeatedly suggested by councillors representing all four local authorities that there was no logic in An Taisce's objections; *"They should be objecting to holiday homes, not applications by individuals from the area looking to set up a family home"* (CR2). A number of councillors also commented on the cost to the individual of having an objection made against their application for a single dwelling; *"Their [An Taisce] objections are very costly to the planning applicant who is trying to rebuke their often ridiculous arguments... they are very slow to withdraw objections"* (CG3).

A common complaint put forward regarding An Taisce was that it was *"viewed with suspicion"* locally because "*we don't know who they are or who is objecting because they hide behind the tag"* (CC1). In this sense, it was felt, even by those councillors who cited themselves as being against one-off housing construction, that the operating tactics of An Taisce, and other 'environmental groups' at local level, were proving to be unsuccessful. A number of reasons were put forward to explain this observation, the most prevalent being the lack of local knowledge displayed by many groups who are opposing one-off housing; *"They'll object but they don't know what they're objecting to. They know nothing about the area, population trends or the community living there"* (CC3). In Co. Galway, where there was a serious problem with the safety of drinking water at the time

interviews were be conducted, councillors were particularly opposed to An Taisce's 'policy' of objecting to rural housing; *"they object to single dwellings, yet you've got all these new housing estates being built at the edges of towns and villages with only temporary treatment systems which eventually cause a backlog in the main system and the awful stench that goes with it and if they're not adequately treated, water pollution like we've got now. This is a real environmental problem, they should be objecting to these developments"* (CG4).

There was general consensus amongst councillors that the best way forward for the *'environmental'* lobby was to try and *"develop a strong local base"* (CC7). It was acknowledged that this would prove extremely difficult given the *"reputation they have fostered objecting randomly to everything"* (CCa1). Despite this, it was felt that the setting up of strong local bases and developing a local knowledge, may allow them to gain credibility locally.

It was also suggested that a more successful use of time for environmental groups would be to attend local authority meetings when CDPs are being negotiated and ensure that; "*zonings which may be taking place that are inappropriate and wrong don't take place"* (CCa4). In this context, was noted by councillors in each of the four case-study authorities that, in terms of making representations; *'An Taisce and people like that who were saying, let's look at the environment going forward, let's examine our conscience here as to what we are going to be dealing with in 50 years time, they were never at the meetings"* (CC7).

Indeed, many councillors commented that the groups which did want to get heard at CDP discussions were very professional in the way they went about it. Interestingly, this was neither the groups that were for or against one-off housing, but rather builders, developers and speculators. This ranged from *"individuals who had a few acres of land and wanted to get it zoned residential"* (CCa3) or "*professional bodies supporting various builders"* (CR3). As one councillor in Co. Clare commented, his assertions being echoed by councillors in the other case-study areas, "*they are very clever in the way they do things, they hire the best*

brains available and people with local knowledge, the best architects in the county were working for them...and these people were the ones who were eventually successful in getting what they wanted" (CC5).

In summation of this section, there is a high level of uniformity in the perspectives of councillors representing both strict and lenient planning regimes with regard to the role of interest groups.

Lobby groups in favour of one-off housing construction were considered to be often informed, knowledgeable and a good source of information with regard to their area of interest. However, councillors operating in lenient regimes felt that the influence of these groups was minimal, perhaps as a result of their organisational structure and small size. The pro- one-off housing lobby was found to be primarily comprised of local groups. A high degree of empathy was expressed by councillors towards these groups.

Conversely, the majority of councillors displayed a negative attitude towards anti-one-off housing groups. Pro-conservation groups were not considered to have local roots and were deemed disruptive to the planning process given the perceived frequency of their objections to approved applications for the construction of single rural dwellings

5.4. The Significance of the Rural Housing Issue during the 2004 Local Election Campaign

The issue of one-off housing and its sustainability as a settlement pattern is a topic which attracted national media attention in 2004, following the publication by the DoEHLG of the Draft *Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines for Planning Authorities* in April of that year.

Local elections were held in June 2004. Given the public debate surrounding one-off housing which was prevalent at the time, it was interesting to examine the extent to which the rural housing debate manifested itself during the 2004 election canvassing by councillors. This amounted to examining a range of issues;

- to what extent councillors felt one-off housing was one of the primary concerns of voters
- the range of issues and questions relating to one-off housing they encountered when canvassing
- the style of canvassing they employed with regard to the one-off housing issue and their opinions on the canvassing styles of other candidates
- the necessity of making a public stance with regard to their position on one-off housing, given the intensity of the national debate at the time of the local elections;
- whether or not councillors agreed with their national party line on sustainable rural settlement patterns, and finally
- whether they felt their own personal perspective on one-off housing resulted in a gain or loss of votes in the local elections

5.4.1. Rural Housing and the 2004 Local Elections – Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon

Eight councillors expressed opinions relating to the Local Elections of 2004, four representing Co. Cavan and four representing Co. Roscommon. Of these eight councillors, two were affiliated with Fianna Fáil, three with Fine Gael, two with Sinn Féin, and one was a non-party councillor.

With regard to the first issue, the level to which one-off housing was considered a primary issue during the 2004 election campaign, all councillors recalled that one-off housing has been an issue which they had encountered when canvassing. It was possible to divide the councillors, according to their answers, into two categories. The first, accounting for two councillors in Roscommon and no councillors in Cavan, comprised those who felt that rural housing was one of the primary concerns of voters in their canvassing areas; *"It was definitely one of the more*

common issues broached with me: (CR2). *"I'd say nearly every second household had some question to do with planning permission for a one-off* [house]*"* (CR3). The second category, accounting for two councillors in Roscommon and four councillors in Cavan, included those who felt that although it had been an issue for many individual households visited, it was not one of the major issues in their canvassing area; *"People asked for advice about specific planning applications but actually, I expected the issue to be raised a lot more when I canvassed in 2004 because of the national attention rural housing had received with the publication of the guidelines"* (CCa4).

The primary issues relating to one-off housing, which had been encountered when canvassing, had focused on the possibility of acquiring planning permission for a site, requests for assistance with a new or repeat planning application, or queries as to why an application was refused. Such incidences were described as common occurrences by each of the eight councillors. There was a general consensus that a significant amount of pressure was placed on councillors to get them to *"get professional planners to grant houses,"* despite the fact that *"to do so might not be in the common good"* (CCa2). It was observed by one councillor that, *'people don't necessarily understand that we are confined by national and local policy and, of course, best planning practice so you have to make sure the public know this"* (CR4).

Another common request was for clarification of the implications of the new Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines. As one councillor commented; *"the major difficulty was that the guidelines were just being introduced so there was a lot of confusion out there"* (CR1). Another remarked; *"People felt that the easing of restrictions might allow them to reapply and be granted permission where they were refused. This wasn't the case of course but it was difficult to get people to understand this"* (CR2).

A further common theme which emerged during discussion with the councillors was the concerned the manner in which they had managed questioning relating to

one-off housing and how people reacted to the information they supplied. It was noted that voters generally were more *"resigned than confrontational"* (CCa1) with regard to the issues surrounding one-off housing but often *"people weren't interested in what you said...like if a house is coming out onto a main road, and that's not good planning wise, and planners don't have any discretion on that, people don't want to hear that. As far as they are concerned, it's their land and they should be able to build"* (CR4). Despite this, it was felt that *"with the majority, when you sit down and explain the planning situation to them, they see you are doing your best and often planning decisions are beyond your influence"* (CCa1).

The collective perspectives of the councillors representing Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon were less forgiving when asked to discuss the canvassing style of other candidates with regard to issues connected to rural housing. All interviewees stated that they were aware of other candidates who had promised to assist in acquiring planning permission for one-off housing once the seat had been secured in council. The general consensus was that such *'groundless promises'* (CR3) were not the cleverest means of garnering votes; *"People who said what people wanted to hear faced huge problems afterwards if they got in"* (CCa4).

Councillors were asked if they felt it necessary to take a public stance on one-off by means of canvassing literature or the media, seven of the eight interviewed said no; *"My stance is public as in if people ask I will tell them my opinion, but no, it wasn't necessary to make a public statement on it"* (CCa3). The councillor, from Co. Roscommon, who did make a public statement, in favour of one-off housing, felt it was necessary to *"clarify that all applications for one-off housing should be approved once they didn't fall beneath planning standards and that I was there to ensure that this was happening"* (CR1).

Another topic broached during the course of questioning regarding the 2004 local elections related to whether councillors, given their political affiliation, agreed with their national party line on the rural settlement pattern issues. The councillors

interviewed from the local authorities' of Cavan and Roscommon were members of Fianna Fáil (2), Fine Gael (3) and Sinn Féin (2). One councillor was not affiliated to a party.

In general terms, with regard to the national stance of a party on rural housing, Fianna Fáil promotes village-type settlement with one-off housing being acceptable in the facilitation of people who live and/or contribute to an area. In areas where there is population decline, it is acceptable that anyone should be able to submit a single dwelling application for consideration. It is the policy of Fine Gael *"to allow and encourage people to build houses in rural area"*[12]. Sinn Féin is of the opinion that rural housing policy relating to single dwellings should favour those who live in rural communities.

It was notable that the responses of many councillors were non-committal and very generalised in style. As one Sinn Féin councillor commented; *"Well, it's not really a big issue at national level for Sinn Féin so I can't really comment...it's a local problem which needs local solutions"* (SF1). A second Sinn Féin councillor interviewed stated that he *"wholly supported the party line'* in that *"the party is in favour of the Guidelines, as am I...they [Sinn Féin] believe that applications from locals should be viewed in a favourable light and I completely agree with that"* (SF2).

The three Fine Gael councillors interviewed were, for the most part, in agreement with their party's stance on one-off housing. However, one councillor, from Co. Cavan, questioned the level of commitment at national party level to the rural housing issue; *"Fine Gael encourage the rights of people to be allowed to build in the countryside and the discouragement of holiday homes which is fine, however there appears to be no substance to these convictions or no direction when it comes to moving forward. So while I am in favour of one-off housing construction for local people, this worries me"* (CFG5).

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[12] Speech by Fine Gael Seanad Spokesperson on the Environment Senator James Bannon on the Statements on the Draft Guidelines on Rural Housing in Seanad Éireann, 10th March 2004 [Online] Available at: http://www.finegael.ie/news/index.cfm/type/details/nkey/23495 Accessed: 20th August 2009.

Of the two Fianna Fáil councillors interviewed, one councillor, from Co. Cavan, was in agreement with the party line while the second, from Co. Roscommon was completely opposed to any restrictions relating to, for example, birthplace, affecting eligibility to apply for planning permission for a single dwelling.

The final issue which was examined concerning the 2004 local elections was whether or not councillors felt their personal position on one-off housing resulted in their gaining or losing votes in the election. The consensus amongst the eight councillors interviewed from Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon, including the single councillor who was against one-off housing construction, was that their position on one-off housing did not affect their vote count; *"I don't really feel my position on rural housing was a major influencing factor in costing or gaining me votes"* (CFF7). Three of the councillors interviewed felt that displeasure with Fianna Fáil at national level had helped them secure their seat *"I was lucky I suppose, because people wanted fresh blood at the time and there was a swing away from Fianna Fáil"* (CNP3).

5.4.2. Rural Housing and the 2004 Local Elections – Co. Clare and Co. Galway

In the case of councillors representing Co. Clare and Co. Galway, all thirteen interviewees expressed opinions with regard to the 2004 local elections. Of these thirteen, six were affiliated with Fianna Fáil, four with Fine Gael, one with Labour and two were non-party councillors.

All 13 interviewees confirmed that rural housing was a topic they had come across during their canvassing campaigns. Of these, six councillors felt it had been an issue which was one of the main concerns of people in their canvassing areas; *"Yeah, it was definitely a major concern for many people, especially with the release of the rural housing guidelines, people felt this might be their chance to get permission"* (CFG2).

The main points concerned the possibility of acquiring planning permission under the new 'more lenient' guidelines and requests for assistance with new or previously refused planning applications. Again, an air of confusion and despair was reported by councillors amongst the voters; *"These people aren't experts, they don't understand why they've been refused and are looking for advice, understandably'* (CNP2). One Co. Galway councillor noted; *'You can help people to a certain extent but you have to let them know there's not always a happy ending. There's a solution to most things. If they've been refused planning permission, you see have they gotten any proper advice and then sit down with the planner and try to sort it out"* (CFF4).

Notably, eight of the thirteen councillors interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with the timing of release the draft Rural Housing Guidelines just prior to the local elections; *"It was so transparent, a Government who are losing points nationally, so they release these Guidelines to try and gain favour at local level but all it did was cause confusion, and also, which is worse, give hope to many people who had been refused before, that's unforgivable as far as I'm concerned"* (CL1).

Turning to the canvassing style of councillors, each of the thirteen councillors interviewed felt it was best to be honest when dealing with queries relating to rural housing. To say what *"people wanted to hear"* was described by one councillor as *'playing with people's emotions, which I hate doing and tend not to do it. The one thing I always say to people on the campaign trail is I'll do my best, no more, no less, so take it or leave it"* (CFG2). Another councillor stated that *"If people know you, and respect you, they know that even if they don't agree with you 100 per cent of the time, you are trying to make decisions which have their best interests at heart"* (CFF1).

Interestingly, given the statements of the previous paragraph, a majority (10) of councillors were less than impressed by the canvassing styles of other councillors; *"You'll be talking to somebody and they'll say, well so and so said he'd make sure my application went through this time if they're in the council, and you're thinking*

that's a load of bull but sure good luck to them, it's a disgrace but it's a common way to gain favour" (CFF4). Another stated *"I saw that* [the making of false promises] *with others, particularly new candidates, playing on people's frustrations saying I'm going to have a pro-rural housing policy if I get in there and, of course, this is very popular and they get elected on this premise"* He continued; *"Our hands are tied with the Rural Housing Guidelines so you have to make sure the public know this and I have experience in doing this, but you do see people trying to please everyone"* (CFF5).

Three councillors stated that they had not personally witnessed underhand canvassing styles; *"Well, from what I saw, candidates were willing to help people with applications and so on, but cautious when it came to predicting a favourable outcome, people realise you're not God and were just happy someone was helping them, giving them a chance"* (CNP2).

Of the 13 councillors interviewed, six had made a public stance on the issue of rural housing, in the form of media interviews and/or canvassing material. Of those six, five had made statements relating to the restrictive nature of the planning system when it came to granting planning applications for local people; *"I felt I had to do it, to let people know that I was in their corner and would try to be a voice for them. I'm a local too and I know their frustrations"* (CL1). Another commented; "*You have outsiders, non-locals, buying derelict houses and renovating them to the gills, and often not even living in them, and then you have local people looking to build a family home on family land or nearby, and they're being refused. A lot of these people wouldn't have the money to buy, and they shouldn't have to...I wanted to be a representative of these people"* (CFG3). One councillor, from Co. Clare, who was against one-off housing, stated *"I made my opinions known, yes through the media, that I objected to what the professional development sphere were doing, getting rezoning. They were operating so efficiently and getting results. When asked, I didn't say I was against one-off housing...I said I had a problem with developers getting permission left, right and centre. That seemed to satisfy people"* (CFF1).

The seven councillors who had not made a public statement on one-off housing said that they felt it unnecessary to do so. Two offered further explanation, the first stating *"you could find yourself tied up in knots later on, trying to explain your way out of something you're quoted as saying during your election campaign, so it's a lot safer to say nothing"* (CFF3). The second councillor claimed that; *"Any councillor worth his salt wouldn't make a stand one-way of the other but instead talk about balance and common sense in making planning decisions"* (CFF5).

Regarding their agreement with their national party's stance on rural settlement issues, of the six Fianna Fáil councillors interviewed, two stated that they supported the prescriptions of the national party. Referring to Fianna Fáil's promotion of village-type settlements, one councillor stated; *"It's the only way to go if you think about it, it works on so many levels: better for the environment; better in economic terms, infrastructure, services and so on; and better for social interaction as people grow older"* (CFF1). The other five councillors were more vague and non-committal in their responses. It was suggested that the Draft *Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines for Planning Authorities* were introduced as *"a tactical measure to gain support from the voting public and offer nothing new really. Nothing is going to change on the ground. Locals can still be refused for numerous reasons if planners feel that way inclined"* (CNP2). Another stated; *"Fianna Fáil don't really have a stance when it comes to rural housing. We're all over the place, trying to be all things to all people and all that is doing is causing confusion for applicants, they don't know where they stand"* (CFF6).

Despite, the disconcertion displayed by Fianna Fáil councillors, there was a general consensus that; *"You have to strike a balance and decide where you serve people best, whether it be from inside a party or outside a party"* (CFF3). Another Fianna Fáil councillor remarked; *"You'll never be in total agreement, some stuff I agree with, some stuff I don't, but that's democracy and majority rules and you just ignore issues because your party doesn't agree with you"* (CFF6).

Of the four Fine Gael councillors interviewed, all but one were in general agreement with the national party line that people should be permitted to build houses for full-time occupation in rural Ireland, *"On this issue, I agree with the party. People who show they are willing to live in and contribute to an area should be allowed to build there"* (CFG3). However, one councillor disagreed with his party's stance on single dwelling construction and described himself as being *"very critical of Fine Gael in this one, because I feel their policy changes by the hour. Unfortunately, I feel their policies in this regard are very populist and lack leadership. Having said that, it would be fair to say that Fianna Fail have taken a populist stance as well"* (CFG1).

The one labour party councillor interviewed, was not in agreement with the national party line which is of the view that clustered rural settlements should be promoted, *"The Labour Party nationally doesn't really have a stance on rural housing. There's a mention of clustered settlements briefly in the manifesto but it's like a line or two, just so everything is included. As I have said already, anyone who is from an area or working in an area should be allowed to set up home in the area, and if this involves building a house, so be it"* (CL1).

One of the two non-party councillors interviewed was quite vocal in his contempt for the major parties with regard the rural housing issue; *"I won't have any time for any of the major parties until I see them looking at the overall issue and coming up with something reasonable, taking leadership and being prepared to take a hit to do the right thing, bringing some sort of order to national and local rural settlement strategies"* (CNP1).

Of the ten councillors who were categorised as being in favour of one-off housing, none felt that his/her personal stance affected them with regard to gaining or losing potential votes; *"While it was a big issue at the time, I don't feel it was a factor in affecting my vote count. People knew you were on their side and you would do your best and that was enough for them"* (CFF3). Dissatisfaction with national government was cited by three of these ten councillors as being a possible factor

contributing to their election success; *"Well the local elections took place midway through the governments' second term and whatever way you look at it, whatever the issues are, a local election is also a reflection of satisfaction with government nationally. I took a Fianna Fáil seat"* (CFG2).

Of the three councillors categorised as being against one-off housing construction, two felt that their stance may have affected their final vote tally; *"You're always going to lose votes if you are against one-off housing construction but you'd never get anything done if you spent all your time thinking, will I gain or lose more votes if I do this"* (CFF1). The third councillor in this category did not feel his position on one-off housing affected his vote tally stating; *"I don't think my stance affected me. Given my age, I was targeting a younger age group who grew up with environmental concern and don't want urban sprawl"* (CFG1).

A number of interesting points were raised during the discussion relating to the 2004 local elections. Councillors representing the lenient planning regimes in operation in counties Cavan and Roscommon were of the opinion that their position on one-off housing did not affect their vote count in local elections. Indeed, it was electorate displeasure with central government which some believe secured them their seat. In counties Clare and Galway, councillors in favour of one-off housing construction also felt that their election was unaffected by their personal stance on this issue. However, of the three councillors who were against the proliferation of single rural dwellings, two felt their stance may have affected their voting tally.

Councillors representing both strict and lenient planning regimes both stated that the release of the RHGs so close to the elections, intended to loosen the restrictions attached to single rural dwelling construction were considered to be little more than a ploy by central government to gain favour with the voters. Despite this, many reported that the RHGs had instead caused confusion amongst the electorate.

Interestingly, councillors suggested that it was best to be honest when dealing with queries during the election campaign. Yet, each reported that they had witnessed other candidates behaving in an insincere manner in order, in their opinion, to gain votes.

5.5. Sustainable Development

In this section of the interview, councillors were asked to define sustainable development, in terms of rural settlement patterns, according to their own understanding of the concept. They were also asked to consider the three dimensions of sustainable development, the economic, social and environmental aspects, and discuss their relevance with regard to rural one-off housing construction.

5.5.1. Position Relating to and Understanding of Sustainable Development – Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon

Of the eight councillors interviewed from counties Cavan and Roscommon, all were in agreement that sustainable development, as a concept, is hugely interpretive and *"hinges on the personal perspectives of an individual"* (CCa4). The definitions of sustainable development put forward by the interviewees were very descriptive, often employing anecdotal evidence as further explanation, thus illustrating the depth of feeling surrounding the issue of sustainable development and rural settlement patterns.

Given that seven of the eight councillors interviewed had personal convictions that were, for the most part, in favour of one-off housing, descriptions of the meaning of sustainable development tended to focus on positive aspects of rural life, for example, community spirit in rural areas. To this end, sustainable development was described as development which is supported by *"a community which is vibrant and alive to support development"* and will allow for *"the integration of new community members"* (CCa1). It was suggested that for the maintenance and

sustainable development of rural communities, they *"must not be subjected to further planning restrictions or the personal vendettas of planners who are squeezing the life out of rural Ireland"* (CR2). One councillor, from Co. Roscommon commented; "*We may be perceived as having relatively lenient planning policies with regard to single dwellings. That's just a smokescreen. The reality is that sustainable development is being used to refuse whatever they* [the planning department] *want. It's a farce*" (CR1).

Just one councillor, from Co. Cavan, expressed the opinion that one-off housing could not be considered sustainable development; *"You have to have a nucleus or a cluster to achieve sustainability in rural settlement planning, you have to develop around existing settlements. Large parts of Co. Cavan are suffering from population decline. We have to consolidate our towns and villages not add to the problem by continuing to build housing in the countryside. That's not sustainable development"* (CCa4).

Sustainable Development and One-off Housing – The Economic Dimension

Within the context of rural settlement patterns, councillors were asked to consider and discuss the economic dimension of sustainable development. There were several areas of focus which were repeatedly broached namely; the role of the tourism industry as an economic backbone in rural areas; the importance of maintaining employment levels in rural areas, the role of home businesses, and the cost differential for the individual between building and buying a home.

Tourism was by far the primary topic of discussion with regard to the economy and rural settlement patterns. Again, the majority of councillors spoke of the benefits of a dispersed rural community when promoting local tourist industry. It was suggested that many tourists who visit rural Ireland do so to immerse themselves in the local culture *"which is essentially rural dwellers and the welcome they provide"* (CR3). The uniqueness of the Irish countryside was frequently mentioned as a draw for tourists and this uniqueness was attributed to the 'tradition' of dispersed rural housing. Tourism as an industry was cited by all

councillors interviewed as being very important in that it is *"a main provider when talking about the economy. It provides jobs in so many respects, restaurants, B&B's, shops, tour guides and so on"* (CR4).

Many councillors discussed the importance of having people in rural communities working, *"In many areas, we have an aging population. This is not good economically as older people can't really contribute. You have to let in new blood because young people can contribute hugely to the economy of rural areas"* (CCa2). Rural dwellers were described as being the workforce who operate the rural tourism industry and their falling numbers, due to ageing and younger people being unable to acquire planning permissions, would have huge consequences for the future of the industry.

There was, albeit to a lesser extent, discussion relating to the negative affect dispersed rural dwelling can have on the local tourism industry and, by proxy, the local economy; *"Tourists relate the environment to their sense of what is Ireland a lot quicker than they would to the urban environment and this is what they take with them, we have to ensure that it is protected"* (CR4). It was suggested by one councillor in Co. Roscommon that if the building of one-off housing were to continue at its current rate, the tourism industry in Co. Roscommon would be seriously affected in the near future. *"We do have great tourist attractions, Forest Park, beautiful historic houses, the Shannon...but so do other counties and they have much stricter planning conditions attached to the building of single dwellings, ensuring the future of the physical landscape in their counties, an amenity which is at the heart of rural tourism"* (CR3). Another councillor, from Co. Cavan, commented, *"We have to be very careful here in Cavan with water quality. Fishing is one of the main local industries and a major tourist attraction. We can't afford to have our lakes polluted by effluent escaping from faulty septic tanks"* (CCa4).

The volume of holiday homes was mentioned by councillors in both counties as being detrimental to the rural economy, the general consensus being that holiday

homes should be built in clustered settlements. *"Empty houses do not contribute to the economy or the visual landscape which is the cornerstone of tourism. Certain areas look like...well housing graveyards I suppose"* (CCa3). There was also general agreement that *"the days when holiday homes were allowed to spring up all over the place is long gone"* (CR4).

The final issue, relating to the rural economy of the counties Cavan and Roscommon, was the matter of the cost of building a house rather than buying it; *"Of course you want young people to be able to build a house, as economically, this is the most affordable option to them"* (CCa3). The rise in the number of holiday homes built in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries was cited as being responsible for difficulties both in acquiring planning permission and the high costs of built properties.

Sustainable Development and One-off Housing – The Environmental Dimension

When discussing the environmental dimension of sustainable development within the context of rural settlement patterns, the main issues broached by councillors in Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon related to the visual impact on one-off housing, the environmental awareness of one-off housing planning applicants, and the subject of septic tanks and environmental degradation.

The issue of one-off housing and its effect on the visual landscape has previously been mentioned when detailing councillors' responses to questions regarding economic sustainability. With regard to environmental sustainability, the maintenance of the visual landscape was considered an important issue. There was consensus that one-off housing should fit into the landscape and not dominate it. It was suggested that there needed to be more clarity with regard to required house design as *"planners appear to change their minds every year with regard to what type of house is visually acceptable and fits in to the surrounding environment"* (CCa1).

It was also suggested that the 'visual monstrosities which have sprung up in recent years' were a product of the Celtic Tiger, *"These houses are a recent phenomenon as people came into money. Houses which were built before this are different; you won't see any McMansions on the top of hills or the like from this era. Everything was done on a smaller scale to fit in with the environment as people were more controlled by the environment in which they lived and were tied to the land"* (CCa2). Given the tightening up of the planning system with regard to one-off houses in recent years, such 'McMansions' were described as being a thing of the past as *"people are a lot more environmentally aware when submitting planning applications for a single dwelling. They realise they have to be if they have any chance of being granted approval to build"* (CR4).

Perhaps, not surprisingly, the most prevalent topic with regard to environmental sustainability and rural settlement patterns was the issue one-off housing and septic tanks. Again, given the positive view of one-off housing shared by the majority of councillors interviewed from Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon, the general consensus was that given the huge improvement in septic tanks and percolation systems in recent years, *"the issue of groundwater contamination is now defunct"* (CCa2). However, one councillor in Co. Cavan made the point; *"It doesn't matter how top of the range or secure the systems are if the soil in the area doesn't support it"* (CCa4).

The monitoring system for waste-water treatment systems in place in Co. Cavan was commented on by all four councillors representing Co. Cavan local authority and commended by two Co. Roscommon councillors. These Bye-Laws came into effect on the 1st July 2004. They were introduced to control the design, operation and maintenance of waste-water treatment systems and provided for the initial and ongoing assessment of all waste-water treatment systems for single dwellings. It was initially agreed that approved and properly functioning systems would be installed for all single dwellings by 31st December 2005. However, as one councillor commented; *"We aren't there just yet, it is an ongoing process but we*

are making progress, looking after the environment while maintaining the rural way of life" (CCa3).

Other prescriptions of these Bye-Laws included that single houses whose boundaries lie within 100m of a public sewer should be connected. Up-to-date records of inspection, to be undertaken every seven years and which are to be carried out by a person approved by the council, and maintenance must be available for inspection by the council and tanks are to be emptied at intervals which are determined by the size of the tank and the number of inhabitants of the house.

These Bye-laws were commended as being 'the way forward' by all six of the councillors who mentioned them. A councillor from Roscommon suggested that this system should be in place across the country; *"With this system in place, environmental problems and groundwater and waterway pollution caused by faulty septic tanks will be a thing of the past and can no longer be used as an argument for opposing the building of one-off houses"* (CR3).

The sustainability of sewage removal arrangements in villages and towns was questioned by three councillors; *"It ridiculous. You have a situation where people are being herded into new estates in town and villages in the interest of environmental consideration, yet more often or now there is little or no service provision like permanent sewerage facilities. This is hardly sustainable"* (CR2).

Sustainable Development and One-off Housing – The Social Dimension

The arguments relating to the social sustainability of rural settlement patterns amongst councillors representing Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon tended to centre on the perceived lack of focus placed on this dimension of sustainability; *"Well, in the eyes of a planner, who wants to develop around existing centres, the social element of sustainable development is forgotten. This is no good for rural communities, for schools, churches, you are not allowing for people to come into areas and to support areas"* (CCa2).

A recurring focal issue concerned the strength of communities in rural areas; *"You will often find that you have stronger communities in rural areas than in urban areas. This is often out of necessity, people need to look out for each other and for their communities because they are getting little help from anywhere else. In fact, the current direction of the planning system, in terms of the perceptions of planners with regard to one-off housing is hindering rural communities"* (CCa1).

Rural communities were described as the 'backbone of rural Ireland' in terms of supporting the local economy, providing the workforce for local industry. The importance of placing greater emphasis on social viability was stressed by the majority of councillors; *"Well obviously if you have people living in an area, there is going to be some environmental degradation, this is true of anywhere. It is a necessary evil and the lesser of two evils when compared to the value of a populated sociable community with a vibrant economy"* (CR2).

In line with the findings of previously discussed topics, just one councillor from Co. Cavan, voiced concerns over the negative impacts of one-off housing with regard to social sustainability. His arguments centred on the issue of isolation faced by many rural dwellers; *"You've got a situation were when people retire, often the only contact they have with others is when they go into town, and then if they don't drive they are reliant on others. This is a ridiculous situation and one which shouldn't be allowed to continue into the future. People who do not work on the land should be building or buying houses in or within walking distance of urban centres"* (CCa4).

5.5.2. Position Relating to and Understanding of Sustainable Development – Co. Clare and Co. Galway

Given the relative strictness of planning policies relating to single dwelling in counties Clare and Galway, when compared to counties Cavan and Roscommon, it is perhaps not surprising that discussion relating to sustainable development and the three dimensions of which it is comprised (economic, environmental and social) tended to be more heated and in-depth.

Each of the 13 councillors were of the opinion that sustainable development is *"an extremely difficult concept to define"* (CG1). There was universal agreement that, as a concept, sustainable development is open to interpretation. Furthermore, it was suggested that the manner of interpretation was based on perspective; *"What I think sustainability is and what someone else thinks sustainable development is could be two completely different things"* (CG4). Respondents were eager to point out that sustainable development can only be defined if circumstance is taken into consideration; *"Rural sustainability can't be measured by the same yardstick as urban sustainability. At the end of the day, this is society, a mix of everything and we can't all fit into pre-defined boxes"* (CG5).

It was suggested by six councillors that the view that one-off housing was not sustainable, was based on a sustainable development ethos was grounded in an 'urban perspective.' One councillor commented, *"I know there's the argument of people travelling to work and that's not sustainable but this is an urban point of view. It has always been done and has to be done in a rural area. These people are still bringing home the money and spending it in the locality"* (CC1). The majority of councillors, tended to focus on rural communities and the social dimension of sustainable development when defining the concept; *"If the community is dying, then the development isn't sustainable and you have a situation, especially in a county like Galway were houses are left vacant. Maintaining communities is the key"* (CG3).

However, three respondents did hold a negative view of one-off housing, when considering the concept of sustainable rural settlement patterns. Again, it was the social dimension of sustainable development which was the primary focus in councillors' descriptions of why one-off housing could not be considered sustainable development. The following encapsulates the main arguments put forward by these respondents:

"Sustainable development is the development of villages and towns. This means building on the periphery of towns and villages, though not a cluster of houses three miles down the road. In Liscannor, for example, the shop has closed down

recently, the Post Office is gone; this proves that even the villages are struggling. The only hope rural services like pubs and shops, and so on, have is if people can walk to them. Most people can walk short distances so I do believe in the rural settlement policy that is in place. I do believe in developing but it has to be village-based and community-based, not dot dot dot all over the landscape. Sure you can't argue the principle that people should be allowed to build on their own land but it's very hard to reconcile the two" (CC6).

Sustainable Development and One-Off Housing – The Economic Dimension

With regard to the economic dimension of sustainable development and the sustainability of rural one-off housing, this engendered a vast array of responses from the councillors.

A primary topic of attention, was the difficulties of attracting industry to rural areas; *"The day of industry, the likes of Moneypoint, situating themselves in the countryside is long gone"* (CC4). The ongoing retreat of industry from rural areas was described as a blow to the economy, both at county and local level, *"In the 1970s, 80s and even the 90s, large factories locating in an area like this* [Tuam area] *would act to consolidate the area, providing jobs and security"* (CG5). Government policy was frequently cited as having assisted this trend; *"In fairness, why would anyone bother* [locating a factory] *in rural areas with the government focusing and promoting urban centres"* (CC2).

The advances in modern technology, if utilised to their full potential, were frequently cited as a means of benefiting rural businesses and the home industry; *"If you have broadband, then large sections of the community have the option to be self-sustainable, or at least contribute to their incomes in this sense, you know, selling farm products, or promoting whatever service they provide online, and so on"* (CC5). The primary problem was that many sections of the rural community are unable to obtain broadband connection; *"The infrastructure needed to promote the home industry, and by proxy benefit the economy, has been so slow in coming"* (CG1).

In counties Clare and Galway, the tourist industry was deemed to be the biggest provider, in terms of the economy in rural areas. The majority of councillors commented on the draw of rural Ireland, perhaps best described as *"the authentic voice of Ireland"* which rural tourists want *"to get out and experience"* (CC3). *"Many* [tourists] *want to immerse themselves in an area and feel part of the area, to stay in a local B&B or a farmhouse"* (CG4). It was considered 'extremely' important to ensure the continued maintenance of rural communities so that they can provide *"the kind of experience visitors expect. This is very important for tourism. This is what visitors will talk about, the welcome they received from the rural community"* (CC3).

Aside from the revenue rural areas acquire from visiting tourists, the tourist industry was also cited, by the majority of councillors, as being one of the main providers of jobs. For example, one councillor mentioned the Cliffs of Moher, one of many tourist attractions in Co. Clare, to illustrate a point he was making regarding the wide-ranging job opportunities created;
"*The Cliffs of Moher are employing at least 100 people, both directly and indirectly, from the information offices, tour guides, bus drivers, hotel and B&B staff. The Cliffs of Moher are what attract people to the area, and the locals are trying to make the most of this. In peak season, more people are hired, often providing second or third incomes for families"* (CC1).

The importance of having people working was frequently cited as being of huge importance to the strength of the local economy. The issue of aging populations in rural areas and restrictions being placed on non-locals building one-off housing in these areas was an issue which received a lot of attention; *"In an ideal world, sustainable development is about striking a balance, allowing for an area to grow economically and socially while maintaining the environment. But you need viable communities for this to happen and, I suppose, community replenishment when people leave. Planners seem to have forgotten this. Older people don't contribute to the economy and what we are left with is our communities dying out"* (CG3). There was a notable sense of unrest, amongst councillors interviewed, that

planning clause relating to 'locals only' were being applied too stringently, leading to, the difficulties in attracting and maintaining a working population in rural areas.

The issue of holiday homes was frequently mentioned with regard to their role in the functioning's of the rural economy. There was general agreement that new holiday home developments should be placed in clusters. Six of the 13 councillors stated that despite their negative image, holiday homes did have a role to play in boosting the rural economy; *"We do try to confine holiday homes, to cluster them. Sure, there's obviously nothing to be gained by having them scattered all over the countryside. At the same time, it has to be said, even if it's only during the summer months, these visitors come to experience what they feel is the real rural Ireland, and they do provide a huge boost to the economy"* (CC5).

Overall, however, the majority of interviewees (nine out of thirteen) felt that, all things considered, the boom in holiday home development, witnessed in the 1990s and early 2000s, had resulted in long-term negative effects for the rural economy, particularly with regard to people looking to build or buy a home in rural areas. As one councillor noted; *"People are caught in a catch-22 situation, they can't get permission to build a house, often because the area is considered overcrowded with development, many of these being empty holiday homes, and then there is a huge cost to buy a house because so many of these holiday homes were given planning permission in recent years, and have since increased drastically in price"* (CC4).

Three councillors (two in Co. Clare and one in Co. Galway) suggested the idea of an annual tax or service charge to be placed on holiday homes as a means of inducing *"some sort of correction in the property market in terms of second homes, a tax of €1000/1500 depending on the square footage, similar to taxes that exist in the south of France of Italy*[13]*"* (CG4). Given that many holiday homes are

[13] This has been effected. An annual tax (current rate €200) for non-principle private residences (current rate €200) came into effect on 31st July 2009 by means of the Local Government (Charges)

rented out for at least three months of the year, it was felt that such a service charge could be easily afforded and *"could be used for providing amenities, playgrounds, maintaining beach areas, providing cloakroom facilities for surfers, all that sort of thing"* (CC4).

Sustainable Development and One-off Housing – The Environmental Dimension

Although the environmental dimension of sustainable development did not feature particularly strongly when councillors were initially asked to provide their own definition of sustainable development, interviewees, both in favour and against one-off housing construction put forward strong arguments as to the location of environmental protection within the broader spectrum comprising 'sustainability.'

Four broad themes emerged relating to the visual impact of one-off housing as a settlement pattern type, the effect on the environment of single dwelling sewerage systems, the dependence on motorised transport in areas where one-off housing prevails and littering problems associated with single dwellings.

Eight of the 13 councillors in counties Clare and Galway made reference to the physical environment of rural areas and the need for its continued protection through planning policy; *"The increase in one-off housing is definitely detrimental to the environment, the whole scenic side of it"* (CG6).

Illustrating the interconnectivity of the three strands of sustainable development, six of the 13 councillors expressed views that considered the countryside as a visual amenity which should be considered a cornerstone of the rural tourist industry. Therefore, one-off housing needs to be managed to ensure the protection of this amenity and, as a primary contributor to the rural economy, the tourist industry. Each of these six councillors equated the perceived decline in the visual appeal of the rural landscape with the lax planning regimes witnessed in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As one councillor from Co. Clare commented; *"All you*

Act 2009. In addition, the capital gains tax for the sale of these types of property was raised from 20% to 22%.

have to do is drive from Carrigaholt up to Ballyvaughan and you'll see for yourself. I think it's appalling some of the decisions which have been made. It says an awful lot about people who can be swayed, that they allowed these things to happen" (CC7).

The primary grievance of four of these councillors related to the previously unchecked building of one-off holiday homes rather than to dwellings built for permanent occupation; *"My main problem, in this sense, is second homes or holiday homes. They take away from the landscape. Whereas, houses which have been built to be permanent homes...they add to it* [the landscape]. *They bring warmth and life to an area, which tourists come to see"* (CG5). Two councillors held a stricter stance, stating the all future building of single dwellings needed continued strict management if the visual environment was to be maintained and protected; *"Landscape character is so important – you want to pass on this visual amenity and this must be considered when planning, and indeed granting permission for, a rural house"* (CC6).

A related topic, which was quite frequently mentioned, was the location and siting of one-off housing. It was noted that if the siting and design of a single dwelling is in keeping with the surrounding landscape, the effect on the visual landscape is minimal and *"people will have less trouble with the planning authorities"* (CC3). There appeared to be a general consensus that applicants were more environmentally aware in recent years when it came to submitting applications for a single dwelling; *"People are now looking at the greater good going forward and have concern for the impact of decisions you are making are going to have in the future. If you build houses, for example, in some scenic areas of the coast or up hills, it's going to effect the environment and the landscape. You have to consider the environment when building, the house has to compliment the landscape"* (CG5).

Another primary theme which emerged was that of sewerage systems, relating both to one-off housing and growing clustered settlements. Surprisingly, given that the vast majority of councillors considered themselves, in general, to be in favour

of one-off housing construction, there was a significant level of concern displayed relating to the viability of single dwelling sewerage disposal systems. Seven out of the thirteen councillors displayed reservations to this effect. These concerns appeared to be threefold. The first related to the 'security' of septic tank sewerage systems; *"The lack of a secure system can be extremely detrimental to the environment and have a huge effect on the quality of soil in an area, which results in a knock-on effect for farming"* (CC7). Second, the suitability of certain areas to house such systems was called into question; *"It doesn't matter if you have the most modern and up-to-date sewerage system, if the soil in the area doesn't support it. People don't seem to realise this"* (CG6). Naturally, the converse of this argument was also represented with several councillors who contended that the introduction of new 'top-of-the-range' percolation systems had rendered the argument of ground water contamination obsolete.

The third, and most discussed of the issues related to the lack of a monitoring system to review the ongoing security of septic-tank systems already *in situ*; *"The last thing we need is have unmonitored percolation tanks dotted everywhere"* (CC4). As one councillor in Co. Galway commented; *"There is absolutely nothing being done by our local authority at the moment to check septic tanks, so septic tanks could be overflowing and may be polluting streams all over the place. I have never heard of one septic tank being monitored"* (CG5). This sentiment was echoed by councillors in Co. Clare; *"We have no investigation into whether septic tanks are being properly monitored, whether the stuff is being released into the environment"* (CC7). Three councillors mentioned the septic tank monitoring system put in place by Cavan County Council; *"They have to be commended. As a result of what they have done, the situation has seriously improved up there"* (CG3). However, a number of councillors commented that they had not yet raised the issue in council as to do so would be politically unwise; *"None of the councillors have brought up the idea of monitoring septic tanks, including myself, because that means putting extra costs on people, although I am considering it"* (CG5).

Given the timeframe during which interviews with councillors were conducted (2007), the water crisis in Co. Galway, was at the forefront of councillors' minds and, thus, was subjected to detailed attention by each of the six councillors interviewed in Co. Galway. In 2007, Lough Corrib, one of the primary sources of drinking water, for both Galway city and county, became polluted. This was caused, *inter alia*, by the overloading of a sewerage treatment plant, rendering it incapable of treating effluent, resulting in raw sewerage being released into waterways. As a result, 90,000 people in the vicinity were forced to boil water prior to consumption between March and August 2007.

Unsound farming practices were suggested at the time as being causal to the situation. However, this claim was rejected by all but one of the councillors interviewed. Indeed, all six councillors stated that the primary cause of blame was to be directed at *"the multi-housing units which are springing up at the edges of towns and villages which are causing major sewerage problems"* (CG3). One councillor commented; *"There's talk of blaming the farmers but farming practices haven't changed to such an extent to cause such pollution but settlement structures have*" (CG2). Another cited the example of Athenry which has *"increased in size by approximately 50% from 2003 to 2007. This has caused huge sewerage problems as the small sewerage plants currently in place are being overworked and need to be replaced to accommodate the new housing developments"* (CG5).

A lack of foresight in planning was also cited as being the instrumental in contributing to Galway's water problems, several councillors commenting on temporary sewerage systems put in place when new housing estates are developed; *"These systems are only designed to last five years or so, then when they are full the excess effluent is flushed down to the main system and this is what is causing the backlog and causing the pollution"* (CG5).

A high level of contempt for central-government operations, particularly the DoEHLG was apparent. The promotion of clustered settlement patterns in rural areas and the apparent lack of direction regarding the manner by which associated

infrastructure is to be provided was heavily criticised; *"They allow for developers to come in and make profound sums of money building these estates, all in the name of sustainable development, and yet we can see that they are less sustainable, in terms of the environment and indeed economically and socially, than single houses ever were"* (CG2).

With regard to the upgrading of existing sewerage treatment plants, one councillor commented; *"there are apparently around 50 sewerage schemes in the pipeline, to be funded by the DoE* [Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government] – *how many of these come into fruition, especially given the unstable economic climate we find ourselves in, is anyone's guess"* (CG3). His sentiments were echoed by all councillors interviewed in Co. Galway.

Another issue relating to the sustainability of dispersed rural settlements and raised by four councillors was that of household waste and the manner of its disposal by single dwellers. The Irish, as a nation, were described by one interviewee as being *"dirty, whether we like it or not, and we tend to engage in illegal dumping a lot more than our European counterparts."* This, he continued, has led to *"scenario where the amount of litter accumulating in rural areas is increasing. What we need is a proper policing of disposable litter"* (CC3). All four councillors, who spoke on the issue, commented upon the fact that, currently, the disposal of domestic waste by single dwelling households is difficult to trace and that this was the crux of the problem; *"I've had countless reports of people disposing of their waste in rivers, lakes, over walls...and they know not to leave any personal stuff in it that would allow it to be traceable"* (CG6). In addition, each of the four councillors who voiced concerns on this subject focused upon the lack of legislation in place to compel people to register the means by which they are disposing of their domestic waste, *"Each household should be compelled to submit an audit of how they are disposing of their waste – a waste disposal declaration. In businesses you have to do this so it should be the same for households"* (CC6).
The final issue of note was that of dependency on motorised transport by people living in areas where one-off housing is the prevalent settlement pattern type.

Interestingly, given the vast coverage of this issue in literature relating to rural settlement types, it was only mentioned by three councillors when discussing environmental protection. One councillor cited car dependency as an example of how *"certain quarters overemphasise the environmental aspect of sustainable development and use the car dependency issue as their core argument to oppose one-off housing. But, it has always been this way. People in towns and villages often travel to larger urban centres for work also, that's no different and you'll often find that people car pool for these journeys"* (CG1). The other two councillors who raised this topic did voice concerns relating to the long-term environmental sustainability of constant reliance on motorised transport for access to work, school and amenities, such as, supermarkets.

Sustainable Development and One-off Housing – The Social Dimension

A common observation made by councillors representing Co. Clare and Co. Galway was that rural areas are *"often more sustainable than urban areas in terms of social interaction"* (CC3). The primary reason put forward for this observance was necessity; "*The fact that people's living situation is quite, well, isolated means that people, they are more conscientious, they make time to visit their neighbours and relatives, they organise their own entertainment whether that be having people over or taking turns in being designated driver for nights out"* (CC4).

With regard to the issue of social viability, the topic of eligibility requirements, such as the 'locals only' planning clause, attached to applications for single dwellings was frequently mentioned. The issue of social viability was commonly discussed with reference to the economic situation of rural areas, highlighting the interconnectivity of the three strands of the sustainable development concept; *"An ageing community is no good in that they can't really contribute in an economic sense. This is why development must be allowed to continue to ensure that vibrant communities are sustained"* (CG5). Another councillor commented; *"It is extremely important to ensure that outsiders are not subjected to a blanket ban, either consciously or otherwise by planners as young working people can*

contribute hugely both to the economy and to the social fabric of rural areas" (CG3).

In a related topic, six councillors discussed the effects of the *"rigidity of current planning regimes"* on services in rural areas. While it was conceded that the (perceived) strictness of planning officers in granting permission for single dwellings was not singularly responsible for ongoing trends of depopulation in rural areas, and the resultant closure of local services (e.g. shops, pubs etc.), it was suggested that such policies were playing a significant role in preventing a recovery of population;

"What planners don't seem to realise is that communities are dependent on maintaining population numbers, you know, to field sports teams, for community groups, schools, services...Sure people will leave an area, this is normal, but to prevent any replenishment of a community through the use of planning policy, this is barbaric and goes against tradition" (CC1). It was also stated that *"the future of rural communities and the tradition of dispersed settlement patterns in Ireland are being severely compromised in the name of environmental protection"* (CG4).

In contrast, three councillors pointed out that the 'replenishment' of rural communities was not dependent of further development; *"Integration of newcomers to a community should not be related to the one-off housing issue. There are lots of ways outsiders can integrate to a rural community. They can buy or develop an existing house"* (CG6).

While the majority of councillors spoke positively with regard to the sustainability of dispersed settlement in terms of social viability, three councillors did question the sustainability of this settlement structure in relation to its social dimension. The examples and anecdotes put forward to support their position centred on the issue of social isolation and are summarised in the following;

"The social difficulties of one-off housing are enormous, even for young people living just two or three miles outside a settlement if they don't have a car or are a

one-car family. People talk about letting people integrate into communities. How is this possible in this instance? And this is a very common situation" (CC7).

These councillors also noted that the social benefits of living within walking distance of an urban centre far outweigh those of living in an area of dispersed settlement, particularly for older people; *"The only contact they* [older people] *may have is neighbours or relatives dropping by or dropping off messages so maybe they have social contact for an hour a day whereas if you are living in a town or village you can see and hear people around you, even if you chose not to interact, the sense of isolation is nowhere near as acute"* (CC6).

To summarise this section, councillors representing authorities which are both strict and lenient with regard to rural housing policy were in agreement that sustainable development, as a concept, is extremely difficult to define and is often based on personal perspective. As the majority of councillors positioned themselves as being in favour of one-off housing construction, most depictions of sustainable development focused on the positive aspects of rural life.

Tourism was a primary focus of discussion across both types of regime particularly the role of rural dwellers in promoting the industry, citing their necessity in providing the authentic rural experience. Councillors in counties Clare and Galway also emphasised the importance of the tourist industry for providing jobs. In addition, a common discussion involved the suggestion that difficulties in attracting industry to rural areas could be overcome by utilising the advances in modern technology and the promotion of home industry.

It was agreed by all respondents that the proliferation of holiday homes in recent years had had a detrimental effect and is not in keeping with the prescriptions of sustainable development. Councillors representing strict regimes have suggested that this proliferation and the subsequent tightening of associated planning policy has prevented people with a real interest in relocating to a rural area, thus helping

the economic and social situation, from acquiring single dwelling planning permission to do so.

The perceived lack of focus on the part of planning officials for the societal aspect of sustainable development when making planning decisions on one-off housing applications was also a topical subject with councillors from both types of regimes. This, in conjunction with current national rural housing policy, was considered a factor which affects social cohesion in rural areas. In addition, councillors from strict regimes felt that local policy tools such as the local need and occupancy clauses exacerbated this situation.

The primary concerns of the minority of councillors against one-off housing construction were that single rural dwellings affect local rural infrastructure and the provision of services. In addition, they were adamant that continued one-off housing construction will not assist the population recovery of rural areas. Instead, the existing housing stock should be utilised and new building should occur in clustered settlement.

5.6. Assessment of National Policy Relating to Rural Settlement

In this section of the interview, councillors were asked to assess both the *National Spatial Strategy for Ireland, 2002-2020* (NSS; published 2002) and the *Sustainable Rural Housing, Guidelines for Planning Authorities* (RHGs; published 2005), in terms of their success in promoting sustainable rural settlement patterns. A number of key areas which prioritised attention during these discussions emerged. These related to the perceived urban bias associated with the NSS; the role which interpretation and personal perspective play in the formulation of national policy; the manner by which such policies are applied at local level; and the lack of clarity as to the role of the RHGs. The possibility of forming a viable regional tier of government was an issue which was also raised. Finally, a number

of councillors commented on the effect that government policy relating to rural settlement structure was having at local level.

5.6.1. Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon

Among councillors representing counties Cavan and Roscommon, by far the main topic of conversation was the perceived bias of the NSS towards urban settlement structures; *"Rural Ireland has suffered because of such a blatant promotion of urbanisation"* (CCa1). Their primary concern was of the effect which the current rural settlement strategy would have on rural areas, not just at present but heading into the future; *"Urbanisation is the policy of national government at the expense of rural areas. There is a steady haemorrhage of young people moving to urban areas, yet the door is being slammed shut to anyone who wants to fill this void. It will be 20 to 30 years before we see the effects of such policies"* (CR2).

It was frequently suggested that the 'urban-centric' model of national policy has resulted in huge conflict at local level as local authorities struggle to conform to a *"one size fits all model"* (CR2). As one councillor in Co. Cavan commented; *"There is a huge difference between an area that is deprived and an area which is doing exceptionally well, and both exist in Cavan at the moment as well as throughout the country. Any guidelines or policies brought down* [from national level] *need to reflect an area if they are to be incorporated into a development plan"* (CCa1).

The issue of interpretation of national policy by planning officers at local level was a topical issue. The all-embracing nature of national rural settlement policy and the manner in which it was being activated at local level were considered problematic by the majority of councillors interviewed; *"With the spectrum of ruralities and rural situations we have, in terms of your environment, the economy and the community, top-down guidelines are often too generalised and can end up having a negative effect when they are employed in every single decision relating to single dwelling applications and are being used to promote the personal*

convictions of an individual" (CR3). It was frequently commented upon that at local level; *"Individuals and their opinions play a huge role"* (CCa1).

Connected to the above topic and a commonly raised subject of conversation, was the manner in which the RHGs are being utilised. The lack of clarity regarding their specific role was frequently mentioned, as can be seen from the following interview excerpt:
"With the rural housing guidelines, they are only guidelines, and if they are used as such they can be useful, but if they are treated as the sole policy and interpreted straight down the line, then they do a lot of damage" (CR2).

Each of the eight councillors interviewed from Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon were of the opinion that national policy, directing sustainable rural settlement structures, has been unsuccessful, both in its formulation and implementation. As discussed, the primary reasons put forward by councillors explaining this perspective was the generalised nature of these policies and their urban bias. However, one councillor from Co. Cavan disagreed with his colleagues. He remarked; *"The thinking behind the government's policies* [regarding rural settlement] *is sound. We do need to focus on promoting clustered settlements at local level to curb the environmental, economic and social problems we are currently experiencing in rural areas. What we need is a strong leader who will not be swayed by popular opinion when it comes to formulating a national spatial strategy"* (CCa4).

5.6.2. Co. Clare and Co. Galway

As seen in Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon, the general consensus amongst councillors representing Co. Clare and Co. Galway was that government policy relating to rural settlement had, on a whole, been unsuccessful, both in its formulation and its implementation.

With regard to the NSS, it was suggested by the majority of interviewees that the methodology employed in the formulation process was flawed. One councillor

remarked that, *"the background research to the National Spatial Strategy was based on a series of reports, which had been commissioned by the DoEHLG'* He continued; *'The findings of these reports were accepted without question by the DoE. There is no system in place for refuting the findings of such reports or for providing alternate best practice models to move forward with"* (CG5).

Again, the majority of councillors were in agreement that the 'roll-out' of the NSS was an 'unmitigated disaster.' The main reason given for this perspective related to the manner in which the government was perceived to have been influenced by external influences (i.e., lobby groups). *"The National Spatial Strategy in terms of the development of towns was disastrous. You had businesses and interest groups lobby government to make their towns a focal point of the strategy and they* [the government] *succumbed to this pressure"* (CC6).

The primary issue of consternation raised by councillors was that the NSS marginalises rural areas; *"It is based on a model where the focus is placed solely on urban areas to the detriment of rural areas"* (CG5). One councillor, form Co. Clare, cited the following example to illustrate his point; *"In Clare, it* [the NSS] *focuses on the main corridor from Shannon to Limerick. For example, the National Roads Authority's new signage focuses on Limerick, Shannon and Ennis, there is no focus whatsoever on the West...Kilkee, Kilrush, Lahinch. It's like we don't exist. Think of the effect such a strategy will have on tourism in the long-run"* (CC5).

Another common topic of discussion amongst councillors concerned the difficulties faced in translating national policy for local implementation. One councillor from Co. Galway stated; *"Unfortunately, there are clashes with national policy, like the National Spatial Strategy, at local level because these policies are drawn up for the whole country, and a policy which may suit one part of the country may not suit here, and this can lead to conflict"* (CC5). A number of interviewees remarked that councillors were essentially being made scapegoats and blamed any lack of compliance with national policy at local level, particularly

with regard to the prescriptions of their respective County Development Plans; *"Councillors are being penalised for not complying with the National Spatial Strategy and are being asked to redraft their County Development Plans. This is wrong. This is a failing of government expecting local authorities to assimilate to a ridiculously generalised, urban-biased national model"* (CG4).

The manner by which national policy relating to rural settlement structures is enforced at local level was a common grievance among councillors. It was generally conceded that despite 'conflict and much wrangling,' it was possible to align national policy with local policy, *"even if this is done in a very generalised manner"* (CG3). It was suggested that the majority of problems encountered at local level, occur at the policy-implementation stage. Thus, a need for clarity with regard to the role of the RHGs was considered a necessity by ten of the thirteen interviewees; *"The rural housing guidelines are only guidelines if they are treated as such. Problems arise when they are treated and applied as policy"* (CC3)

Conversely, three councillors were of the opinion that the RHGs were actually problematic because of the lax manner in which they were being enforced. Their concerns are summarised in the following;
"The rural housing guidelines are being broken left, right and centre. This needs to be addressed. They should be workable but they need to be redrafted because they are far too general. For example, there is a big difference between a coastal village and an inland village. There is no point in having them if they are not being used properly" (CG6).

There was a general consensus amongst the majority of councillors that conflict relating to the assimilation and implementation of national policy at local level was unavoidable. Nine councillors made the point that it was a councillor's role to monitor the manner in which such policies are being applied and to intervene when necessary; *"We know the individuals applying for permission [for a single dwelling], we know their motives and if they are genuine, and we can help them appeal if necessary."* (CC2).

The interpretation of rural settlement strategies by planning officers was an issue which was also frequently alluded to by councillors. As one interviewee commented; *"The National Spatial Strategy and the Rural Housing Guidelines can be bandied about and implemented as an individual sees fit. They can be used to refuse any development"* (CG2). However, by the same token, it was recognised that the NSS and the RHGs could be used to promote development if such development were considered the most sustainable option for an area; *"A planner, who sees that for the sustainable development of an area, we do need some actual development, the policies can be used to promote this view"* (CG4).

Two councillors commented on the effect which national policy was having on the individual. Their concerns related to the economic implications faced by people who are *"being forced to buy rather than build their house"* (CC4). One councillor, from Co. Galway remarked; *"They don't realise in Dublin that they are forcing many people to face sustained financial hardship over a long period of time. This could be avoided if only people were afforded their god-given right to build their home. Instead, the government have set up a situation where people are essentially sitting ducks for developers who are able to make a fortune off them"* (CG1). It was also remarked upon that the *"age-old pension plan for farmers, to sell off a site or two, has been removed by current government policy, leaving many in dire straits moving into the future"* (CC1).

In summary, the NSS was considered unsuccessful, both in its formulation and implementation by the majority of councillors representing both strict and lenient local planning regimes. Both groups noted the urban bias within the NSS which it was felt marginalised rural areas. The suggestion was made that pressure from external factors had led to too many urban centres being included as focal points for development. Therefore, it is contended that the all-embracing nature of the NSS has, in fact, damaged its impact. Firstly, this has created problems with translation and activation at local level due to the huge variations in geographical and spatial circumstances across local authorities. In addition, it was stated that the scope for interpretation within the NSS has meant that it can be used to forward

the personal convictions of any individual, often resulting in rigid interpretation, which has resulted in significant controversy at local level. In contrast, a small minority of councillors were of the opinion that the primary problems relating to national policy were due to lax interpretation at local level.

5.7. The Role of the Sustainable Development Concept in Planning Policy

The question of whether the absence of a statutory definition of sustainable development in national and local rural settlement policy has been beneficial or detrimental to the promotion of sustainable rural settlement patterns was intended to be included as just a part of the section assessing national policy. However, the issue when raised during the interviewing process engendered a great deal of discussion, and so, has been included as a sub-section. There was a high level of uniformity in opinion across the four case-study local authorities. Therefore, the perspectives of councillors are documented together.

The overall consensus was that it was virtually impossible to define the exact meaning of what construes sustainable development for an entire country and that this was the major problem underlying national policy, especially with regard to its implementation at local level; "*The idea of sustainable development and the manner in which it is interpreted at European level has its merits but the national government has just taken the concept and shunted it down to local level as if they consider it like a net which catches everything*" (CCa1). Within the same context, another councillor commented; *"The government has decided to define sustainable development as a 'catch all, cover all' with no consideration given to the huge variation in living environments of people across the country"* (CG2).

The perceived lack of democracy in the current generally-accepted interpretation of sustainable development, relating to rural settlement structure and the promotion of village-type rural settlement patterns, was a concern which was

frequently raised; *"What is sustainable? Does the focus have to be on urban development or do you go with the broader holistic approach to society where you recognize that there is a huge divide in opinion? As a democracy, the voice of rural Ireland should be heard"* (CC4). In addition, the benefits garnered by the degree of interpretation afforded to the concept of sustainable development were considered to be directly linked to the personal agenda of those in a position to make that interpretation; *"I suppose room for interpretation is a good thing but it depends on the person doing the interpreting and their own personal opinion regarding dispersed dwellings and other rural settlement patterns. When you consider the huge turnover of planners across the county councils, with each having their own take on the meaning of sustainable development, you can see how this would be problematic"* (CG1).

It was agreed by all councillors, who spoke on this topic that the primary focus of problems caused by the interpretive nature of the sustainable development concept was at local level, both with regard to the formulation of the CDP and the activation of these rural settlement policies. The main observations put forward by councillors in relation to this issue are summarised in the following quotation;
"The fact that sustainable development is not specifically defined causes huge problems with interpretation and this follows through to the County Development Plan which is then left open to interpretation as well. You'll be told that it isn't by planners but how is this possible given that the core concept cementing the plan is interpretive...sure I know, I helped put it together. At the end of the day, the people who decide who builds are the planners. The interpretation of most planners [of sustainable development] *falls on the environmental side with little social consideration. When you think about it, planners have no obligation to populate rural areas"* (CR1)

5.8. Assessment of Local Policy relating to Rural Settlement Strategies – The Policy Formulation Process

The entire process of CDP formulation is governed by a specific timeframe, a pre-defined date by which each section must be completed. The process is initiated with a consultation phase, whereby planning officers meet councillors and work through the issues which have been raised from the previous plan. The next step in the process involves the planning officers constructing a draft CDP which the councillors *"basically tear to pieces, then it's a case of back to the drawing board"* (CC3). At this stage, the councillors amend the plan to their satisfaction. In keeping with the specified timeframe, a draft must be ready to put on public display by a particular date. The public is invited, at this stage, to make submissions on the plan. A report on these submissions is written up and is also put on display for a period of time. The feedback, both with regard to the submissions and the report, are taken into account by the council when introducing changes to the plan. If changes are incorporated into the plan, it is put back on public display. Finally, by a set date, the final draft is decided upon.

5.8.1. Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon

The primary topics presented by councillors in counties Cavan and Roscommon when asked to provide an assessment of the formulation stage of local rural settlement policy focused on internal conflict; problems relating to interpretation and the wording of policies and the role of party politics in influencing councillors' opinions.

Councillors highlighted a number of instances in which conflict was liable to occur, the first being among councillors themselves during negotiations over what to include and omit from the CDP. *"It's a tense time, the making of the County Development Plan. When it comes to a rural settlement strategy, there are a lot of differences of opinions, amongst councillors, of what should be considered*

sustainable and what is best for the county. No-one is going to be completely happy. There's a lot of compromise involved" (CCa4).

A second area of conflict, mentioned by all eight councillors interviewed, pertained to the differences in opinions between the County Manager and his planning officers and councillors. One councillor suggested that, *"the seriousness of the conflict does depend on the perspective of planning officers, but it's mainly to do with their flexibility and securing their agreement to comply with policies we put forward"* (CR2). Four of the eight councillors conveyed a level of respect for the work of planning officers. One councillor from Co. Roscommon commented; *"Planners do deserve some commendation for what they do and they shouldn't be underestimated. They are experts in planning matters and provide sound advice at the policy-making stage....maybe you should do this, maybe you shouldn't do that"* (CR3).

Turning to the issue of interpretation, seven of the eight councillors interviewed felt that interpretation of the CDP was a 'huge problem' encapsulated in the following;
"Interpreting the County Development Plan, once it is finalised is a major issue. What you thought you were setting out, what you meant, can be interpreted completely differently, and this causes all sorts of problems" (CCa1).

However, despite the problems relating to interpretation, the possibility of introducing a more rigid policy framework was rejected by the majority of councillors. Six councillors spoke of the need for flexibility when it came to the rural settlement strategy component of the CDP, one commenting that: *"You can have problems if the rural settlement strategy is over-descriptive, in that you can tie yourself up in knots, so you're better off to have a certain vagueness so you can have flexibility within the plan and only in planning decisions"* (CR4).

The third topic was that of political party influence when formulating the County Development Plan. All but one of the councillors felt that their first priority was to

their constituents and that meant securing a rural settlement strategy which met their needs while still complying (where possible), with national policy. Only one councillor held a contrasting view; *"One-off housing is not sustainable, not matter what why you look at it. I know it goes against popular opinion but Fianna Fáil's policy of concentrated rural settlement is the best way forward and that's what I push for in County Development Plan negotiations"* (CCa4).

5.8.2. Co. Clare and Co. Galway

The questioning of councillors in counties Clare and Galway regarding their assessment of the process involved in local rural settlement strategy formulation furnished answers which covered the same broad themes as seen in the Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon interviews such as conflict in constructing the CDP; policy interpretation and the level of political party influence during the CDP formulation process. Two additional categories of discussion were identified; the role of outside influence during the formulation stages of the CDP, and the possible consequences faced by councillors if aspects of the CDP proved unsound.

Again, councillors reported a high level of conflict among themselves when drawing up changes for the CDP; *"You want to do what's right for your constituents without compromising the environment. Getting it right now does save a lot of conflict later on. Often it can come down to the working of a sentence. You can't please everyone but the goal is to ensure that everyone feels that the settlement strategy in place is workable in their areas...well in theory anyway"* (CG6).

With regard to the issue of conflict between councillors and planning officers during rural settlement strategy negotiations, it was suggested by five of the councillors that there was an element of contempt on the part of planning officers, for the policy-making process highlighted in the following extract:
"Given that they are used to being in the driving seat, being the ones making decisions, there is a definite impression that they don't appreciate our [councillors'] *role in the policy-making process that we're in over our heads or*

something. When councillors decide on changes, you'll find that planners inevitably reject a lot of them, often, I think, without any real basis" (CC1).

However, the majority of councillors did make the point that many planning officers were happy to work within the confines of the plan once the final draft has been completed; *"Well many planners are great and say, well I might not agree with everything but I will accept it, this is our plan and I will work within it, but others will say I'm never going to agree with this, and this is where the conflict comes in. But in the end, it's us as councillors that vote on changes and put forward the plan"* (CC3).

The manner in which possible changes to the CDP are brought up for discussion received attention. While much of the debate concerning changes to the CDP is open to the public, three councillors mentioned the necessity of holding some CDP meetings 'in committee' (in private) stressing that this was *"nothing to do with keeping the public out"* rather *"to ensure that the best possible plan is achieved"* (CG5). As one councillor remarked; *"It is necessary* [to hold meetings in private] *when teasing out the issues. You may say something only to work out the implications of moving in a particular direction. However, it may not be popular opinion and if the media are there they will jump on that, when the making of such a comment may only have been to go through all the options"* (CC4).

Ten of the thirteen councillors mentioned the set timeframe within which the CDP was to be completed. It was agreed that the *"deadline provides focus"* (CC7). *"It ensures that we don't keep running around in circles and that compromise over certain aspects of the plan is reached fairly rapidly"* (CG3).

The second key topic which drew a lot of discussion was the interpretation of the CDP once the final draft had been published. As one councillor commented; *"This is an area which causes a lot of conflict. What one person thinks they have agreed to being included can, when viewed in print be interpreted completely differently by another individual"* (CC4). Several councillors expressed the exasperation they

felt at the situation; *"Of course you want to clarify your meaning to ensure that the policy is carried out as you intended but often this just becomes word upon words. An element of flexibility is necessary. In fairness, the policy as you intended it might not be able to be applied in all situations anyway"* (CC2).

Despite agreement by a majority of councillors of the need for flexibility in the rural settlement strategy component of the CDP, it was noted by five councillors that planning officers did not appear to be at ease with such flexibility in planning policy and that this had its own consequences; *"Planners say they don't want flexibility and you can end up with a tight, rigid interpretation of local rural housing policy, which you intended to be flexible, and more often than not, their* [planning officers] *interpretation doesn't fall down on the side in favour of rural housing"* (CC2)

Connected to the preceding issue was the level of distrust which six councillors suggested existed between councillors and planning officers. This distrust related to the misinterpretation by planning officers of rural housing policy as laid out in the CDP. The perspective of these councillors is synopsised in the following interview extract;

"With the County Development Plan, the stock answer from officialdom when they make a decision you don't agree with is, 'well we're following your plan,' but this is far from the truth. They are interpreting it in a totally different manner than was intended. There is a huge level of distrust between elected representatives and officialdom at local level. You may have an understanding with the Manager regarding a certain section or point within the County Development Plan, and three months down the line you find that it has been misinterpreted in the planning office" (CC1).

In addition, one councillor stated that due to the level of interpretation afforded in the CDP, *"often through no fault of our own but as a result of the loose interpretive policies coming down from national level"* it was common for certain policies in the CDP to contradict other policies, *"and it is the planner who decides*

which policy he is going to go with. In this sense, planners have a managerial role" (CG1). This sentiment was echoed by a further six interviewees.

The third issue raised by interviewees in their assessment of local rural settlement policy formulation was the role of the 'party line' regarding rural settlement structure in influencing councillors' decisions when constructing the rural settlement strategy of the CDP. The general consensus was that the 'party line' isn't given much credence, as the councillors' first interest is to *"secure what is best for my constituents"* (CC2). The following excerpt, a summation of the issue by one councillor, highlights the main points raised; *"It is imperative that each councillor acts on their own initiative when making decisions relating to rural settlement policy. There is no party whip in the County Development Plan formulation process, so councillors aren't, in theory, directed by the party line. Rather each councillor makes their own decision which they must be satisfied with"* (CG3).

While two councillors did comment that the decisions they made with regard to the rural settlement strategy were in keeping with the party line, they asserted that this was incidental as their personal positions on sustainable rural settlement structures mirrored the prescriptions of the political party to which they were affiliated, which in both instances was Fianna Fáil.

The role of 'outside agents' influencing the policy decision-making process was noted by a number of councillors. The general consensus of the eight councillors who spoke on this topic was that while there is an element of influence from *"various groups and individuals trying to promote their own agenda,"* (CC6) it is the role of the councillor *"to try and balance it out as best we can"* (CC5). Councillors, in both Co. Clare and Co. Galway, spoke of open nights where *'we try to offset public concerns'* (CG2). This was to allow for *"individuals and groups to come in and put forward their opinions and it's here we try to explain to people why we can and can't do certain things"* (CG4).

The final issue of note, mentioned by five councillors, was the level of importance attached to ensuring the CDP is 'safe.' While it is the role of the County Manager to ensure that the plan does not conflict with national policy, hence his ability to accept or reject all or parts of the plan, it is within the remit of councillors, while taking the County Manager's actions in this regard into consideration, to overrule him and publish a CDP which does not have his full backing. It was stressed that councillors needed to be completely sure of themselves if they voted to take this route as they would be liable for any resulting consequences. As one councillor commented; *"You must be 100 per cent sure of your plan because if a manager is forced by a councillor to vote to accept part of a plan and there is subsequent fall-out, whether this be environmental or economic or whatever, the councillors who voted in favour of introducing these changes without the backing of the Manager can be held personally, financially responsible"* (CC7).

Several interesting issues were raised with regard to the formulation of local rural housing policy, the first relating to the issue of conflict. While conflict amongst councillors themselves during CDP formation was mentioned, more attention was given to the conflict which occurred between councillors and planning officers. Despite all councillors representing strict regimes, and half of those representing lenient regimes indicating a respect for the work of planning officers, there was a level of consternation uncovered with regard to differences in perspective and perceived problems with flexibility on the part of planning officers. In particular, this was considered the case with regard to the problems which occur once the rural settlement strategy has been finalised, in that it can, and has, been interpreted in ways which were not envisaged or intended by councillors.

However, the perspective of councillors with regard to ensuring sustainability in rural settlement strategies also has to be questioned given that all but one councillor interviewed stated that their first priority was to their constituents which meant securing a rural settlement strategy which meets their needs while attempting to comply with national policy.

5.9. Assessment of the Application of Rural Settlement Policy at Local Level

Given the national focus on consolidating town and village settlements and the intention of promoting sustainable development at local level, a number of local authorities have introduced eligibility conditions, attached to planning applications for one-off housing, commonly known as the 'local need' clause. In addition, an occupancy clause is now attached as a condition of planning approval on successful applications. This is where the applicant, to whom permission for construction of a single dwelling has been granted, must agree to reside in the property for a set number of years established by the council.

Of the four case-study local authorities selected counties Clare and Galway utilise both the 'local need' and the occupancy clauses as part of their rural settlement strategy, whereas Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon do not, as yet, employ such strategies as a means of managing rural settlement. Therefore, this section will focus primarily on the perspectives and experiences of councillors representing Co. Clare and Co. Galway. However, the views of those representing counties Cavan and Roscommon pertaining to the benefits and/or disadvantages of the 'local need' and occupancy clauses will also be noted.

5.9.1. The Local Needs Clause – Co. Clare and Co. Galway

Of the thirteen councillors interviewed, five councillors stated that they felt that the 'local need' clause was a necessary condition attached to the constructing of a single dwelling. The primary reason put forward for this point of view was that it took into account and protected the local community; *"The local need clause is a good thing. It allows for the core base population of rural areas who wish to set up their own homes in the area to have this opportunity"* (CC5). Connected to this point, and an issue mentioned by each of the five councillors was the role the local needs clause plays in limiting the market for land in rural areas. From the perspective of the buyer, this was considered a very positive outcome of the clause because it removed the occurrence of pricing locals out of the market; *"If this*

[local needs] *clause wasn't in place, you could have a person with a lot of money coming in and buying land at an inflated price, and a local who does not have the same resources cannot compete"* (CG4).

Councillors also commented on the role that the local needs clause plays in preventing holiday-home construction and the influx of people who have no intention to contribute to the community; *"You can't have people deciding they like an area, then coming in building a big house with two to three acres and then not actually becoming involved in the community, whether this be socially or economically. This is not good for the community and this is where sustainability comes into it"* (CC5).

Conversely, eight of the thirteen councillors interviewed were not satisfied by the manner in which the 'local need' clause was currently being operated in their authorities. The primary reason given for this was the lack of consideration, afforded by the clause for people who have shown themselves to be committed to an area, but are not locals or have not lived in the area for long enough to be considered eligible; *"You have an outsider with a permanent job, such as a teacher who is involved in extra-curricular activities such as the school sports or choir, involved in community life and yet they can't get planning permission. This is an issue which needs to be addressed"* (CG4). The general consensus was that outsiders, who have demonstrated a commitment, contributed to the social fabric of an area and are in a position to continue doing so should be accommodated. The perceived inflexibility of planning officers was viewed as a contributory factor to this problem. As one councillor commented; *"If the County Development Plan was afforded its intended flexibility, then things would be fine. Planners need to be more comfortable exerting the flexibility as was intended with the plan. The blanket ban we are currently seeing isn't working"* (CC4).

Connected to the preceding issue and the perception of inflexibility on the part of planning officers was the lack of consideration given to the various rural area types as described in the NSS and the County Development Plans of each local

authority. It was suggested, by six councillors, that planning officers were not differentiating between areas where the 'local need' clause was deemed necessary and other areas such as those which were structurally weak were anyone is eligible to seek permission to build a single dwelling. As one councillor commented; *"A lot of outsiders are being refused on the basis of the local needs clause in areas where it shouldn't apply. I've seen numerous incidents of this'* (CG4). Another remarked; *'People from outside the local area looking to settle really don't stand a chance. Even in areas of population decline, they'll be hit with a refusal based on landscape vulnerability or whatever. There's no give in them* [planning officers] *at all"* (CG2).

Three councillors suggested that the local needs clause was discriminatory in the sense that the traditional parameters of what constitutes a local rural person is essentially defunct; *"The issue of local rural has dominated rural planning for the last number of years. But, does local rural even exist anymore in the traditional sense. I mean, how many families do we have living and working solely within the local area?"* (CG1). Another councillor stated; *"It's normal for people in rural areas to travel for work, their kids still attend school in the locality, they still contribute socially...but yet people who want to contribute in the exact same way but don't have Moveen or Cross on their birth cert are being denied this right"* (CC2).

A final issue frequently mentioned in relation to the local needs clause was the lengths to which applicants will go to secure permission to build a single dwelling; *"If you have to prove you're a rural person, even if you have to fake it, you'll do it to live in a rural area"* (CG2). The five councillors who spoke on the issue cited many examples of deceptions employed to deceive planning officers in planning applications:

"A lot of improvisation is involved, the coming up with a credible explanation to satisfy the planners, for example, claiming a long-term relationship with a local; the preparation of false documents, showing children being christened in the

parish, attending school in the area...I've seen it all, what people will do to get permission, and these are not isolated incidents" (CC3).

5.9.2. The Occupancy Clause – Co. Clare and Co. Galway

All but one of the councillors felt that the occupancy clause was, in theory, a promising method of promoting sustainable development. However, the success of the occupancy clause in ensuring that successful applicants who built a single dwelling were remaining resident in their properties for the allocated timeframe was called into question, with the primary focus of attention centring on the question of enforcing such a clause; *"I know of numerous people who have occupancy clauses who are either selling or have sold their houses"* (CG6). Councillors cited a number of ways by which people were breaking the occupancy clauses attached to their properties:

- Building a one-off house and 'riding' out the occupancy clause then selling, with a view to making a profit, before initiating the process again
- Paying in cash for a single dwelling, in a situation where the occupancy clause of the previous owner is still in place
- Non-locals enlisting the help of locals to acquire planning permission for a single dwelling and then building the house themselves

Several councillors also suggested that a situation existed whereby banks and building societies were granting mortgages for properties where the occupancy clause of the previous owner was still in effect.

Despite concerns relating to the lack of enforcement of occupancy clauses, six councillors raised the issue of 'exceptional circumstances,' and contended that people who have found themselves in a situation of financial hardship, or need to move home due to health reasons, should not be subjected to an ongoing *"forced attachment to a property"* and should *"definitely be let out of such clauses"* (CG2). However, one councillor, representing Co. Clare, made the point that *"it is not currently possible to appeal this clause"* (CC5).

The ongoing problem of a single dwelling lying empty was frequently mentioned; *"We have a situation where the population of towns and villages has dropped, yet the number of houses has ballooned"* (CC6). It was suggested that this situation was a reflection of the *"failing of the County Development Plan, or at least a failing of the planning office to implement and enforce it as intended"* (CG3). Nine of the thirteen councillors suggested that in order to combat the high level of disregard witnessed for the occupancy clause, a monitoring system was necessary; "*Putting in a proper checks and balances system, a proper audit system to ensure that the occupancy clause is being adhered to is something that should be done, and if people are found to have broken the clause, then there should be penalties, like a set fine, or being banned from applying for permission to build a single dwelling for ten years, or something like that"* (CC4). Another suggestion was for a system so that people would be able to appeal the occupancy condition of the original approval if they wished to move home, citing the reasons why they felt it necessary.

However, while there was agreement that an occupancy clause monitoring system was a good idea, several councillors questioned its feasibility. As one councillor, from Co. Clare, stated; *"the occupancy clause can't be enforced. There may be upward of 1,000 applications a year for the building of single dwellings, yet there are only six people working in enforcement for the entire county for permission that may relate to the past ten years...so a monitoring system is hardly workable without employing more staff and we don't have the resources for this"* (CC6).

5.9.3. Language Enurement Clause – Co. Galway

In addition to the local needs clause and the occupancy clause applicable to one-off housing applications, there is also a language enurement clause in place in Co. Galway. The language enurement clause prevents people from buying a house in developments of two or more units in Gaeltacht areas, if they fail to meet certain requirements related to fluency in Irish language. Each of the six councillors interviewed, representing Co. Galway, were in agreement that this clause was

beneficial to the Gaeltacht area. The sentiments expressed are encapsulated in the following:

"The Irish language is of huge importance to this country and Co. Galway in particular. It is part of our heritage and should be protected. Local people speak the language on a daily basis so people moving into the area should be able to do so as well. The Irish language needs to be monitored closely to ensure it doesn't die out" (CG4).

5.9.4. The Local Needs Clause and Occupancy Clause – Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon

While clauses relating to local need and occupancy are not included in the County Development Plans of counties Cavan and Roscommon, councillors were asked to share their opinion on the necessity of such clauses and whether they felt the introduction of one or both of these clauses would be beneficial to the sustainable development of dispersed settlements within their respective local authorities.

With regard to the local needs clause, the overriding consensus was that this clause was unnecessary and would be detrimental to the continued sustainable development of dispersed settlements. As one councillor, from Co. Roscommon remarked; *"As a county, we have suffered from falling population in rural areas for many years. To introduce a local needs clause in Co. Roscommon would mean shutting the door to potential settlers, why would we want that?"* (CR1). Several councillors commented that the local needs clause was also discriminatory; *"You can't just deny someone their right to set up home in their own country just because they don't have a piece of paper saying they're local"* (CCa1).

The sole councillor who asserted himself as being in favour of introducing a local needs clause was from Co. Cavan. The reasoning behind this was two-fold: a concern with protecting the environment from *"urban-generated housing and holiday home developments"* and the necessity to reduce the cost of land for local people who *"are suffering at the hands of non-locals coming in and buying land, leading to greatly inflated prices"* (CCa4).

Turning to the occupancy clause, five of the eight councillors felt that this would be a welcome addition in ensuring the future sustainable development of dispersed rural settlement; *"As I've said, I've no problem with one-off housing and dispersed settlement as long as it is supported by a strong community. I think and occupancy clause would encourage the development of such a community, while fishing out those who are looking to profit from the planning process"* (CR4). While its merits were acknowledged, its practical application was viewed with caution by all but one of the councillors, the majority noting that it was an unnecessary addition at present; *"It's an option, one that I don't feel is necessary at the moment but can be considered if the situation changes in the future"* (CCa2).

All three councillors who stated that they were opposed to the idea of an occupancy clause, the reason they put forward for this stance was that it is wrong to tie people to a property; *"People are entitled to move on as they please, whether they change jobs, or have a growing family and need to move house. The old house can still be considered sustainable when a new family moves in"* (CR2). A second suggested reason was that it would not be possible to monitor it; *"Whose going to go around knocking on doors five years down the line checking if Mr. and Mrs. Murphy still live there?"* (CCa3).

To summate this section, the majority of councillors working within strict planning regimes were unsatisfied by the manner in which the local need clause is being operated as it is being applied too strictly by planning officers and there is very little consideration being given to rural area types when applying the clause. A minority described it as being discriminatory in that people should not be restricted in choosing where they wish to live. The occupancy clause was considered a promising method of monitoring sustainable development in theory. However, this clause was frequently ignoring by the successful applicant and while a monitoring system was considered a good idea, it feasibility was questioned.

The local need clause is considered by the vast majority in the case-study counties with lenient regimes as unnecessary as it would be detrimental to the continued

sustainable development of dispersed settlements. While the merits of the occupancy clause were acknowledged, its practicality was viewed with caution as some were opposed to the idea of tying people to property.

5.10. Assessment of the Transition, from Policy to Practice, of Government Policy Promoting Village-Type Rural Settlement Structures

Central Government's promotion of village-type settlement patterns as the most sustainable settlement type provoked considerable discussion among councillors, which warranted the inclusion of this subject area as a separate section within this chapter.

Figure 5.10 Village-type settlement pattern (Location: Querrin, Co. Clare)

5.10.1. Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon

A major problem identified in promoting village-type settlements was that the present infrastructure would struggle to cope with additional housing. As one councillor commented; *"The idea is good...cluster development so that more people can have access to centralised services. However, more often than not the services and infrastructure are not there or if they are, they can't accommodate this new development"* (CR3).

One of the major problems with the development of residential estates was identified as the lack of finance available to ensure that infrastructure and services are in place for growing urban centres; *"Basically, village-type settlements are promoted as being the most sustainable rural settlement type. Yet there is no money to make villages which are expanding sustainable, the excuse being you are not big enough to warrant expenditure"* (CCa1). Another councillor commented; "*Building housing estates at the edge of villages is considered the best option because it is anticipated that services will follow in due course. However long this will be and where we, the council, are expected to acquire the money to provide these services, I don't know"* (CR4). The development of out-of-town estates was considered to be in complete opposition of government policy promoting the consolidation of towns and villages. As one councillor argued; *"It completely goes against government policy and will cost more in the long run to provide additional services for these estates"* (CR2).

Three councillors stated that the blame for the *"failing of government policy in meeting its aim of achieving sustainable rural residential development"* (CCa4) was the fault of central government. One councillor from Co. Roscommon commented: *"It's easy to blame the developers and I suppose they do deserve some of the blame because they have made an unholy profit, but at the same time provisions should have been put in place to ensure that infrastructure was provided with these new estates...the developers could certainly afford it"* (CR4). A related topic, according to two of the interviewees, was that developers currently could not be held accountable for subsequent infrastructural problems associated with their development given that they are working in accordance with central and local government policy.

Another issue, noted by three councillors, was the level of influence exerted by developers at local level in that they are providing employment at their development sites and will make sure that this is known locally as they apply for planning permission; *"If a big developer plans to employ 300 local people and is determined to get planning permission for a €50 million development, look at the*

influence they have just in terms of bodies" (CCa3). It was suggested that the public put pressure on their elected representatives who will, in turn, push for the development to go through.

Despite the high level of scepticism towards the outcomes of government policy promoting village-type settlements, three councillors stated that even given the problems associated new multi-unit developments in, or in the vicinity of, rural towns and villages, they were still *"more sustainable than the continued construction of unnecessary one-off housing"* (CCa2).

5.10.2. Co. Clare and Co. Galway

The primary focus of councillors' discussion regarding Central Governments' promotion of village-type settlement related to the problems associated with translating this policy into practice; *"Well, government policy regarding concentrated settlement is one thing, but in reality it's quite different"* (CC5). It was argued that the promotion, by central government, of concentrated rural settlement as the most sustainable rural settlement type failed to consider that the majority of towns and villages do not have sufficient infrastructure in place to accommodate new large-scale, multi-unit residential developments. As one councillor commented, his sentiment being echoed by nine of the thirteen councillors; *"The dilemma is that people are being encouraged to move into towns and villages because this is where the services are concentrated but in reality many towns and villages don't have services that can cope with an influx of new development"* (CG4).

Each of the eleven councillors who commented on this issue raised the point that if central government was intent on promoting concentrated settlement in rural areas, it was its duty to guarantee that provisions are in place to ensure that new residential development is adequately serviced; *"The government don't seem to realise that if you put in a housing scheme, you're going to have to service it. They allow for the servicing of existing houses but are not recognising that you're going to have, or should allow for development if it's government policy. It's a no*

brainer concept for everyone it seems, except those in the department [DoEHLG]*"* (CG6). One councillor, from Co. Galway commented that; *"during the national election, a number of villages had applied for infrastructural improvement to facilitate development and they were promised the sun, moon and stars, but they're still waiting"* (CG2). Another councillor from Co. Clare cited the example of Leebasheeda[14] as having similar problems in acquiring sufficient infrastructure to accommodate new residential development; *"Leebasheeda, due to an influx of development, looked for their own sewerage plant. However, when they sat down with engineering officials they were told the cost per house was too much. A lack of money is used as an excuse for everything"* (CC4).

According to each of the eleven councillors who commented on this issue, the fault for such a situation lay with central government for failing to secure the provision of services from developers trough policy provision; *"You have to blame central government. These developers could easily make one million euro profit out of a development of fifty houses. Yet you'll find that the approach road is cat, there's no street lighting, no schools, no nothing really"* (CC7). However, according to the majority of councillors, the crux of the problem was that developers are essentially doing nothing wrong because they are in compliance with government policy; *"They* [developers] *recognise there is a profit to be made from government policy and they use this to their advantage"* (CG2). Another councillor remarked; *'They'll* [developers] *buy land and they'll speculate. They may have paid over the odds because, in the long term, government policy is concentrated development and there will be a demand for these houses, then they'll get their return"* (CC3).

Six of the interviewees were severely critical of the decision by Central Government to amend Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000. The following interview excerpt outlines the general sentiment expressed by councillors; *"In recent years, the developers have had to give 20 per cent to social housing but they've bought their way out of that, with the amendment to the*

[14] Leebasheeda is an isolated village in Co. Clare, situated approximately 8 miles south-east of Kilrush and 25 miles south-west of Ennis.

Planning and Development Act, which proves the influence that big businesses and builders have with central government, that they could change what I would have described at the time as being a very radical and appropriate, well-thought out means of balancing the equation" (CG3).

Aside from the influence exerted by developers at central government level, it was also suggested that developers wielded a lot of influence at local level. Five councillors commented that developers often attempt to pre-empt the development decisions of planning officers; *"They say they will provide infrastructural improvements to sewage and water systems to accommodate their development if they get the green light'* (CC5). One councillor remarked; *'Obviously, the proposed upgrading of infrastructure is viewed in a very positive light by the council who see it, I suppose, as a confirmation of the sustainability of the proposed development. They* [the council] *exert pressure of planners whose hands are essentially tied"* (CC3).

In addition to discussion relating to the development of multi-unit estates in towns and villages, eight councillors spoke of the trend whereby housing estates were being erected *"two or three miles outside urban centres"* (CC6). The discussion with regard to this subject was universally negative. It was suggested that the development of such estates was leading to the ruination of town centres because *"when services are provided for these estates, they are taking business away from the town"* (CC6). On the same topic, another councillor commented; *"I realise that when development is taking place, it is a huge inconvenience for the town centre with large trucks traipsing through and obstructive construction sites, but if the primary concern is to be the consolidation of towns and villages, surely it's a case of making the best of a bad situation"* (CG6). Indeed, the majority of councillors who spoke on this issue commented to the effect that *"allowing for the development of these out-of-town outfits is certainly no good when you consider the government policy of consolidating towns. It's contradictory, it shouldn't be allowed and these out-of-town developments will need more services"* (CC7).

There was an overwhelming level of negative criticism for the manner in which national and local policy promoting the consolidation of towns and villages is being applied within the case-study authorities of Co. Clare and Co. Galway. However, five councillors did make the point that while there was work to be done with regard to the successful application of national and local policy within their respective local authorities; it would be preferable *"to see fifty houses in a well-designed estate than fifty of them dotted around the countryside. If you talk about evils, it's far the lesser of the two evils"* (CC6).

In summary of this section, the nationwide situation whereby many newly-build village-type housing estates have been left without adequate infrastructure or services was considered by councillors to be a failure of government policy, through the creation of a set of circumstances whereby power is placed in the developers' hands given that such developments will be welcomed locally due to short-term gains (i.e., jobs) despite being unsustainable in the long-term. The failure, on the part of central government to obtain a guarantee from developers to ensure these developments are adequately serviced was also considered an oversight.

5.11. Assessment of the Performance of Planning Officers

This section documents councillors' assessment of planning officers as activators of rural settlement policy. The response to questioning in this regard was mixed, ranging from those who felt that planning officers were playing the role of *"over-prescriptive bureaucrats"* (CC1) to those who felt that they were doing their best under *"often difficult and trying circumstances"* (CR4). Aside from an assessment of the performance of planning officers; councillors also raised the issue of problems that are faced by planning officers, discussed the benefits of a pre-planning service and questioned the necessity of Local Area Plans (LAPs).

5.11.1. Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon

The first category of responses examined relating to councillors' assessment of the performance of planning officers focuses on councillors whose responses reflect a negative opinion of the work planning officers are engaged in. Of the eight councillors interviewed, five expressed views which placed them in this category. The primary charge brought against planning officers was that their personal opinions with regard to one-off housing construction have played a significant role in the number of applications which have been refused .As one councillor remarked; *"Planners have the leeway, due to the flexibility of the County Development Plan, to do as they see fit with regard to one-off housing and personal opinion plays a huge role, usually to the detriment of one-off housing applicants. This was not the intention of the County Development Plan but that's how they're using it"* (CCa3).

Councillors spoke of a *"total disregard for the tradition of dispersed settlement"* (CR1) in Ireland, attributing this to the 'British mentality' displayed by many planning officers with regard to single-dwelling applications. One councillor from Co. Roscommon commented; *"What we are dealing with is English-trained town planners here interpreting Irish planning law"* (CR2). Two councillors, one representing Co. Cavan and the other Co. Roscommon, spoke of an on-going staff turnover amongst planning officers in their respective councils. As one remarked; *"The problem is planners keep coming and going. They might be here for a year and then they move on"* (CCa1). The councillor, from Co. Roscommon made a similar statement; *"We're a relatively small council, so when they* [planning officers] *get an opportunity to move to a larger authority or to the private sector, they'll jump at it"* (CR3). Both agreed that the turnover of planning staff had a negative effect on one-off housing applicants involved in the planning system; *"It's a ridiculous scenario where the outcome of an application depends on which planner is handling it and often this changes half-way through the process as people come and go"* (CCa1).

The second category of councillors, whose assessment of the work of planning officers was generally positive, represented four of the eight councillors interviewed from Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon. Each made statements to the effect that planning officers were, for the most part, doing a good job in what could often be described as difficult circumstances. An overview of this perspective is aptly summarised in the following excerpt:
"Obviously, planners are going to be the target, of well, abuse, both from applicants and councillors, because they [planning officers] *are the ones who have the final decision regarding one-off housing applications...but I feel that overall, they are doing a good job, in the main, they're consistent in their decision making"* (CCa2).

With regard to adhering to the prescriptions of the CDP, councillors in this category agreed that planning officers were not being overly interpretive, in a negative sense, of rural housing policy; *"Yes, there's flexibility within the* [County Development] *Plan, but I think planners are relatively fair in the decision they make. There may be an element of personal opinion, but I think, like in any other profession, they suppress this in most instances"* (CR4).

A third matter raised by councillors related to the problems faced by planning officers in completing their duties. The first of these concerned councillors intervening in the planning process; *"Planners are constantly faced with a situation where councillors are coming in making representations for their constituents or arguing the conditions of a refused application. The backlog in the planning application process isn't surprising"* (CCa2). One councillor, from Co. Cavan, stated that he was aware of instances where applications for single dwellings, which had perfectly sound reasons for refusal, were being granted due to consistent pressure from individual councillors; *"They're* [councillors] *keeping their people* [applicants/electorate] *happy, but in reality, they're going against the rural settlement policy they themselves have helped to create, and yet everything is the planners fault because they're an easy target"* (CCa4).

Three councillors interviewed mentioned the benefits of the pre-planning service, suggesting it could make a significant difference to approval rates for one-off housing applications. As one councillor commented; *"The average Joe Soap applying for planning permission is not going to know the intricacies of the planning application process, why would they? This is why a pre-planning service is a good idea so people don't get led down the swanie by the likes of draftsmen or architects"* (CR3).

In relation to the preceding quotation, two councillors remarked that *"questionable architecture"* plays a role in *"the volume of substandard applications for one-off housing"* received by the planning department (CR4). The point was raised that a person submitting plans for a single dwelling does not necessarily need to have a qualification in architecture, yet they can still charge people for their services; *"It's very frustrating that young people are handing over €1500/€2000, to absolute amateurs for useless work"* (CCa2). It was also suggested that the rates of (single dwelling) planning application withdrawal are connected to substandard architecture; *"Withdrawal is thought to look better than refusal. It also makes the planning department look better because it's not seen to be refusing as many applications, but this is essentially just a smokescreen"* (CR4). Both councillors felt that regulation of the architectural industry, through the provision of a register of qualified architects, was necessary.[15]

The final issue raised with councillors was the use by planning officers of LAPs in their decision-making regarding one-off housing applications. Of the eight councillors interviewed, just one felt that planning officers consistently referred to LAPs when making planning decisions; *"Planners do consult the Local Area Plans. They provide more detailed reference material of the policies laid out in the County Development Plan. I would say they are an essential resource when making a decision"* (CCa4).

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[15] This has been enacted. On Monday 16th November 2009, the Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland (RIAI) and the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, John Gormley launched a Register for Architects. Establish under the Building Control Act 2007, the Register lists architects whose qualifications meet the standards set out in the Act. Since the commencement of the Act, only architects who are on the Register may use the title 'Architect'.

Conversely, seven councillors considered that planning decisions were generally purported to be based on the rural settlement policies laid out in the CDP. With regard to the LAPs, one councillor commented; *"Why would they* [refer to LAPs]*? They're not policy so they can't be used as grounds to base a refusal. Anyway, the County Development Plan covers everything in the Local Area Plans, and that's actual policy on which decisions can be based"* (CCa1). Three councillors stated that they felt LAPs should be abolished as they were a waste of resources' a sentiment articulated in the following quote; *"There should be a move towards local area mission statements rather than Local Area Plans. It's not necessary to use up as many resources – reviewing and discussing these plans and doubling up on work. The County Development Plan should be considered the Bible. We have a problem of losing the run of ourselves with all this unnecessary paperwork"* (CR3).

5.11.2. Co. Clare and Co. Galway

Six of the thirteen councillors were dissatisfied with the performance of planning officers. One of the main issues raised was the role personal perspective plays in planning decisions regarding one-off housing. As one councillor commented; *"We have an ongoing problem with planners who appear to interpret the* [County Development] *Plan and the guidelines to suit themselves and there is certainly discrimination which is negatively affecting rural dwellers"* (CG1). The majority noted that such negative discrimination is a recent phenomenon. As one councillor from Co. Clare stated; *"Common sense prevailed for years. Sure after the bungalow blitz there was a tightening of the reins and this was understandable but it's no longer necessary"* (CC3). In addition, it was stated that in many instances where there was a problem, however small, with an application for a single dwelling, planning officers would still attach a large number of reasons for refusal; *"If there's even a little problem, then everything comes into the mix. They'll throw the book at you. They want to cover themselves. There will be so many reasons for refusal, the applicant doesn't know where to start"* (CC1).

One of the reasons for the perceived bias of planning officers against one-off housing construction, an issue mentioned by four councillors, was termed *"the urban bias of planning"* by one individual (CC2). It was suggested that the majority of planning officers employed by county councils are qualified in town, rather than rural, planning; *"Planners are interpreting rural from an urban perspective, not a rural perspective and yet they are adjudicating on rural issues"* (CG2). Furthermore, it was noted by each of these four councillors that, until recent years, it had not been possible to gain a planning qualification in Ireland so *"planners have got there grounding in Britain and have been educated in respect of the British system, which is entirely different"* (CC1).

Two planners, from Co. Clare, commented on the constant staff turnover among planning officers; *"The problem is planners are always coming and going. They might be here for a year or so, then they move on"* (CC3). Connected to the preceding issue and topical amongst councillors was the problem of understaffing at the planning offices; *"There aren't enough planning officers to deal with the volume of applications so they aren't getting the depth of attention they deserve"* (CC2). One councillor suggested that delaying tactics were being employed as planning officers were struggling to make decisions regarding single-dwelling applications within the allotted timeframe; *"Planners are snowed under. A decision on an application is supposed to be made within six to eight weeks. You'll find that they [planning officers] will wait until 1-2 days before a decision is due and then they'll put in a request for further information. When this is supplied, the six to eight week wait begins again and this goes on and on. I know people who have been waiting on a decision for over two years"* (CC3).

Another issue which was mentioned by three councillors was what was described as the 'needless administration' involved in making a planning application; *"25 years ago, even 10 years ago, planning applications were just a single page, now we're talking eight plus pages, not including the support documentation. We've fouled up the system wasting resources and time"* (CC1).

The second category of councillors' responses comprises those who were more lenient in their appraisal. This category accounts for seven of the thirteen councillors interviewed. The general consensus of councillors in this category was that the majority of planning officers were 'quite good' and that they did deal with the majority of applications for single dwellings on an individual basis; *"They are the experts after all, the majority* [of planning officers] *do realise that each case for application is individual with its own merits and drawbacks and they must make a decision based on that application"* (CG6). Despite previous suggestions to the contrary, four councillors made statements to the effect that they felt planning officers were doing their best to comply with the rural settlement strategy, as laid out in the CDP, in the manner which councillors intended. One councillor remarked: *"In fairness to them, they're taking the County Development Plan more seriously than they have in the past, as in they're not as liberal with the interpretation as they could be"* (CC4).

It was also suggested by four councillors that the furore surrounding the issue of one-off housing in recent years has led to planning officials being viewed in an unnecessarily harsh light by many councillors; *"Councillors give planners a very hard time when they don't get what they want – you know when they make a representation for an applicant but the application is still refused. With councillors...we're experts at the double speak. On the one hand, we're looking for planning permission for our clients, and on the other, we're looking for consistency"* (CC5).

It was agreed by all six councillors in this category that, overall, planning officers had been far more consistent in recent years than in the past. It was suggested that this may be connected to a greater awareness on the part of the general public of what is required to acquire permission for a single dwelling. As one councillor commented; *"I think this consistency has meant that people are coping on with house design. They realise that they are not going to get a mansion and a coming up with more realistic proposals"* (CG4).

During the course of these discussions, a frequently-raised topic of conversation concerned the problems and hindrances faced by planning officers. The greatest problem, according to seven interviewees, was councillor intervention once a planning application had been made. The manner in which councillors expressed this view varied from general disapproval to marked expression of disgust, as highlighted in the following quote; *"I think the biggest problem planners face is the intimidation they are experiencing from councillors. It's sustained. It's horrific. It wears them down. If you're a planner working five days a week and you've constantly got councillors coming into you, you're going to give in, just for an easy life"* (CC6).

Three councillors raised the question or whether or not it was a good idea to have councillors involved in development control. One councillor also suggested that councillors should not even be involved in the formulation of the County CDP but did concede that this would be undemocratic. However, each of the councillors who raised this issue felt that the argument exists that elected members should not be allowed to make representations. As one councillor remarked; *"At present, the councillor has a legal right to make representations and the planner has a legal obligation to hear them. You can imagine how much time this takes up and you could have five or six councillors coming into the planning office every week'* (CC7). It was also suggested that while development control is an executive function, it can essentially become a reserved function as *'councillors continually make representations and object"* (CC6). Despite the case put forward for removing councillors' influence from development control, one councillor, while suggesting the option, felt that in reality this would be too extreme. He states, *"At the end of the day, if it's* [the planning application] *a borderline case and someone is genuine, you'd like to be able to make the case that they are genuine"* (CG5).

Another issue, frequently mentioned, and considered problematic to the work of planning officers was the lack of regulation of architects leading to *"shoddy work being submitted with applications"* (CC4). As one councillor reflected; *"A person with limited experience in technical drawing has the same right in submitting a*

house design for a single dwelling as an architect. People are employing what I would consider grade Z architects and paying good money for plans. The plans are being submitted and the professional planners who look at it say this is absolute tripe" (CC5). Another commented; *"I would say that three-quarters of failed or questionable applications of which representations are made to me, that it is the architect, usually unqualified, that is at fault"* (CG6). Of the six councillors who mentioned this issue, each was of the opinion that architectural services needed tighter regulation.

In a topic connected to the preceding issue, four councillors spoke of the benefits of having a pre-planning service in place, three from Co. Clare and one from Co. Galway. Of the four case-study authorities selected for this project, a pre-planning service is currently only available in Co. Clare. However, the councillor from Co. Galway felt that such as service would be very beneficial both to applicants, in familiarising them with the planning system, and to planning officers, in reducing the level of substandard and invalid applications. The general consensus of the three councillors from Co. Clare who spoke on the issue was that pre-planning is a service that should be actively encouraged as currently, *"people don't utilise it half enough"* (CC5). It was contended that *"so many of the problems people encounter could be avoided. Good architects can be recommended and people are given a checklist of what is required for an application"* (CC4).

The final issue raised by councillors representing counties Clare and Galway regarding performance of planning officers was the level of attention they paid to LAPs given their non-statutory nature. Each of the councillors commented on this issue, with seven stating that, in their opinion, planning officers did consult the LAP when making a decision relating to a one-off housing application. However, three of these councillors stated that the LAPs were used as *"another tool from which reasons for refusing applications are extracted"* (CG2). The other four were of the general opinion that planners did have due regard for the LAPs despite their non-statutory nature. However, one councillor commented: *"You won't find the policies of Local Area Plans contradicting the policies of the County Development*

Plan. At the end of the day, it's the County Development Plan that is the primary focus of planners" (CC7).

Of the six councillors who were of the opinion that planning officers were *"not in the habit of consulting Local Area Plans"* (CC3) when making planning decisions, again the primary reason given for this view was that the CDP is *"the main port of call for planners, given that it's actual policy'* (CG5). Several councillors suggested that efforts should be solely concentrated on the CDP, one councillor remarking; *'I think that Local Area Plans are more aspirational than anything else, it is a waste of resources. If I go in* [to the planning office] *representing an applicant, it's the County Development Plan I have in my hand to back up my case, not the Local Area Plan"* (CC5).

In summary of this section, the majority of councillors representing both strict and lenient planning regimes expressed negative opinions with regard to the performance of local planning officers. The primary frustration displayed was concerned with the employment of personal perspectives regarding the sustainability of one-off housing when making decisions regarding the single dwelling applications. Another area of contention related to the high turnover of local authority planning officers, meaning that many are not familiar with the functional area within which they are working.

Conversely, a significant minority had a more positive perception of the work of planning officers suggesting that, in general, they were doing a good job in difficult and often controversial circumstances. They were described as being, for the most part, fair and consistent in the decisions they make regarding rural one-off housing. It was also noted that planning officers are under near constant, often unnecessary pressure from councillors making representations on the behalf of constituents.

5.12. The Role of An Bord Pleanála

In the final section of the interview, councillors were asked to provide an opinion on the necessity of An Bord Pleanála (ABP). Each of the 21 councillors across the four case-study areas were in agreement that a third-party appeals body was necessary component of the Irish planning system; *"Yes, An Bord Pleanála is very important. Local planners don't always get it right. There needs to be another outlet for getting a second opinion"* (CG6). Another commented; *"They are an independent body who are removed from the local planning arena so the decisions they make are not affected by bias"* (CR3).

However, there were several concerns, the first being the ability of the board of ABP to overturn the decisions of their planning inspectors; *"I do think it's unfair that an inspector's recommendations can be disregarded by the Board even though they don't even visit the location of the proposed dwelling"* (CC6). Another concern was the fact that there are qualified planning officers on the board of ABP; *"The board is supposed to be composed of people who are representative of all sectors of society and who can avail of expert advice if necessary...not planning experts. What we have is planners reviewing the decisions of planners and this seems very unjust"* (CG2).

5.13.1. Conclusion

Local authority councillors perform a dual role. They operate as policy makers at local level and also as public representatives. Therefore, they are perhaps best placed to provide an insight into the processes involved in the translation of national rural housing policies for local implementation, and the outcomes of such processes.

The vast majority of councillors in each of the case-study authorities were in favour of one-off housing. Councillors in counties Clare and Galway listed social and economic reasons for this stance, whereas in counties Cavan and Roscommon,

the focus centred on social factors. The fact that, proportionally, there are a greater number of councillors in favour of one-off housing construction in authorities with lenient regimes may suggest that the perceived leniency of their rural housing policies is due to the fact they are less likely to pass rural housing policy deemed overly restrictive. If this is indeed the case, it suggests managerialist leanings on the part of councillors with regard to their operation of local state functions.

However, the vast majority of councillors, across each of the case-study authorities, stated that their first priority was to their constituents meaning the securing of rural settlement strategies which meet electorate needs while complying, when possible, with national policy. This is indicative of the prescriptions of the pluralist conception of state.

In counties Clare and Galway, where strict planning regimes regarding the control of one-off housing are in place, there was much criticism for the overly-rigid manner by which rural housing policy is operated by planning officials. Similarly, in counties Cavan and Roscommon, despite the operation of more lenient planning regimes, councillors criticised the strict manner by which planners are interpreting rural housing policy. Councillors suggested that this problem has its origins at central government level.

The perceived urban bias of the NSS, and its vague prescriptions regarding one-off housing, have caused huge difficulties regarding its translation into local policy. This is due to the huge variations in environmental, social and economic factors which must be considered at local level. To accommodate these local disparities and to ensure the sustainable development of rural areas, councillors contended that local policy must have an element of flexibility. However, it is this flexibility that has caused conflict between councillors and planners at local level as planners, in the opinion of local councillors, are interpreting rural housing policy in a much more stringent fashion than was intended.

The perceived inflexibility of local planning officers by councillors, in addition to the contention that planners employ their personal perspective and interpretations when making decision regarding one-off housing applications suggests that they (planning officers) are operating managerialist agendas in that they are functioning with regard to their own knowledge systems as opposed to the requirements of the democratic process.

Despite the fact that the majority of councillors from counties Clare and Galway expressed personal stances in favour of one-off housing, these authorities operate regimes which are amongst the strictest in the State with regard to single rural dwelling construction. In keeping with the managerialist perspective this may suggest reliance, on the part of councillors, on the expertise of professional planning officers in local policy decision-making.

The minority of councillors opposed to one-off housing development suggested that the proliferation of this construction must be curtailed in the interests of sustainable development. However, it was stated that this may prove problematic, given politicians' reluctance to oppose public opinion. This again highlights a pluralist perspective whereby external factors are the influential forces guiding the operational agenda of politicians who strive to achieve continued election success.

The role of interest groups at local level, both for and against one-off housing, is not to influence policy, but to inform and provide knowledge so that councillors may have a well-rounded view when preparing local rural housing policy. However, apart from Co. Clare, it was suggested that the impact of pro- one-off housing groups in the other case-study areas was minimal. This was accredited to their lack of structure and small size. Conversely, the most successful interest groups are those who are professionally organised and have the resources to avail of professional support and advice. This perception of the functionings of state is in keeping with the prescriptions of the managerialist thesis which describes the ability of groups with a different level of power. This means that some groups are

better equipped through organisational structure, fiscal comfort and educational background to deal with the 'impenetrable bureaucracy' that is local government.

However, an alternative pluralistic interpretation of this situation can also be considered. Despite the perceived lack of impact from pro- one-off housing groups at local level, a high level of empathy was expressed by the majority of councillors towards these groups with many councillors considering themselves as advocates. Interestingly, while councillors positioned themselves as advocates of pro- one-off housing groups who lobbied through informal channels, there was an apparent disconcertment towards groups who voiced their objections to rural housing policy through official channels.

The experiences, perspectives and opinions of councillors working within both strict and lenient regimes appear to be very much in alignment. This is perhaps related to the similarities in personal opinion favouring one-off housing, which impacts councillors' positions concerning its curtailment. This is regardless of the strictness or leniency of the planning regime and the planning decisions of planning officers within their authorities.

The perspectives and experiences of local planning officers occur within the same planning sphere as those of local councillors. However, the two are often irreconcilable. This thesis aims to provide a greater empirical understanding of the reasoning for this situation. The views and opinions of planning officers with regard to the sustainability of one-off housing and the effectiveness of government and local policy in promoting sustainable rural development are examined in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SIX:
THE PERSPECTIVE OF LOCAL PLANNING OFFICERS

6.0. Preamble

Given their role as activators and operators of local policy, in the context relating to rural housing, planning officers are a central part of the local planning system. Their occupational role involves advising and drawing up plans during the developmental stages of the CDP formulation process and making decisions on planning applications in accordance with the prescriptions of local policy.

In an attempt to provide an insight into the operations of the planning system at local level relating to the development of sustainable rural settlement patterns from the perspective of the policy activators, this chapter documents the individual opinions of planning officers from each of the four case-study local authorities.

As previously mentioned, making contact with planning officers employed by the case-study local authorities proved to be the most difficult and time-consuming of all the interviewee categories. Despite exhausting all avenues of obtaining a meeting, just six planning officers, across all four local authorities, agreed to an interview. Even with the small sample of interviewees representing this category, the responses proved to be both detailed and informative in constructing an overview of the perspectives, opinions and experiences of planning officers involved in activating local rural settlement strategies concerning national and local rural settlement planning.

Two of the planning officers interviewed represented Co. Clare, two represented Co. Cavan, with one each representing Co. Galway and Co. Roscommon. Given the small sample of interviewees, the planning officers will not be identified by the local authority for which they work. Instead, the six interviewees are assigned numbers, for example, PO1, PO2, etc. There are instances where planning officers refer to locations within the functional areas of their local authority or refer to the

local authority by name, which are included when considered relevant. Discrepancies in observations and opinions put forward by planning officers representing the different case-study local authorities are also highlighted.

The topics covered during the course of the interviews centred on the following themes:

- The personal position of planning officers regarding one-off housing
- The role of interest groups at national and local level
- The significance of the rural-housing issue during local election campaigns
- Position with regard to and their understanding of sustainable development
- Assessment of national policy relating to rural settlement
- Assessment of local policy relating to rural settlement – the policy formulation process
- Assessment of the application of rural settlement policy at local level
- The role of An Bord Pleanála

The theoretical framework of this thesis affords two contrasting conceptions of the role of planning officials as understood in pluralist and managerialist theory. The pluralist perspective considers planning officers to be protectors of the public interest, their role being to ensure the common good. Managerialist theory views planning officers as independent agents operating with a faithfulness to their educational background and code of practice which is inconsistent to the operations of the democratic process. The relevance of these understandings will be assessed with regard to the body of empirical data documented in this chapter.

6.1. The Personal Position of Planning Officers Regarding One-Off Housing

The first topic of interview called for planning officers to summarise their perspective on one-off housing with regard to the sustainability of this form of

settlement pattern. The aim was to ascertain the factors which influenced the respondents' position.

The most notable feature identified when examining the responses to this line of questioning was the focus placed on the technical aspects associated with ensuring the sustainability of one-off housing. Each of the six planning officers interviewed discussed issues relating to site location and house design when detailing their responses. For example, one planning officer commented; *'I think with one-off rural housing, the most important factor is that they meet design criteria and that they don't cause hazards like public health or traffic hazards'* (PO2).

In addition, the majority of interviewees referred to aspects of both national and local policy when qualifying their responses relating to their personal opinion on the sustainability of one-off housing, most notably the categorisation of rural area types, for example; 'areas under strong urban influence' or 'traditional rural areas'.

A particular focus, mentioned by five of the interviewees, was the issue of location; *'The sustainability of a one-off dwelling depends on the area in question'* (PO5). Several factors for consideration were put forward supporting his viewpoint:

- The landscape sensitivity of an area
- The historic settlement patterns of an area
- Population pressures

The points discussed relating to location are aptly summarised in the following interview excerpt; *'Location is very important when considering whether or not a single dwelling is sustainable. A house must fit into the local environment, both scenically and in terms of historic settlement patterns...Population factors also have to be considered. I mean, one-off housing can be considered sustainable in areas of population decline but not in areas suffering from urban-generated sprawl and ribbon development'* (PO2).

The general consensus amongst the interviewees was that *'People who need to live in an area should be accommodated'* (PO3). The 'need' to live in a particular area was described as relating to people who '*work in the area, farmers, labourers, those involved in local industry'* (PO1) and *'people who are from the locality and have close family ties to the area'* (PO3).

Of the six interviewees, four expressed the opinion that *'one-off housing is not the most sustainable rural housing option'* (PO6) with two planning officers not committing an opinion on the subject. However, it was conceded by those who questioned the sustainability of one-off housing that currently *'alternative options for rural living are not appealing, given the ongoing problems with inadequate infrastructure and service provision in towns and villages'* (PO1). This point will be discussed in greater detail in a later section of this chapter.

6.2. The Role of Interest Groups at National and Local Level

Planning officers were asked to relay their opinion on the influence that interest groups, both for and against one-off housing, exert on policy formation and activation.

Interestingly, four of the interviewees initially focused on the influence that interest groups have on national policy. Although this direction was not intended to be the primary focus of questioning relating to interest groups, it did evoke interesting and relevant discussion. The apparent preoccupation of these planning officers with national policy relating to rural settlement patterns is perhaps related to the role it plays in their day-to-day functions as rural housing policy-activators at local level.

Two of the interviewees who spoke on this topic questioned the extent to which the concerns of interest groups are actually considered during the national policy formation process. As one remarked; *'Well, with the Rural Housing Guidelines,*

everyone who made a submission was mentioned in the appendix, so you would hope that their views and opinions were actually taken on board and that they weren't just included there as well, tokenism, you know, 'we read your submission, thanks' (PO4).

Again, with regard to the *Sustainable Rural Housing, Guidelines for Planning Authorities* (RHGs), two interviewees commented that such *'loose policy'* (PO6) could be interpreted in a number of different ways; *'On one side you have the likes of An Taisce and on the other side the likes of the Rural Dwellers Association. In fairness, depending on how you read and interpret them, the Rural Housing Guidelines have elements which would suit each group'* (PO6). The fact that the RHGs are tailored to accommodate various rural area conditions has meant that one-off housing is *'considered to be permitted in certain instances and forbidden in others'* (PO2). Therefore, '*issues which have been frequently raised supporting the respective arguments of both sides of the rural housing debate can be seen to be have been given consideration in the Guidelines'* (PO3). Given this situation, it was suggested that *'one could argue that groups both for and against national policy have had an influence on one-off housing'* (PO2).

Turning to the level of influence exerted by interest groups at local level, the interviewees, perhaps given their direct involvement in this role, initially focused on the policy-activation or decision-making process regarding one-off housing applications. It was universally agreed by planning officers representing each case-study authority that An Taisce, a group which is generally considered to be strongly opposed to one-off housing construction, wields the most influence in the decision-making process at local level.

Planning regulations allow that each application can be examined by a body which is listed as a prescribed body within the planning legislation. As one planning officer commented; *'An Taisce is probably the only interest group that has this status. This means that they frequently, not 'assess' as such, but make observations on planning applications so they would have a very strong influence*

if they chose to use it' (PO1). Another remarked; *'An Taisce, given their statutory status, can effectively make an observation or a complaint, whatever you want to call it, on any single dwelling application and if they are not happy with a decision that has been made regarding an application, they can appeal to An Bord Pleanála'* (PO5).

With regard to other interest groups, particularly those in favour of one-off housing construction, it was stated that they do not have the same power to make observations in the way that An Taisce does, the result being that they do not exert the same level of influence; *'In the actual day-to-day process of granting permissions or making assessments, they* [pro one-off housing groups] *definitely have less of an influence and play less of a role'* (PO5). It was noted that these groups could make an observation on planning decisions if they wished but that *'each submission costs money, twenty euro, and this all adds up if they are determined in their cause'* (PO4).

The planning officers representing Co. Clare both commented on the pro- one-off housing group the IRDA noting this group's presence at local level. An element of conflict between this group and planning officers was evident, it being suggested that this group are very often disgruntled (and publically voice this displeasure) by opposed planning applications for single rural dwellings. With regard to other pro-one-off housing groups, the fact that *'tend to be local groups with limited resources'* has meant that *'they are unable to match the volume of observations made by An Taisce'* (PO1). Despite this, it was stated that; '*At the end of the day, these submissions* [by pro- one-off housing groups] *are referred to with the same attention as those made by An Taisce'* (PO1).

One difference between authorities operating strict and lenient planning regimes related to the level of councillor involvement with planning applications for one-off housing. While this practice was mentioned by all interviewees, the planning officers representing the strict regimes of counties Clare and Galway suggested that the volume of representations made by councillors had led to situations

whereby the work-rate and return on planning decisions was greatly reduced, due to their obligation to hear all representations. During discussions relating to the level of influence exerted by interest groups in terms of day-to-day decision making, it was frequently remarked that elected members of the council play a larger role than interest groups in terms of influencing day-to-day decision making; *'You only have to look at the volume of representations they make'* (PO3). The primary issues raised by planning officers in this regard are summarised in the following interview excerpt; *'You could have three councillors in a day, representing an individual's application for a one-off* [house]. *Most cases are genuine, where they believe the applicant has a genuine need for the application to be granted but some* [councillors] *are known for their pro one-off housing stance and will argue for any applicant who comes their way and we are obligated by law to hear each representation. In this sense, these councillors are essentially the most powerful interest group in that they are looking after their own interests in gaining favour with the public and, at the same time lobbying for the pro- rural-housing cause. To be honest, it can be very overwhelming...and time consuming'* (PO2)

The interviewees provided less detailed accounts of the rural settlement policy formulation process at local level. However, it was agreed by all interviewees that it was at the policy formulation stage in which interest groups should become involved and let their opinions and concerns be known. One planning officer commented; *'With the policy formulation process, when we make up any Local Area Plan or Development Plan, we open it up for public consultation and also consult on the details with a number of bodies, community leaders and the like. This is an important stage because it is the job of councillors to adapt national policy to meet local needs so they need to be made aware of local concerns'* (PO3). It was suggested by three interviewees that a more active involvement in the policy formulation stages of local rural settlement policy, on the part of interest groups, could prevent problems later on; *'I feel it's important that interest groups play a role in local policy formulation. Often they don't and then they object to*

planning decisions that are in compliance with local policy but by then it's often too late' (PO6).

6.3. The Significance of the Rural Housing Issue during Local Election Campaigns

Planning officers were asked to discuss the extent to which they considered the rural housing debate and the personal stance of election candidates on one-off housing to be significant factors with regard to candidates' success in achieving a council seat in the 2004 local elections.

Of the six planning officers who were interviewed, three respondents, representing Co. Cavan and Co. Clare declined to comment on the topic claiming lack of knowledge; *'I really don't know to be honest'* (PO5). Of the three councillors who did discuss the issue, two interviewees responded affirmatively; *'I do think that the stance of candidates with regard to rural housing had an effect on their election success'* (PO3).

In both of these instances, the interviewees supported their views with what they termed anecdotal evidence. As one remarked; *'I have spoken to one candidate who feels he lost out on a seat in the last election because he took a practical view of planning matters regarding one-off housing. He felt that his stance on one-off housing was one of the factors that caused him to lose out. He had held the seat previously and he was essentially replaced by a candidate who put forward a strong campaign in favour of one-off housing'* (PO2). Both of the planning officers who held this view were of the opinion that candidates who *'used a pro- rural-housing stance to gain votes'* (PO3) often found it very difficult in council because they were unable to follow through on many of the promises which they had made.

In a related issue, one planning officer claimed that it is *'quite common practice'* in instances where borderline decisions for a one-off housing application had

eventually resulted in a favourable result for the applicant for *'councillors to jump on the back of it, claiming credit for securing the granted application, where in reality, it was just the correct decision that would have been made anyway'* (PO3).

Only one planning officer felt that a personal stance on one-off housing did not feature as an influencing factor in election success, the following interview extract summarising his thoughts on the issue; *'The majority of candidates and returning councillors are well-established and well-known in their areas so people know what they're getting when they vote for particular people and I don't think that their voting was in any way influenced by the rural housing debate'* (PO4).

6.4. Position and Understanding of Sustainable Development

In this section, planning officers were invited to outline, in terms of rural settlement patterns, their own understanding of the concept of sustainable development. They were then asked to focus on the three primary components which together comprise sustainable development; environment, society and economy, and to comment on their relevance in terms of one-off housing construction.

6.4.1 Defining Sustainable Development

The response of planning officers to this section of questioning was very technical in nature, highlighting their education and occupation within the planning sphere and also their involvement with the intricacies of day-to-day planning matters. The majority of definitions, or explanations, of sustainable development included references to 'local need', public safety, site assessment and housing-design factors. For example, one planning officer stated that his *'ideal definition of sustainable development is that people who need to live in an area should be permitted the opportunity to live there subject to meeting public safety and design criteria'* (PO1). Without the benefit of hindsight of a discussion relating to the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, societal and

environmental), the definitions of sustainable development put forward by interviewees focused solely on environmental, and to a lesser extent societal considerations.

Furthermore, in contrast to responses by councillors to this line of questioning, not one planning officer suggested that sustainable development was a concept which is open to interpretation. Indeed, one planning officer commented that while this is a common perception, *'it isn't the case in day-to-day planning as decisions we make regarding one-off housing applications are drawn directly from local policy'* (PO2).

6.4.2 Sustainable Development and One-off Housing – The Environmental Dimension

With regard to the environmental dimension of sustainable development, the main focus of planning officers was the importance they connected to viewing the countryside as a visual amenity which must be afforded protection; hence the necessity of ensuring that one-off housing construction is carefully monitored. The viewpoints expressed by interviewees are summarised in the following excerpt: *'One can argue that rural housing may not be sustainable from a visual amenities point of view. There is a very strong argument against granting one-off housing from a sustainability perspective. For every house that is granted permission, there is a planning impact for any future applications for single dwellings in the area, so you have to be sure you're getting it right'* (PO3).

A continued focus on planning technicalities was also apparent in interviewees' responses. Planning officers from counties Clare, Galway and Roscommon discussed the importance of site characterisation reports, placing particular emphasis on the role of these reports in determining the viability of environmentally-safe effluent disposal at a given site; *'Every house that is granted has an impact on the environment. This is a given but people cannot be prevented from continuing to live in the area of their birth. Despite this, we are very vigilant in terms of siting, design, groundwater assessment and so on'* (PO1).

It was frequently commented upon that a strict adherence to the findings of the site characterisation tests is an essential component in ensuring sustainable development. For example, one planning officer remarked; *'Clare County Council would have a fairly high standard of groundwater as a result of the assessments associated with planning applications and adhering to the findings of these assessments. We also work to EPA standards for the majority of local projects. We have design guidelines relating to standards of design for single dwellings. That's were our focus lies. That's how we ensure sustainable development'* (PO2).

The majority of interviewees were eager to point out that it was not their *'sole objective to refuse every house as appears to be the common belief,'* rather that *'the houses we do grant, we have to make sure that they are in complete compliance with the plans'* [The County Development Plan and relevant Local Areas Plans] (PO6).

6.4.3 Sustainable Development and One-off Housing – The Social Dimension

This section focuses on the social dimension of sustainable development and the issue of community viability in rural areas. Planning officers focused, almost exclusively on issues relating to people from urban areas looking to set up home in a rural location. The main concern raised was that; *'there are problems with people from urban areas understanding the concept of rural living'* (PO5). It was suggested that; *'often people conjure up this picture of the rural ideal, you know, the quiet life, safe for children with an abundance of wide open spaces...yet they totally forget about the negative aspects, the isolation, the reduction in facilities readily available to them. These negatives don't factor into their vision'* (PO3).

Several interviewees remarked that in many instances 'urbanites' find it difficult to adapt to rural living and frequently revert back to urban lifestyles; *'You have people who work in urban centres during the week, who do their shopping in the city and often socialise up there* [the city] *at the weekends staying with family or friends. I mean, what's the point...their house is essentially just a place to store*

their belongings and they are in no way contributing to the rural community where they have built this house' (PO5). Another commented; *'There are ways for people who are from urban communities to have a house in the country, in clustered developments, without disrupting the landscape or affecting the environment'* (PO1). One planning officer suggested that it would be a worthwhile project to carrying out a local-authority study *'to see if households of former urban dwellers, indeed all the houses we are granting, are actually contributing to the areas in which they are built, to the local fabric. That's the tricky part for planning as a whole'* (PO3).

Turning to interviewee responses relating to the role of planning officers as local policy activators and the manner in which carrying out this role may affect the viability of rural communities, each respondent made reference to the CDP of their respective authorities; '*One of the main objectives of the County Development Plan is to promote sustainable rural living and this is our key objective in carrying out our daily work'* (PO4). Planning officers also made reference to the *Sustainable Rural Housing, Guidelines for Planning Authorities* [RHGs] and the prescriptions laid out within in their responses to this line of questioning; *'We follow the rural guidelines in that people who are intrinsic to a rural area should be given the opportunity to live there. It is these people who will ensure the continued sustainability of rural communities'* (PO1).

The rural-area typologies, as laid out in the RHGs were specifically mentioned by all planning officers representing the strict regimes of counties Clare and Galway, yet by none representing the authorities operating lenient planning regimes. One planning officer operating in a strict planning regime stated; *'We do have a rural area typology, similar to the Rural Housing Guidelines and in areas of population decline, non-locals can apply to build a single dwelling. This is only, of course, if it's in the best interests of the area and if the plans meet all the usual criteria relating to design and safety'* (PO3). Another, from Co. Clare commented; *'Yes there are areas suffering from population decline and social facilities such as sports clubs are feeling the effects but the County Development Plan is tailored to*

account for these areas, identified through the Census, and we allow people into these areas, carefully, because we don't want a situation where we are left with empty houses. Similarly, in areas which are identified as being strong rural areas, we don't allow non-locals to settle. The trick is to ensure that the policies are in alignment with the rural area types as if they aren't this will have a negative effect on the community, the schools, the local economy and so on' (PO2).

The above point is interesting and highlights the complexity of DCPs and LAPs in strict case-study authorities as opposed to authorities operating more lenient planning regimes.

6.4.4 Sustainable Development and One-off Housing – The Economic Dimension

Of the three dimensions of sustainable development discussed, the economic aspect received, by far, the least attention from planning officers. The primary issue which received attention in this regard was the tourist industry, particularly the benefits and disadvantages of one-off housing construction in relation to this industry.

Of principal concern was the continuing effects the so-called 'bungalow blitz' which occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Several councillors commented that this occurrence had negatively and irreversibly affected the countryside in terms of its landscape character and its role as a visual amenity, factors which are of great importance to the Irish rural tourist industry. As one interviewee commented; *'Foreign, even domestic, tourists appreciate the green landscapes which Ireland is known for. The disastrously relaxed planning regime of recent years has meant vast areas of rural Ireland have been left looking haphazard and untidy. You see urban sprawl and ribbon development which have taken away from the character of many rural towns and villages. Funnily enough, in their attempts to boost the local economy and attract more tourism through expansion and the building of holiday homes, many rural areas have witnessed a decline in their tourist industry as visitors choose more remote locations'* (PO2).

While several planning officers conceded that holiday homes do provide an economic boost during the summer season, it was stressed that these properties could be provided in less environmentally intrusive clustered settlements which would, if necessary, allow for a larger number of units. It was also remarked upon that the provision of holiday homes in clustered settlements would prevent the further occurrence of situations where, in winter months, many rural areas resemble ghost towns.

With regard to economic sustainability, it was suggested that the lax planning regime with regard to holiday homes and second homes in the past has meant that many rural localities are saturated in the sense that allowing continued one-off housing construction is environmentally unsound. This has resulted in a very difficult situation where local people, who have a genuine need to live in an area, are finding it almost impossible to acquire permission to build a single dwelling. This situation has also led to an increase in the price of one-off houses in certain areas and the cost of land which possesses planning permission for a dwelling to be constructed to the extent that locals are commonly priced out of the market; *'Essentially, we are left with a situation where a large proportion of houses are empty nine months of the year yet locals are struggling to get planning permission due to environmental concerns. This is obviously a dire situation for the economy and the local community'* (PO3).

6.5 Assessment of National Policy Relating to Rural Settlement Patterns

Planning officers were asked to provide their opinions with regard to the successes in promoting sustainable development of both the *National Spatial Strategy for Ireland 2002-2020* (NSS, Published 2002) and the *Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines for Planning Authorities* (RHGs, Published 2005).

It was agreed by all interviewees that the *'thinking behind the National Spatial Strategy was good'* (PO4). However, each planning officer noted that the implementation of the NSS has been less than effective; *'The National Spatial Strategy as a concept, a plan, is a very good idea. I think that it's the implementation of it that is its weakness. We've seen the programme for decentralisation when it came into effect and didn't follow the original prescriptions of the National Spatial Strategy. It has turned into an absolute disaster'* (PO6).

A number of reasons were put forward for this viewpoint, the first of these being the number of gateways and hubs identified for inclusion in the NSS was *'well over and above that was required'* (PO5). Another problem identified by two planning officers was connected to projected population growth and the associated rezoning of land for residential purposes by local authorities. It was suggested that the *'population projections were unrealistically set too low by the Department of the Environment, or else, and this is a far more likely scenario, that local authorities have zoned as residential land way over what was necessary according to their own population projections'* (PO2).

The above point is connected to a broader topic, raised by four interviewees, relating to the success, or otherwise, of central government's strategy of promoting village-type settlements as the most sustainable rural settlement type. While all interviewees agreed that, in theory, such settlements were the most sustainable form of rural residential development, a number of problems associated with this settlement type were highlighted.

The first of these, mentioned by three planning officers representing the local authorities of both counties Clare and Cavan, involves a situation where housing estates are lying empty as a result of the zoning of too much land for residential purposes. It was suggested that this was done as a means of attracting revenue from developers. Despite the obvious implications regarding the sustainability of such developments, one planning officer remarked that local authorities cannot be

considered at fault as *'they are still, in theory, adhering to central government policy of promoting concentrated rural residential development. However, what we are being left with is empty rural housing estates and no one to occupy them'* (PO3).

A further issue, raised by three planning officers, related to the lack of infrastructure and service provision in many newly-developed estates, including those which are fully occupied. One interviewee commented; *'The major drawback is that there is no infrastructure in place to cater for the large residential developments springing up at the edges of rural towns and villages. Often the finance just isn't available in the council. This is one of the most frequent criticisms levelled against us'* (PO1). Another remarked; *'You have to criticise the Department of the Environment for their lack of inclination to provide financial assistance for the updating of water and sewerage treatment systems'* (PO6).

Turning to the *Rural Housing Guidelines for Planning Authorities* (RHGs), the majority of planning officers agreed that the RHGs were 'useful' as guidelines in that they catered to the lack of uniformity in rural housing needs across rural Ireland through their incorporation of *'a strategy for categorising rural-area types according to population pressures and other related factors'* (PO3). As one planning officer commented; *"The rural housing guidelines provide a framework for adopting a detailed rural area typology and the manner in which it should be incorporated in rural policy"* (PO1)

Only one planning officer voiced a negative assessment of the RHGs. He was of the opinion that the prescriptions of the guidelines were easy to disregard due to their generalised and non-statutory nature. He also suggested that they were interpreted and utilised by different parties to suit their own agenda; *'The rural housing guidelines are used by councillors to refute planning applications but they're not policy'* (PO4).

In concluding this section of the interviews, planning officers were asked if the lack of a statutory definition of sustainable development in national policy relating to rural settlement was problematic in that the concept could be open to varied interpretation at local level.

The consensus amongst all interviewees was that there needed to be some degree of leeway when considering the concept of sustainable development, given the obvious difficulties involved in achieving a level of development which respects environmental, societal and economic concerns. The following interview extract has been included as it clearly illustrates this viewpoint.

'I'd be worried if you were to define sustainable development to the letter when granting houses – there needs to be leeway so that the sustainable development balance can be achieved. You could argue that every single house built in the countryside is not sustainable if viewing it solely from a public health or environmental perspective; in that we can't continue to utilise or pollute the ground water at the rates we are at present. You could also argue that from a transportation point of view single housing is not sustainable – you can't have an abundance of cars driving up and down these narrow country lanes. Granting houses in scenic areas is not sustainable as all these houses detract from the scenic backdrop and take away from the uniqueness of the area. So if you take these considerations into account, one could argue that one-off housing is not sustainable.

On the other hand you have to recognise that people for who were born in an area and have strong links to an area, that one-off housing is nearly always sustainable in these instances from a social point of view. From this perspective, they could also be considered economically sustainable. So there isn't really one definition that would suggest that you can grant houses in a sustainable way that will have regard for the environment and social and economic considerations. That is probably a 'cop-out' but if someone, and this is common in other quarters, defines sustainable development without

consideration for the environment, there is very little hope for the countryside' (PO1).

6.6 Assessment of Local Policy Relating to Rural Settlement Patterns – The Policy Formulation Process

This section provides an examination of the personal perspectives of local-authority planning officers with regard to the manner in which local rural settlement policy is formulated. The timeframe and general strategy involved in compiling the rural settlement strategy of the CDP have been outlined in a previous chapter. This section documents the experiences of planning officers with regard to the CDP formulation process focusing on their opinions of the benefits and the drawbacks of these operations in their current format.

The majority of planning officers tended to focus on the actual role of the rural settlement strategy in their respective local authorities and *'its intended purpose which is to ensure sustainable rural development'* (PO3). It was agreed that meeting this remit was *'a difficult thing to do and there are definitely huge disagreements during the formulation stages'* (PO5). A number of reasons were put forward to account for the difficulties encountered, including; the huge variation in settlement patterns within local authorities; the difficulties involved in tailoring policies to suit the whole county; ensuring compliance with national policy; and the lack of planning officers in formulating local policy.

It was agreed that one of the main challenges in formulating a rural settlement strategy was the accommodation of differing settlement pressures across a local-authority area. As one planning officer remarked; *'In parts of west Clare, your local rural areas could extend five, six, seven or eight miles whereas in south-east Clare, if you're saying you're local within a ten mile radius, you could go from Limerick to Kilaloe or O'Brien's Bridge. We have to be able to tailor our policies to suit Co. Clare as a whole and that's difficult'* (PO2). Five of the six

interviewees made statements to the effect that the *'best way to do it is to define or categorise the local areas within the authorities and go from there, and we have this template to work with from the National Spatial Strategy'* (PO2).

It was also noted by all of the interviewees that while local needs had to be met, it was also essential to ensure compliance with national policy; *'The overriding objective of national policy is the consolidation of existing settlements and we have to ensure that this is translated down to local policy. Obviously one-off housing will be permitted where a genuine need has been identified but promoting concentrated settlement has to be the primary focus of the rural settlement strategy'* (PO1). He continued: *'However, this contrasts greatly with general public opinion and as it is councillors who have the final say on what becomes policy, there is a huge conflict of interests which causes huge difficulties when putting the plan* [CDP] *together, particularly when it comes to the zoning of land.'* The element of compromise was a reoccurring theme during discussions on this topic given the often hugely contrasting perspectives and allegiances of the various stakeholders, for example, planning officers, elected representatives, interest groups and individuals with vested interests.

An air of discontentment regarding the level of power held by elected representatives was frequently apparent in the responses of planning officers when discussing rural settlement strategy formulation. The fact that it is the prerogative of elected council members to make the final decisions regarding rural settlement policy meant that a number of planning officers described their role in this regard as being *'purely guidance and recommendation'* (PO5). As one interviewee remarked; *'When it comes down to the nitty gritty and final decision making, elected members make up their own minds. They formulate the policies and zone the land to meet the prescriptions of these policies. We can only do so much. We can draw up plans but councillors can disagree and draw zoning lines wherever they want. It's ironic that we are the ones with the education and qualifications in this field and they* [councillors], *who are influenced by the public, are the ones making the policy...but that's their power'* (PO4).

The overall process of rural settlement strategy formulation was itself described as an act requiring *'a delicate balance, trying to accommodate national policy, local need, differing population pressures, and all while attempting to achieve the overall objective of balanced sustainable development'* (PO6).

6.7 Assessment of the Application of Rural Settlement Policy at Local Level

Planning officers were asked to provide an assessment of their own roles as rural settlement policy activators at local level. Interviewees were also invited to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of the eligibility conditions which are frequently attached to planning applications for one-off housing, for example, the 'local need' clause and the 'occupancy' clause. In the case-study authorities of counties Clare and Galway, where eligibility conditions for one-off housing are in place, planning officers were asked to outline their experiences in activating and monitoring these clauses. Counties Cavan and Roscommon do not, as yet, employ eligibility strategies as a means of managing rural settlement growth. Therefore, interviewees representing these counties discussed the desirability of employing such clauses as a means of managing rural settlements.

First, planning officers were asked if their personal opinions on one-off housing were a factor in the decisions which they made regarding planning applications for single dwellings. The general consensus was that it is *'impossible not to have an opinion on the sustainability of single dwellings given our profession but that doesn't mean we act on these convictions, whatever they are...I mean, a grocer doesn't refuse to sell you vegetables just because he doesn't like them himself'* (PO6). Another commented; *'We are professionals....we have a job description which in this case is to assess an application, evaluate whether it is in compliance with local policy and then make a decision based on this evaluation. Personal feelings don't come into it'* (PO4).

Turning to the subject of eligibility conditions, the occupancy clause is a condition whereby successful applicants for one-off housing must agree to live in the property for a given number of years, set by the council, before selling it. All six interviewees stated that this clause was, in theory, a promising means of ensuring sustainable development; *'The occupancy clause is there for a very good reason – to ensure people are committed to their community and not trying to make a quick buck'* (PO3). However, of primary concern to planning officers were the problems associated with monitoring and enforcing this clause; *'Of course I am aware of people breaking the occupancy clause'* (PO3). Interviewees listed a number of ways, almost identical to those mentioned by councillors, in which people are breaking the occupancy clause. These included; 1) constructing a single dwelling and adhering to the clause, then selling on and repeating the process; 2) Acquiring through a cash purchase a property having an attached occupancy clause.

A third way in which the occupancy clause has been broken is in instances whereby people have simply sold on their house with the occupancy clause still in place. Of the three planning officers who spoke on this issue, two stated that in situations where this had occurred it was the banks and building societies that were at fault; *'They provide mortgages for properties often on houses with occupancy clauses and this is unfortunate for us because they are disrupting the system allowing people to get their second houses and holiday houses and this was never the intention'* (PO1). However, one planning officer did suggest that this occurrence was not as common as people may think; *'In many cases it is the banks, through mortgage applications, that are first in line to become aware of this discrepancy* [the sale of a property prior to the completion of the occupancy clause] *and they will prevent the sale from occurring by denying finance for the property'* (PO3).

With regard to the monitoring of occupancy clauses attached to granted applications for single dwellings, it was suggested that this is a virtually impossible task, primarily due to staffing issues; *'We simply don't have enough staff to go around checking that every occupancy clause is being adhered to. Nor*

do we have enough staff to ensure that every house for which permission is granted is being built in accordance with the approved plans' (PO2). However, another planning officer commented that it is possible to take action against such infringements, if a complaint from a member of the public is received; *'We do have a strong enforcement team so that if we do get a complaint from a member of the public, we can investigate that'* (PO1).

With regard to the 'local need' clause, of the three planning officers representing local authorities where it is already in place, each felt that it was a necessary condition and should continue to be an eligibility requirement for applicants in areas where population pressures are a factor; *'The 'local need' clause is designed to protect the environment and local people. It is best practice in terms of good planning. We've had cases in the past prior to the introduction of the clause where sites have been sold to the highest bidder and this is not what locals want'* (PO2).

Of the three planning officers representing local authorities which had not, as yet, introduced a 'local need' clause, two felt that it would be a welcome addition; *'We've recommended the introduction of the 'local need' clause before but it was rejected by the elected members who felt it would be too restrictive'* (PO6). Just one planning officer felt that the clause would be an unnecessary addition to local rural housing policy; *'I agree with the concept of the 'local need' clause and am aware of the benefits of its inclusion as policy in other counties but I don't think it's necessary here at present as we don't suffer the same population pressures or have the same demand for rural dwellings as they do'* (PO4).

The interviewees cited a number of benefits which the 'local need' clause provides in terms of promoting sustainable rural development including:

- The role it plays in limiting the market for land, thus favouring local buyers
- Its role in preventing the construction of second homes and holiday homes, thus helping to consolidate rural communities by ensuring that successful applicants are committed to the locality

A final issue which was mentioned in relation to the 'local need' clause was the occurrence of instances where *'people will forge documents to convince us they are local to an area'* (PO3) to secure permission to build a single dwelling. Two of the interviewees had uncovered such forgeries when assessing applications but both stated that, to their knowledge, deception in this manner was not a common occurrence. As one commented; *'I am so familiar with planning applications at this stage, I think I would be able to spot a fake a mile off'* (PO1).

6.8 The Role of An Bord Pleanála

In the final section, interviewees were asked if they felt An Bord Pleanála[16] was a necessary element of the planning system.

The general consensus was that An Bord Pleanála was a necessary body; *'Yes having An Bord Pleanála is a necessity in the planning system. Their independence is important'* (PO4) However, some respondents were more hesitant in their assessment; '*I suppose a third party is necessary. There should be an independent body for appeal. We can't really be judge and jury on our own decisions'* (PO1).

While confirming the requirement of a third-party appeals body, the majority of planning officers also spoke of difficulties or problems which they associated with An Bord Pleanála. The first of these concerned the knowledge that an appeals inspector representing An Bord Pleanála may or may not have of a given area. In addition, four planning officers questioned the way in which an inspector's decision can be overturned by An Bord Pleanála. These concerns are succinctly summarised in the following interview excerpt;

'Planning officers from the county council know the area for which they are granting/refusing applications. It might be the first time the inspector from An

[16] an independent statutory body that decides on appeals from planning decisions made by local authorities

Bord Pleanála has been to an area and they can't be too familiar with the local policies and also the environmental, social and economic factors in every area they visit which have played a role in the local planning officer's decision. Even if an inspector does uphold a planner's decision, the board can overturn it having never even visited the area. This is very suspect and also very frustrating as a planner to have your professionalism and knowledge questioned by people who have never even been in the location of the proposed property' (PO2).

Another issue, mentioned by three interviewees was the objectivity of An Bord Pleanála. As one planning officer commented; *'Members of the board can also be subjected to lobbying from vested interests. However if they do go against an investigator's report, they have to make a statement of why they have done this...which I suppose is satisfactory to me'* (PO6). A further criticism put forward by one interviewee was that An Bord Pleanála is *'essentially an urban-based organisation. If they were to move their offices to the west of Ireland I think we would see changes in their decision making'* (PO3). He continued *'An Bord Pleanála do not have an ingrained vested interest in ensuring the sustainable development of an area in the same way the local planning department do'.*

Despite the reservations put forward by five of the interviewees, one planning officer displayed complete faith in An Bord Pleanála's functioning as a third-party appeals body; *'An Bord Pleanála have a bad reputation amongst the general population. Their apparent clinical nature doesn't appeal to the public. But what's important is that they can't be lobbied, they don't listen to councillors and there's also the finality of the board's decision. This is a good thing'* (PO5).

6.9. Spatial Patterns of Refused and Approved One-Off Housing Applications 2005

The following maps illustrate the site locations of refused applications for one-off housing in 2005. The county road network and location of urban centres (as defined by the census 2006) are mapped to establish if there are patterns of urban sprawl and ribbon development which have been prevented.

As can be seen from Figure 6.9.1, the vast majority of refused applications in Cavan are located in the south of the county. There are definite patterns of ribbon development and urban sprawl (which have been prevented), particularly surrounding the towns of Ballyjamesduff, Virginia and Ballieborough, which form the triangle of urban centres (population size 1500-2999) to the south-east of Cavan town, the largest urban centre in the county.

Turning to Co. Roscommon (Figure 6.9.2), the spatial visualisation of planning refusal for one-off rural housing illustrates the definite occurrence of ribbon development, had the applications been approved. This is particularly in evidence on the road network between Roscommon town (located in the centre of the county, population 5000-9999) and Athlone (the environs of this town extend into south-east Roscommon, population >10000). There is also evidence of (prevented) urban sprawl around Roscommon town and some of the other urban centres throughout Co. Roscommon.

The majority of one-off housing refusals in Co. Galway (Figure 6.9.3) are located in the easterly region of the county and also along the coastline in the south and west of the county. The area in the west of the county where there are few refusals is a mountainous region. Lough Corrib is also located in this region, spanning from the west of Galway city up to the Co. Mayo border (See Image 6.9.1). A number of refused applications can be seen in the regions of Lough Corrib. The refused applications in the east of the county exhibit a vast amount of urban sprawl and to a lesser extent ribbon development, particularly leading into Galway city.

Figures 6.9.4 and 6.9.5 which illustrated both refused and approved applications for one-off housing in Co. Clare in 2005 are very similar with regard to the spatial patterns visualised on the maps. An examination of the maps correctly suggest that the northern coast of Clare is protected from development as a significant number of applications were refused in this area and only a small number were approved. This is also the case along the south coast of Co. Clare which borders the Shannon estuary. Both the refused and approved maps show elements of ribbon development and urban sprawl. However, this is to be expected if applications are to be granted for cases of genuine rural need, building on family land.

Figure 6.9.1

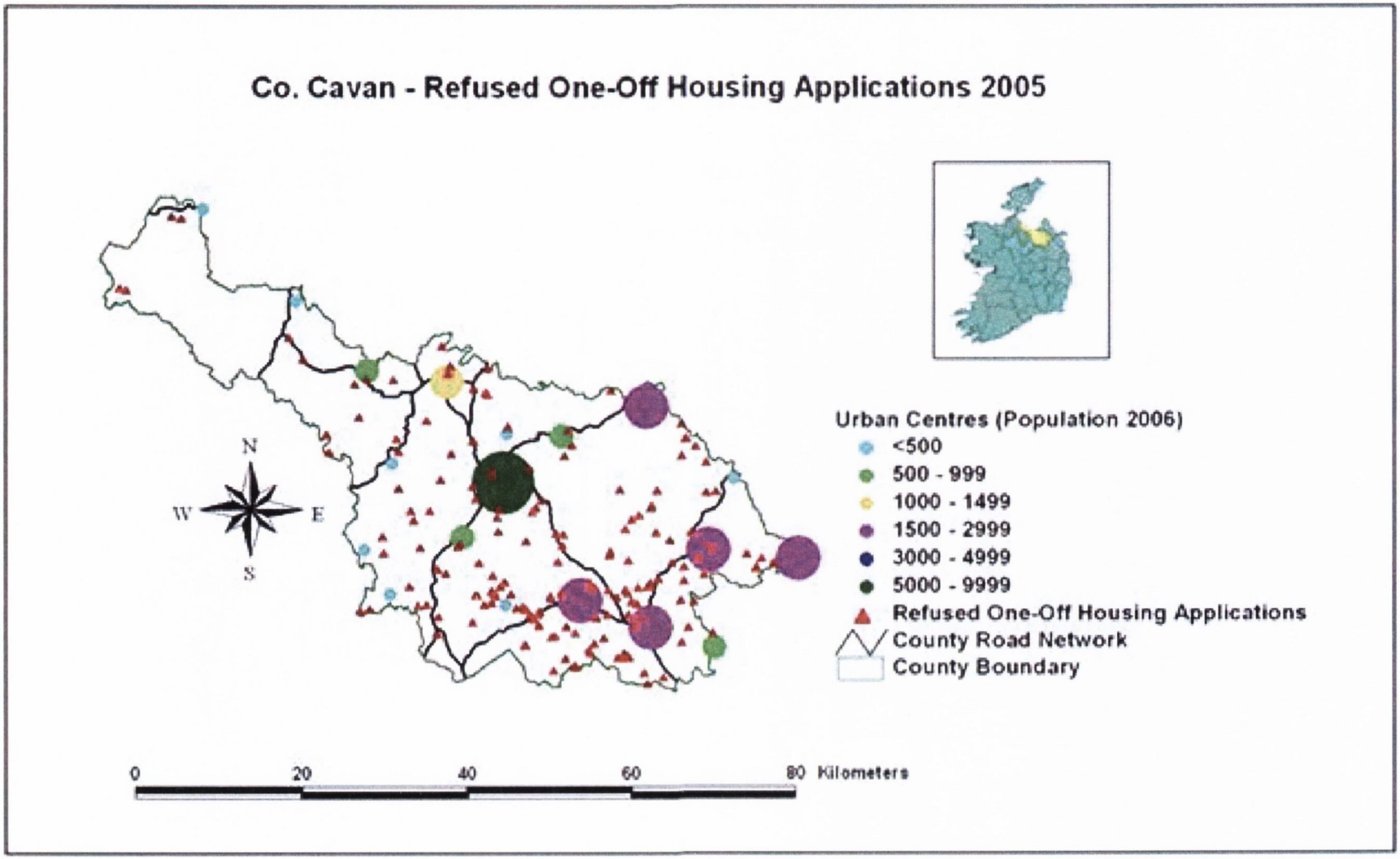

Co. Cavan - Refused One-Off Housing Applications 2005
N
W
E
S
Urban Centres (Population 2006)
<500
500 - 999
1000 - 1499
1500 - 2999
3000 - 4999
5000 - 9999
Refused One-Off Housing Applications
County Road Network
County Boundary
0
20
40
60
80 Kilometers

Figure 6.9.2

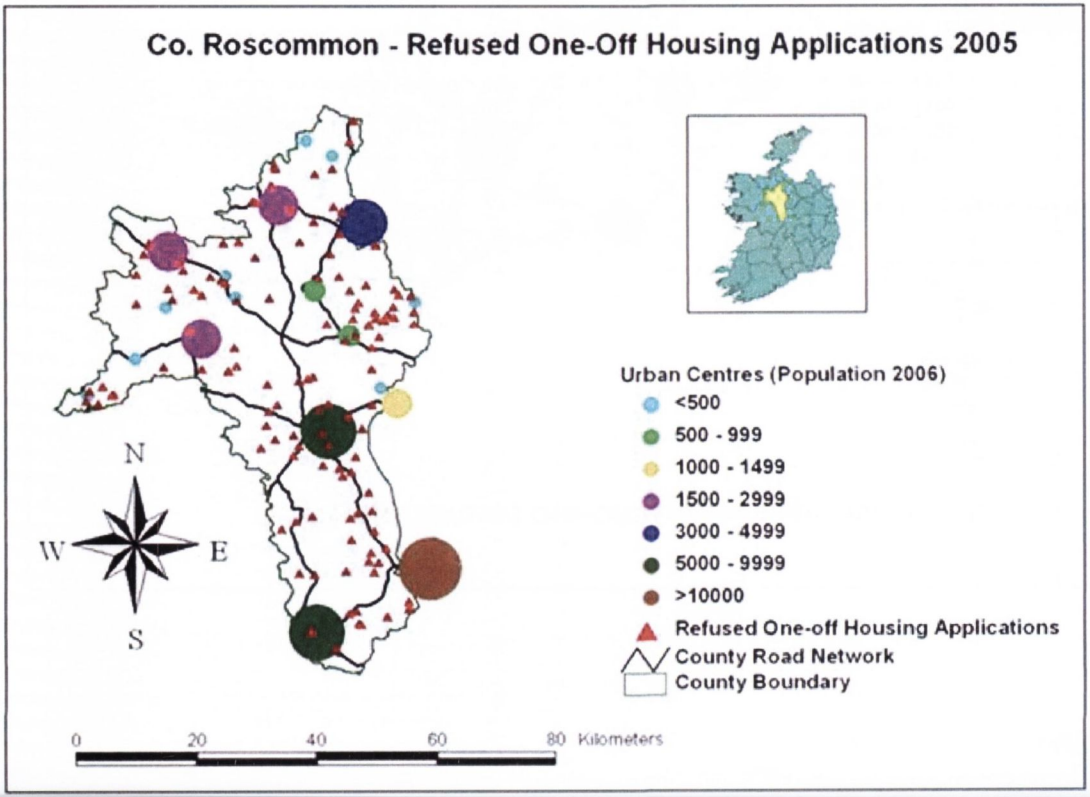

Co. Roscommon - Refused One-Off Housing Applications 2005
N
W
E
S
Urban Centres (Population 2006)
<500
500 - 999
1000 - 1499
1500 - 2999
3000 - 4999
5000 - 9999
>10000
Refused One-off Housing Applications
County Road Network
County Boundary
0
20
40
60
80 Kilometers

Figure 6.9.3

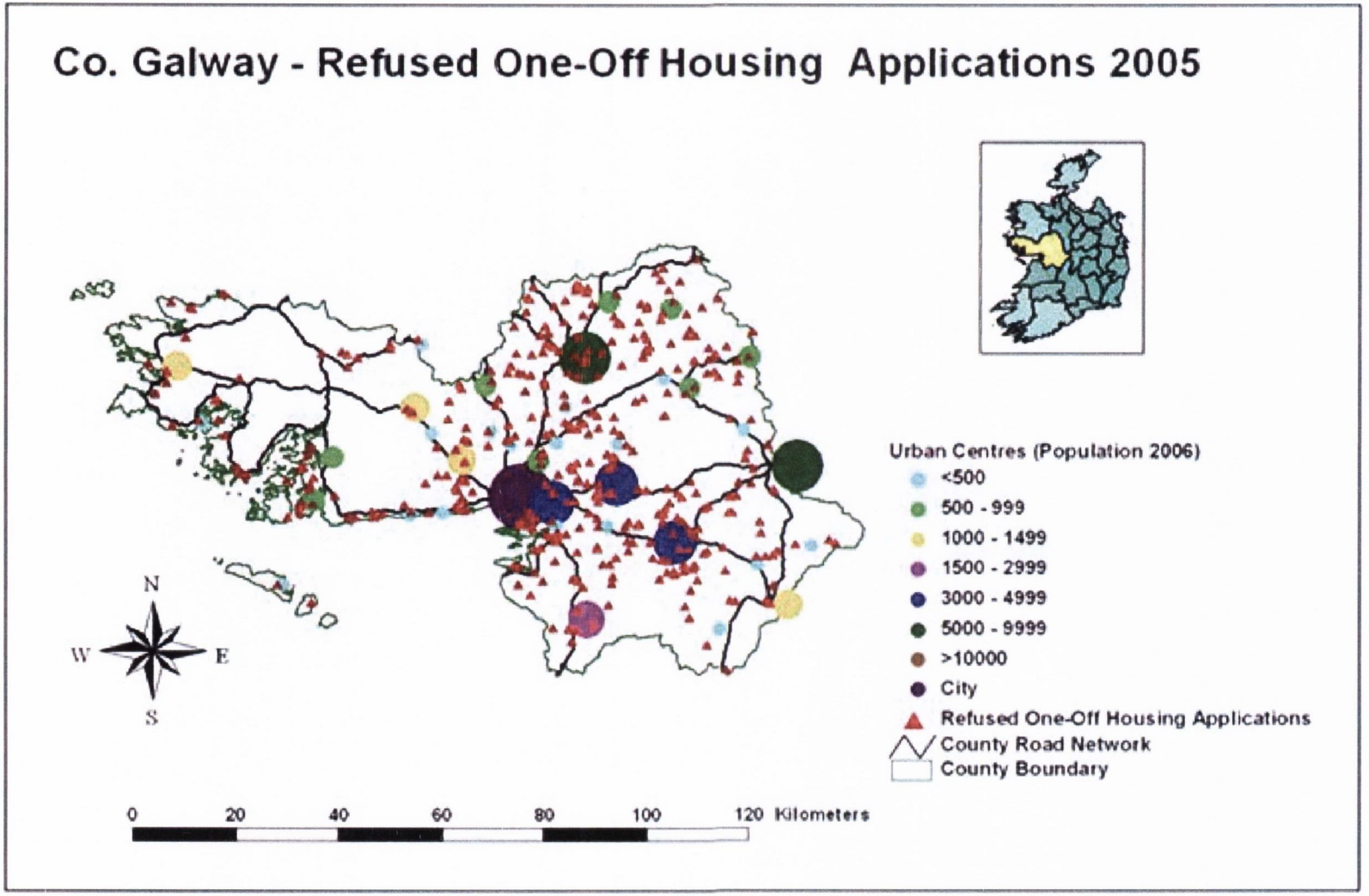

Co. Galway - Refused One-Off Housing Applications 2005
N
W
E
S
0
20
40
60
80
100
120 Kilometers
Urban Centres (Population 2006)
<500
500 - 999
1000 - 1499
1500 - 2999
3000 - 4999
5000 - 9999
>10000
City
Refused One-Off Housing Applications
County Road Network
County Boundary

Image 6.9.1 Location of Lough Corrib in Co. Galway (Image not to scale)

(Source; Teagasc, 2010, 1)

Figure 6.9.4

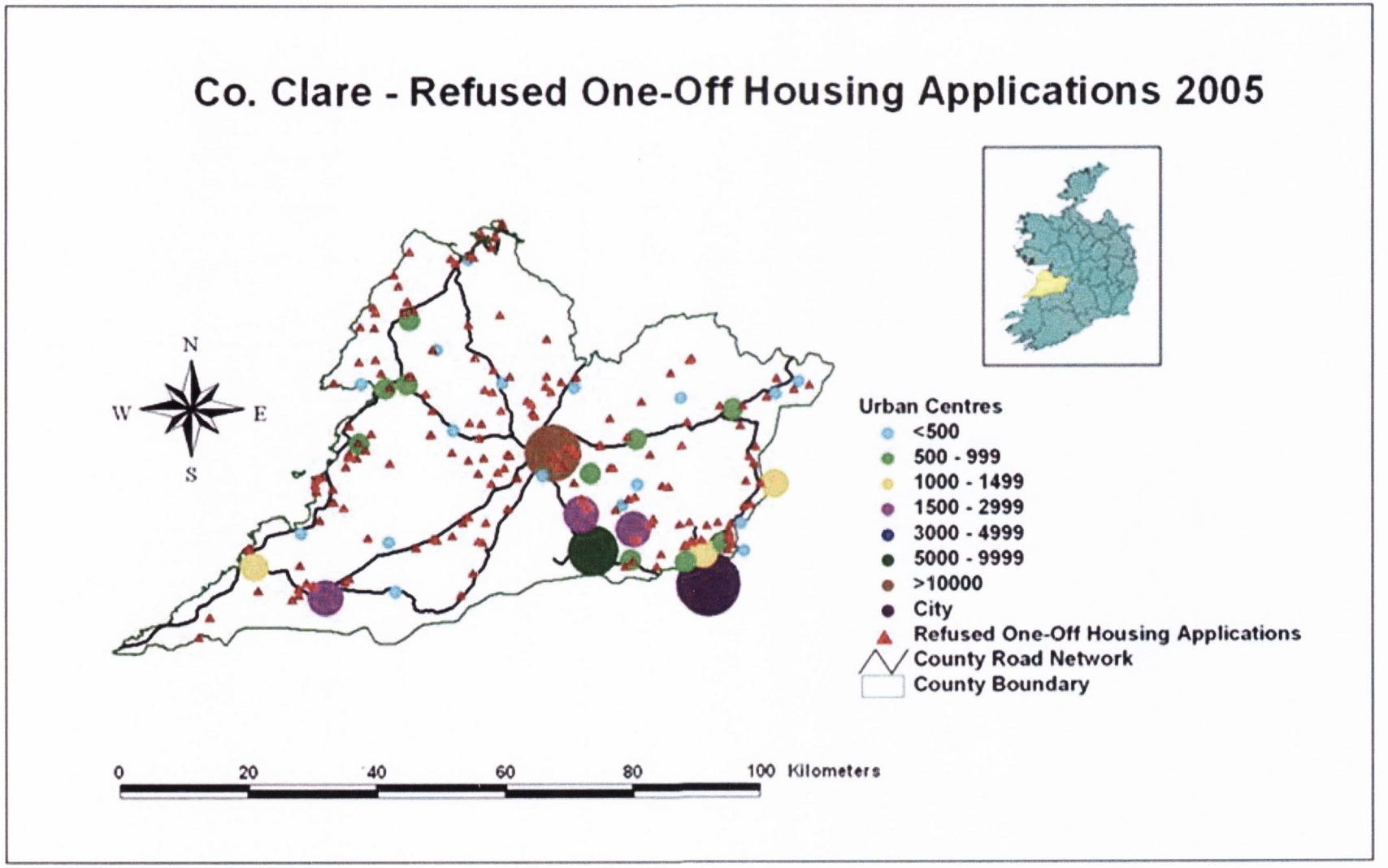
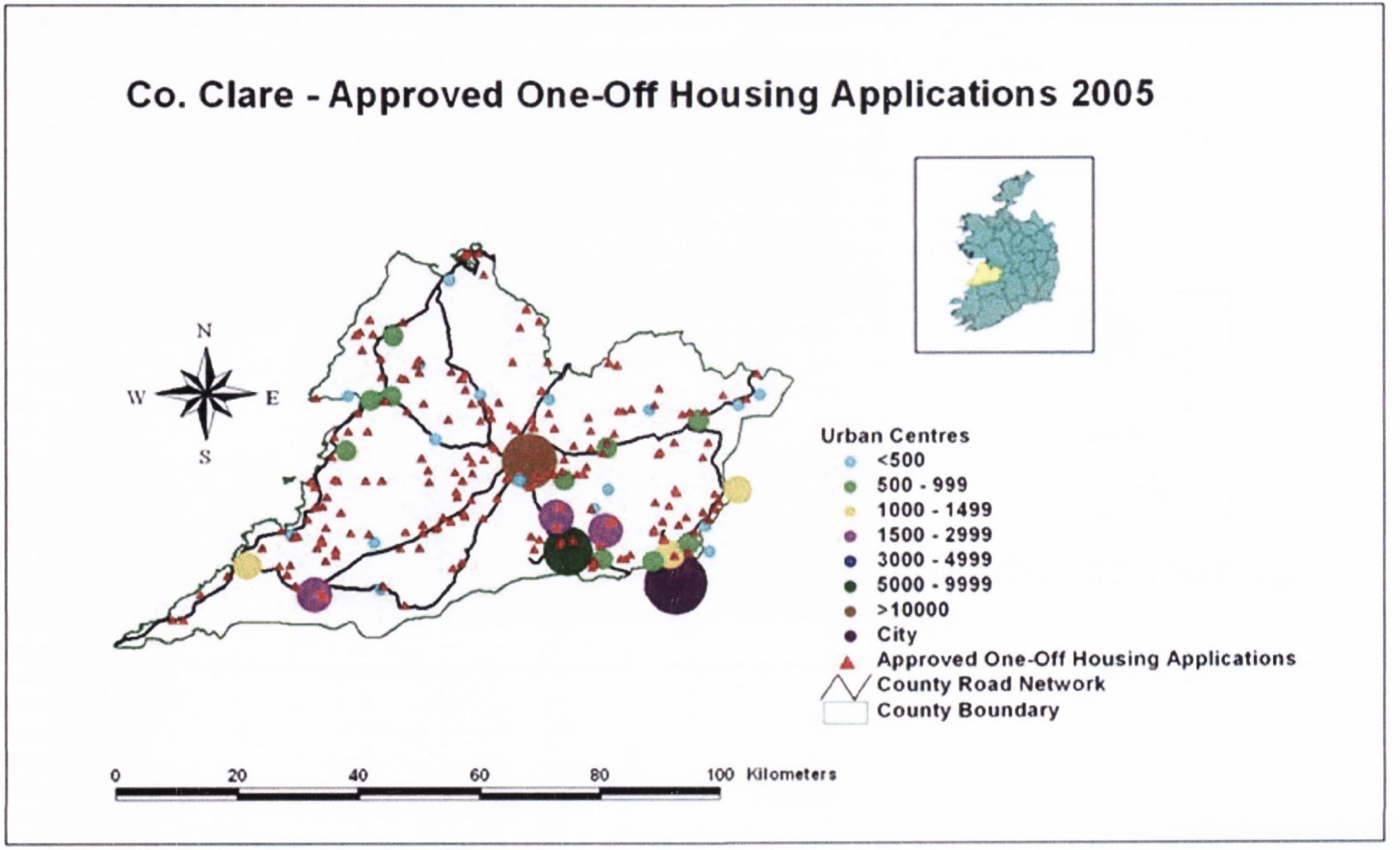

Co. Clare - Refused One-Off Housing Applications 2005
N
W
E
S
Urban Centres
<500
500 - 999
1000 - 1499
1500 - 2999
3000 - 4999
5000 - 9999
>10000
City
Refused One-Off Housing Applications
County Road Network
County Boundary
0
20
40
60
80
100 Kilometers

Figure 6.9.5


Co. Clare - Approved One-Off Housing Applications 2005
N
W
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Urban Centres
<500
500 - 999
1000 - 1499
1500 - 2999
3000 - 4999
5000 - 9999
>10000
City
Approved One-Off Housing Applications
County Road Network
County Boundary
0
20
40
60
80
100 Kilometers

6.10. Conclusion

Local planning officers are activators of local policy relating to rural housing and therefore take up a central position in the local planning system. Their views and opinions relating to the formulation and operation of national and local rural settlement strategies are therefore very relevant and important to this study, as are their personal views on the sustainability of one-off housing.

Given the body of evidence accumulated through interviews with planning officers, it can be suggested that they view themselves as operators of a non-political, professional role, implementing democratically-manufactured rural housing policy on a strictly technical basis with no consideration of their personal convictions regarding the sustainability of one-off housing. The fact that there was an apparent element of consternation displayed with regard to the power wielded by local councillors with regard to local policy decision-making may be indicative of managerialist leanings on the part of planning officers, a dissatisfaction that their professional expertise is being undermined. However, given the data accumulated representing planning officers' opinions and experiences, another possible conclusion is that such frustrations are suggestive of planning officers' dissatisfaction with the situation whereby there is a conflict of interest, on the part of councillors, given their dual role as policy-makers and elected representatives.

There was general agreement, among planning officers, that one-off housing was the least sustainable of all housing types. When discussing sustainable development and one-off housing, they focused on the technical aspects of siting and design, highlighting their education and occupation within the planning sphere. Location was of particular importance to planning officers when discussing the environmental sustainability of one-off housing, citing landscape sensitivity, including the importance of site suitability testing, and also population pressures as issues of prime importance which should be considered.

When discussing the social aspects of one-off housing, planning officers referred to their CDPs, stating people with rural need would be allowed to build in rural areas and that in areas of population decline, anyone would be allowed to build subject to good planning practice. It was stated that these allowances should address issues relating to the social cohesion of rural areas.

In economic terms, planning officers stated that the one-off housing boom of the 1990s and early 2000s have adversely affected the rural tourism industry in terms of the changes to the rural landscape away from the rural ideal which tourists travel to see. This proliferation of one-off housing, it was suggested, had left many rural areas saturated to the extent that the further construction of one-off housing is environmentally unsound. Planning officers acknowledged the difficulties experienced by local people in this regard.

Discussions relating to the role of interest groups highlighted one of the primary criticisms of the pluralist perspective – the lack of regard for inequality between interest groups in terms of, for example, financial resources and technical expertise. The most prominent group at local level was An Taisce. This was attributed to its prescribed status and also the resources available to it. The pro-one-off housing lobby were described as comprising mainly local groups who, while not having the same resources as An Taisce, used local councillors to forward their agenda and this made them the most influential group at local level.

The perspective of planning officers with regard to the operations of local authority elected representatives is in keeping with the pluralist theory as they consider them to be looking after their own interest in gaining favour with the electorate. It is perhaps not surprising that planning officers from the strict planning regimes of Clare and Galway experienced more pressure through councillors' representations given the fact that the fact that the volume of single dwelling applications in these counties is much greater and the refusal rate higher, as well as the previous assertion by councillors themselves that their primary priority is their constituents.

Turning to planning officers' opinions on the NSS, it was contended that the thinking behind the strategy was sound, to focus on urban centres for driving development. However, planners described the implementation of the strategy as disastrous, particularly due to the fact that too many gateways and hubs were chosen for inclusion. Another reason related to the over-zoning of land for residential use at local level which meant that, in accordance with national and local policy to consolidate development, many housing estates had been approved. However, many of these estates were now suffering from inadequate service infrastructure or lying empty.

With regard to the role of interest groups at national level, the perceptions of some planning officers would suggest that central government are operating in accordance with the teaching of the managerialist thesis, given their suggestions of tokenism with regard to public participation in the policy formulation process. Conversely, it was also noted that the all-embracing interpretive nature of the NSS and the RHGs could suggest that arguments put forward by groups both for and against one-off housing construction were influential in its composition. If this sense, a pluralist agenda could be considered to be in operation. Despite this, the RHGs were generally considered to be useful as they provided further information, on the back of the NSS, for rural area typologies.

Chapter six has examined the process involved in central and local government policy formation and activation relating to sustainable rural settlement patterns from the perspective of local authority planning officers. Chapter seven examines these issues from the viewpoint of interest groups who are both for and against one-off housing construction.

CHAPTER SEVEN:
THE ROLE OF INTEREST GROUPS IN THE PLANNING SYSTEM

7.0. Preamble

One of the primary aims of this research was to examine the role of interest groups, both for and against one-off housing construction, with regard to their respective positions to exert influence on policy-makers at national and local level, and their self-perception of their success in this endeavour. In an attempt to provide insight into the extent by which external pressures in the form of interest groups are able to influence national and local political agendas, seven representatives of interest groups who have national standing, and who are representative of both sides of the rural housing debate, were interviewed.

Of the seven interviewees, four represented groups that can be classed as rural community advocates, who have, in varying degrees, shown support for dispersed settlement patterns, and three represented groups that have publically criticised the continued construction of one-off housing. During the course of this chapter, interviewees representing groups who have shown support for one-off housing construction will be described as *interviewees in favour of one-off housing* or by similar terminology, and those representing groups who have publically criticised one-off housing will be described as *interviewees against one-off housing construction* or again by similar terminology. While these labels are a huge generalisation and do not make any attempt to divulge the nature or extent to which these groups have asserted themselves as being in favour or against one-off housing construction, they were deemed necessary for clarity in the text of this chapter and for the immediate identification of which side of the rural housing debate the interviewee and the group he/she represents is placed.

Table 7.1. Groups which Interviewees Represent

Rural community representatives	Groups with an anti- one-off housing stance
– Irish Rural Dwellers' Association (IRDA) – Irish Rural Link (IRL) – Irish Farmers' Association (IFA) – Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA)	– Friends of the Irish Environment (FIE) – An Taisce – The Heritage Council

Each of the representatives, from the interest groups who have taken a public stance against one-off housing, are based at the head offices of their respective organisations. This is primarily due to reluctance on the part of local representatives of anti- one-off housing groups to engage in an interview. Respondents were asked, where possible, to provide specific reference to the four case-study authorities.

In the case of the groups representing rural communities, the representative of IRL was also based at head office, while the IRDA representative was a national spokesperson, also heavily involved with the local branch in Co. Clare. Both the IFA and ICA interviewees were county representatives. To protect anonymity, the county is not disclosed.

While respondents were being interviewed as representatives of their respective groups, they often lapsed into the first person when expressing their thoughts, for example; '*my position on...,*' rather than stating the group's position on a given topic. Hence while interviewees were representing their groups, it is important to

note that on occasion, they may also have been expressing a personal opinion which differs from the group's personal stance.

In addition to assessing the role played by interest groups in exerting pressure on national and local policy decision-makers in an attempt to influence rural settlement policy, interviewees were also asked to provide their opinions on the manner by which the planning system in Ireland is currently operated with regard to rural settlement structure. The perspective of interviewees with regard to the concept of sustainable development was examined to ascertain the differences in perspective between groups who are in favour, and groups who are against one-off housing construction.

The role of interest groups is examined in this chapter with reference to the pluralist interpretation of state operations. Pluralism contends that everyone has the ability to participate in and influence the outcome of policy decision-making through the democratic process. It also contends that politicians are receptive to lobbying due to their preoccupation with maintaining electorate satisfaction.

7.1. The Position of Interest Groups with regard to One-Off Housing

This first topic of interview, called for interviewees to outline their group's stance on one-off housing, with regard to the sustainability of this form of settlement pattern, and to state why this was the stance taken by each group.

Examining first, the responses of the rural community representatives, all stated that one-off housing was a necessary settlement form in rural Ireland and should continue. However, the parameters within which this should occur varied depending on the respondent. Both the IRDA and IFA representatives stated that the ability to apply for permission for a single dwelling should be open to everyone regardless of their local status; '*We have no problem with rural housing. From a rural perspective, it's an advantage to have people moving to the*

countryside because a natural thing that will happen is that families will die out and people will move on. So we need to have these families replaced' (IFA). The IRDA representative commented; '*Applications for one-off housing should be given proper consideration in all instances regardless of whether the applicant is from the local area or not. People should be entitled to freedom of choice. Depopulation, dereliction, rural desertification; all these terms are used to describe rural areas that are dying and they will continue to die if people don't move in.*'

The ICA representative stated that while there need to be restrictions on allowing excess single dwellings to be constructed in rural areas under pressure from urban sprawl, this did not mean that there should be a ban on non-locals acquiring permission to build one-off housing in areas which are not under such pressure or areas of population decline '*as often seems to be the case.*' '*All applications should be considered on their own merit and not immediately disregarded because the person applying is not a local.*' She also stated that a local to the area should always be allowed to build on family land if this is viable and depending on site suitability.

The IRL representative was far more refined in his assessment of instances were one-off housing construction should be allowed to occur; '*We are a rural network that represents rural communities. We are concerned that people from an area should be given the right to set up home there and, in this instance, we do support rural housing. However, we don't support this influx of urban people, into rural areas, looking to build. This creates pressure in an area, both housing pressure and the raising land prices which can price locals out of the market. These people, if they are really dedicated to setting up home in a rural area, should buy a house and renovate it if necessary.*'

With regard to the sustainability of one-off housing as a form of settlement pattern, both the ICA and IFA representatives stated that it was dependent on circumstances, the housing pressures in the area in question and the reasons why the applicant wishes to and needs to build a house. The IFA representative

questioned the definition of sustainability and stated that the concept was perspective based; '*Opinions and perspective are based on what we know. Obviously one-off housing is going to have some affect on the environment but so is any development rural or urban. People who don't have a rural background or an understanding of rural living are perhaps going to focus on the environmental sustainability of rural areas above social and economic stability and sustainability.*'

Turning to the responses of interviews representing groups with an anti- one-off housing stance, each of the respondents stated that a proliferation of one-off housing construction, as seen in recent years, could not be allowed to continue or start up again at its previous pace. As one respondent commented; '*From an environmental perspective, one-off housing is a huge problem in Ireland*' (An Taisce). The sustainable development of one-off housing was described by one respondent, his sentiments echoed by the other interviewees, as being '*instances whereby, the applicant is local to the area in question, and has a real need to be located in the open countryside, for example, an agricultural worker. However, this level of stringency does not happen due to pressure from the local populace and local politicians. The future environmental implications are already apparent but their full extent is unknown*' (FoE).

Each of the respondents stated the sustainability of one-off housing was highly dependent on the location of the proposed development, and those factors such as population pressures, landscape sensitivity, soil sensitivity and the history of settlement patterns in the area in question all had to be taken in account; '*Where there is a legitimate case for the building of a single dwelling, environmental factors such as site and location suitability must also be afforded serious consideration*' (FoE). In all instances, one-off housing was described as by far the least sustainable of all housing options and settlement patterns.

In summary, pro- one-off housing groups contended that rural one-off housing was a necessary settlement form. However, the parameters within which one-off

housing construction should continue varied depending on the group. It was agreed by anti- one-off housing groups that the sustainability of one-off housing as a settlement form was dependent on existing settlement circumstances and pressures as well as on personal perspectives and the importance placed on the various dimensions of sustainable development.

7.2. The Role of Interest Groups at National and Local Level

This section asked for interest group representatives to locate themselves within the arena of the rural housing debate. Respondents were requested to detail the circumstances which provoked their organisation to become involved in the national debate relating to rural housing, and the actions that they have taken to engender discussion and publicise their stance on the issue to the general public.

Given the lobbying experience of each of the interest groups, representatives were asked to consider if they felt themselves to be in a position to influence rural housing policy direction both at national and local level.

7.2.1. The Necessity of making a Public Stance on the Rural Housing Issue

The representatives of the seven interest groups were asked to explain the reasoning behind the necessity of becoming involved in a national public debate regarding one-off housing. Turning first to the responses of the rural community representatives, both the IRDA and the IFA stated that the denial of people's right to choose where they wished to live was of primary importance in their decision to become involved in the debate surrounding one-off housing.

The IRDA representative cited the huge resistance witnessed to allowing the freedom of movement of people and the removal of people's rights to choose where the wish to live within their own country; *'This became particularly apparent after the publication of the National Spatial Strategy. So a group of us like-minded people, normal individuals, councillors from across the country, and*

people from other rural organisations came together and formed the Irish Rural Dwellers' Association to highlight the injustices in Irish rural planning on a national stage, where it would have the most impact, both politically, and with regard to informing the Irish public.'

When asked why the IFA felt it necessary to become involved in the rural housing debate, the interviewee representing this group responded; '*The biggest issue from our point of view was that farmers' family members were having difficulties in acquiring permission for their own land. It's not just that people be forced to live somewhere against their will. If people wish to live in a town or city, that's fine, but if they have the land, they should be allowed to build on it, and this was an issue which the IFA felt needed addressing.*'

The ICA representative spoke of the injustice in the planning system as it currently operates. Of primary concern was the lack of consistency in granting and refusing planning permission for single dwellings, both within, and across local authorities. Also mentioned was the overly-stringent planning regimes in operation in some counties which '*have made it almost impossible to get permission for a detached rural house, to the detriment of many genuine applicants.*' She continues; '*When rural housing became a national issue warranting media attention, we felt that it was important to represent our members and their views on the issue.*'

The IRL representative stated that IRL '*did not really court media attention when rural housing became a national issue*'. He continued; '*We do work with individual groups within our network who feel that rural housing and planning policy are issue which directly affect them. Some of the main issues to which our attention is directed by members are the proliferation of holiday homes and urban-generated housing which members may feel is affecting their own chances of getting permission for a detached house. The issue of rural housing, while receiving national attention is one which more frequently plays out at local level where local factors come into play.*'

Turning to the interest groups who had taken a position in opposition to one-off housing construction, all three interviewees spoke about the introduction of the *Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines for Planning Authorities,* first in draft form in 2004 and the finalised version in 2005, stating that the guidelines, which were intended to ease the planning restrictions placed on one-off housing, were a concession to public pressure, which would result in adverse environmental consequences. As the representative from FoE commented; '*The proliferation of unsustainable one-off housing is ruining the countryside. This problem was addressed with the National Spatial Strategy which introduced legislation to curb the un-checked building of single dwelling and promoted the consolidation of existing rural settlement. However, the introduction of the Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines in 2005 was a backwards step in planning legislation and was essentially a government cop-out and an attempt to appease the general public. The FoE felt that the imminent consequences of such policy concession had to be highlighted*'.

The interviewee from the Heritage Council stated that the primary concern of this organisation was to ensure the proper management of the Irish landscape with regard to its conservation and its sustainable development. It was suggested that; '*the loosening of restrictions on one-off housing could lead to the decline of smaller rural settlements, and in the sustainability and vitality of rural communities.*'

7.2.2. Actions Taken to Engender Discussion and Publicise Stance Regarding the Sustainability of One-Off Housing

Respondents were questioned as to what actions they had taken to engender discussion and promote the views of the respective interest groups, regarding one-off housing, to the general public.

The most common response to this question was the use of the media. As one interviewee remarked; '*A press release is the fastest, and least time-consuming way to get your perspective on the sustainability of various rural settlement forms*

out there, and can also be used to challenge or refute the viewpoints of individual groups who have attracted media attention for their opposing views' (IFA). Indeed, several interviewees noted the importance of 'courting the media' and availing of air-time on radio and television.

Other actions mentioned by interviewees, aimed at engendering public discussion included; the publication of material (booklets, webpages, articles, etc.) explaining the groups stance on one-off housing and the reasons why they have taken this stance as well as the hosting of open days and conferences aimed at disseminating information and exchanging opinions an ideas. The IRDA representative also revealed that he had picketed planning authority offices to attract attention to a situation whereby a number of local residents were being refused planning permission to construct single dwellings in Co. Clare.

The interviewee representing IRL stated that it was unnecessary to set out to engender public discussion as if an issue was of significant importance to warrant attention, they would be made aware of it by their members; '*Given that we are an established organisation, with a proven track record and are knowledgeable on rural issue, we find that generally, our members will come to us if they have concerns, or seek information or advice, on issues relating to rural housing.*'

Of those groups who stated that engendering public discussion and publicising their stance on one-off housing was their objective, each felt that they had been successful in this endeavour. However, the interviewee representing An Taisce remarked that the organisation had also been on the receiving end of poor media coverage which he described as a '*frequent bi-product of environmental activism*' which had resulted in bad feeling towards the organisation amongst an element of the rural population; '*An Taisce often only seems to make headlines on planning issues, and in instances when it relates to one-off housing, it's generally bad press.*'

Under legislation (Planning and Development Regulations, 2001), An Taisce has prescribed status that essentially means it has special interests or a remit to protect. An Taisce's remit is related to the environment, for example, areas of special amenity or special areas of conservation. Local authorities are obliged to refer planning applications for developments which are located in areas which fall under An Tasice's remit to the organisation. An Taisce then make recommendation to the council on the application, including if it should be approved or refused. Local Authority planning officers are under no obligation to proceed as An Taisce has recommended although they must make note of it. On occasion, An Taisce will appeal to An Bord Pleanála regarding the granting of an application by a local authority which it had previously recommended be refused. It is these occurrences which have attracted a significant amount of media attention, particularly as they relate to one-off housing. The An Taisce interviewee commented; '*It's not like we make recommendations on every single planning application that comes our way. If we do appeal, it's because we feel the development is unsustainable and environmentally unsound. The media focuses on our appealing a tiny number of one-off housing approvals and the issue takes on a life of its own and An Taisce are accused of objecting to all one-off housing which is so far from the truth.*'

7.2.3. Influence Exerted by Interest Groups on Policy Decision-Makers at National Level

At this juncture, interviewees were questioned as to whether they felt interest groups have the ability and power to exert influence on policy decision-makers at national level on issues relating to rural housing.

The interviewees representing the IRDA, the IFA, and the ICA, all made statements to the effect that, the campaign mounted, by interest groups in favour of one-off housing construction, prior to and at the time of the publication of the draft *Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines for Planning Authorities* was illustrative of how campaigning and lobbying can engender public support and influence the policy direction; '*public backing was an essential component in 2004, it kept*

growing and growing. The Government couldn't ignore us then, they had to take our view on board when formulating the rural housing guidelines' (IRDA).

The IFA representative commented; '*We are a strong voice representing rural Ireland. We employ top specialists in any particular field we need advice on to ensure we are getting correct and accurate information. Then we can back up our lobbying with fact. If we feel an issue warrants a trip to Dublin to meet with relevant politicians and officials, our county representative will do that. We might just be farmers but the IFA has such a strong lobbying ability now, as well as the staunch support of our members, that the politicians do take note.*'

Turning to the interviewees representing groups who have an anti- one-off housing stance, both the An Taisce and the Heritage Council Representative mentioned the prescribed status of their organisation when discussing the ability of their respective groups to influence national policy direction; '*Of course, we are in prime position to influence, given our prescribed status, to provide advice for government departments on national spatial planning policy as it relates to national heritage*' (The Heritage Council).

The An Taisce representative again made reference to the poor media attention the organisation had received in relation to the rural housing issue but stated that it had not been detrimental to its ability to guide policy direction;

'*Our mission statement stated that our main objective as an organisation is to inform and lead public opinion on the environment and to advocate and influence both national and local policy and I believe we have been successful in doing this. The one-off housing issue has been a tricky one in attracting public support for our viewpoint, given the bad media attention we've received but this does not take away from the fact that we are completely supportive of government policy to consolidate rural settlements and we have published environmental guidelines in this respect to guide key decision-makers. Our role as a prescribed body means that our viewpoint is taken seriously and respected by policy decision-makers.*'

7.2.4. Influence Exerted by Interest Groups on Policy Decision-Makers at Local Level

Interviewees were as to ascertain the role of their respective organisations in influencing policy decisions on rural housing policy and settlement strategies at local level.

The IFA, the ICA and the IRDA all stated that they had the ability to influence councillors at local level through lobbying the council. The IFA interviewee commented; '*We go to the top planning consultants if we have a planning issue which needs addressing, then we present our case to councillors. If the need is there, for example, if seemingly viable applications for one-off housing are consistently turned down by a planning authority operating an overly-strict regime, we consistently lobby, not just at election time. People want to move into the country every year, at all times of the year.*' The IRDA representative remarked; '*Yes we consistently lobby councillors, and a large proportion of councillors are sympathetic to our viewpoint being local rural people themselves and understanding the issues. However, the problem at local level is not usually with the councillors, it's with the planners who seem to interpret local housing policy however they please to meet their own ends.*'

The IRL interviewee stated that the organisation had made individual representations for one-off housing planning applicants who had sought help and advice; '*We are a rejected organisation who have the best interests of our network of members at heart. Planning authorities are aware of this and take our views on board.*'

With regard to the level of influence exerted on local policy decision-making by groups who have an anti- one-off housing stance, the FoE respondent reported that, in the instance of rural housing this was not the primary function or concern of his organisation; '*There are other groups out there performing that function. Our aim is to inform and educate the general population regarding the*

environmental issues associated with one-off housing and other forms of settlement, for example, through hosting workshop for local groups.'

Both the interviewees representing An Taisce and the Heritage Council stated that they were in a position to exert influence on policy decision-makers at local level. The opinions expressed were very similar and are aptly summarised in the following excerpt; '*Given our prescribed status, we provide advice on county and local development plans. Local Authorities are also obliged to consult us on a wide range of development proposals, including rural housing. Therefore, when it comes to preparing policy relating to county and local development, the council takes our recommendations and advice very seriously*' (An Taisce).

In addition, the Heritage Council interview mentioned the Local Authority Heritage Officer Programme, which was set up in 1999 to experts in heritage matters working within local authorities; '*One of the roles of the heritage officer is provide advice to the local authority on rural settlement strategies, as they relate to heritage issues. Heritage officers are also best placed to have in-depth knowledge of local issues and priorities.*'

7.2.5. The Importance of Maintaining a Public Profile on the Issue of One-Off Housing

Given that media attention relating to rural housing and sustainable development has waned since it was at its most intense in 2004 and 2005, interviewees were asked if they felt it was necessary for its organisation to maintain a public profile on these issues. Interviewees were questioned as to where they felt their efforts, with regard to exerting influence were best placed; central government level; local authority level or community level.

The IFA representative felt it was necessary to continuously monitor the manner by which local rural housing policy is being applied; '*We are a grassroots organisation who know what's happening locally involving the individual. Therefore, we are best placed to be aware of local problems involving local*

planning operations and single housing. Often issues can be addressed locally with the council but if an issue warrants national attention we will take steps to ensure this occurs.'

Three of the four interviewees who were in favour of one-off housing construction stated that it was necessary to keep the rural housing issue highlighted; '*If we are seen to be slacking off, the planners, the council, or the people above them may do something like enact a new policy that mightn't be in our favour and then they come back to us and say well you never lobbied us or told us what you wanted and we had to move forward*' (ICA). Both the IFA and ICA representative felt that their attentions were best focused at local level; '*We are a grassroots organisation who know what's happening locally involving the individual. Therefore, we are best placed to be aware of local problems involving local planning operations and single housing. Generally, any issues we have can be resolved at local level. However, if an issue warrants national attention, we will takes steps to make sure this occurs*' (IFA).

By contrast, the IRDA representative, felt it was necessary to maintain a national profile on rural housing issues to ensure the continued support of the public; '*We have to keep the public informed. We need the continued backing of rural communities across the country to ensure that the Government realises that they can't bully us and move us around like herds of cattle.*'

The IRL representative provided an interesting perspective on the necessity of a continued highlighting of issues relating to one-off housing construction; '*Issues which are of importance to rural communities will present themselves as they arise and we will address them, if we deem it appropriate or necessary, when this happens. There's no point in squeezing the life out of the one-off housing debate just for the sake of it. I believe it's an issue which certain rural activists cling to because it's one which the rural faction were seen to have won.*'

The three interviewees representing organisations who are against one-off housing construction all stated that their concerns for the on-going construction of single dwelling do not alter depending on whether or not it is a prominent news issue; '*It is not about courting media attention. People are aware of our views on one-off housing. We are not objecting to every single one-house in the country. If there is a genuine need so be it but we are against development which is not sustainable and is harming the environment. We will continue to promote government policy which states that clustered settlement forms are the most sustainable type of rural settlement. This work is carried out at all levels, national, local and community*' (An Taisce).

In summary of this section, making a public stance was considered necessary by the majority of pro- one-off housing groups given their perception of the rural housing issue as a situation whereby people are being denied the right to freedom of movement and also the right to build on their personal property. Concerns were also raised regarding the stringency of planning regimes in certain planning authorities notably, in the case of this research, counties Clare and Galway. The primary issue raised by groups against one-off housing, with regard to necessity of making a public stance, was the adverse environmental consequences the publication of the RHGs could have for rural areas.

The majority of interest groups felt that engendering public discussion was important. The most common method utilised in achieving this was the media and public forums. One group, IRL felt it was unnecessary to engender discussion; if an issue was considered important it would be raised by its members. Each of the interest groups who had courted public attention felt they had been successful in attracting national awareness for their cause.

With regard to the ability of interest groups to exert influence at national level, the majority of pro- one-off housing groups stated that the RHGs were illustrative of the positive effect public lobbying can have at national level. Two of the

conservations groups, An Taisce and the Heritage Council, highlighted their prescribed status when confirming their ability to exert influence.

In relation to influencing local rural housing policy, the majority of pro- one-off housing groups stated it was possible to influence local policy through the lobbying of councillors as they were sympathetic to their cause. The IRL representative said it was not the groups aim to influence policy but they would make representations on behalf of individual members. Again, An Taisce and the Heritage Council made reference to their prescribed status when discussing their ability to influence local policy.

7.3. The Significance of the Rural Housing Issue during Local Election Campaigns

As a consequence of the publication of the draft *Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines for Planning Authorities* in April 2004, two months prior to the local government elections, the issue of one-off housing received wide-spread media coverage at this time. Interviewees were asked to discuss the extent to which the rural housing debate manifested itself in the 2004 local elections campaign.

The IRDA interviewee commented; '*Yes it was definitely an election issue. Some candidates made one-off housing and the need for more lenient planning regimes a central issue of their campaigns, which we supported.*' The IFA interviewee suggested that restriction on one-off housing was a bigger issue for people living in towns and villages looking to move out into the countryside, than for rural dwellers already living there. Both the ICA and the IRL representatives commented that while it may have been an issue for individuals who were having trouble in acquiring planning permission for a one-off house, the rural housing debate had not, to their knowledge, been a dominant issue on the doorsteps during canvassing for the 2004 local elections.

Similarly, each of the interviewees representing groups who are against one-off housing construction were of the opinion that while; '*rural housing is always going to be an issue for the minority, it was not one of the over-riding issues of the local elections*' (FoE). However, the Heritage Council representative commented; '*I'm aware that there was an element of scaremongering going on, you know statements to the effect that the government wants to empty out the countryside but vote for me and I'll put a stop to it...At the end of the day, if a proposed dwelling doesn't meet planning requirements, it's going to be refused. This has got nothing to do with emptying out the countryside of any other ridiculous notions but certain candidates did employ these scare tactics to drum up support for their election.*'

Finally, in this section, interviewees were asked whether a candidate's personal stance regarding sustainable rural housing resulted in their personal gain or loss of votes. Interviewees representing the IRL, IFA, ICA and FoE did not feel that a candidate's personal stance on one-off housing was a major factor in the gain or loss of votes; '*I doubt it. Rural housing was an issue that had received national attention but I don't think it was a major issue on the campaign trail, so no I don't think a candidate's stance would have changed their vote tally*' (IRL). The IRL interviewee also stated that dissatisfaction with central government was a more prominent factor in the allocation of council seats; '*The was a high level of discontent with central government at the time so I think a candidate's political affiliation was an important factor in deciding their election.*'

The IRDA interviewee felt that personal stance on rural housing was a factor in acquiring votes; '*I think candidates who spoke out in favour of one-off housing would have gained votes, Rural people want councillors who represent their viewpoint, not some bureaucrat on his high horse.*'

An Taisce and the Heritage Council also stated that a candidate's stance on one-off housing may have affected their vote count; '*Given the national furore surrounding one-off housing at the time, a candidate who took a stand promoting sustainable rural settlement patterns may have cost a few votes but I doubt if it*

would have changed the overall voting results. Candidates are generally well known within their election areas and if they are known as being of sound character honest and fair, this will be acknowledged by the voters' (The Heritage Council).

7.4. Position and Understanding of Sustainable Development

In this section, respondents were asked to outline their own understanding of the concept of sustainable development, with regard to rural settlement structure. They were then asked to elaborate by focusing on each individual dimension of sustainable development, economic, social and environmental, by stating the relevance of each to rural housing and sustainable rural settlement patterns.

7.4.1. Defining Sustainable Development

The overriding theme which emerged during discussion was that each of the seven interviewees were in agreement that sustainable development is a concept which is open to interpretation and is often based on the personal perspective of an individual; '*Sustainable development does incorporate all those environmental, social and economic strands, and the aim is to achieve a balance which works when considering development. But the problem is, and this is where the conflict occurs, different people place greater weight on each of these three dimensions and this is dependent on their background and perhaps their education. Perspective is based on life experience. A person with degree in environmental studies will be focusing on the effects one-off housing has on the environment. Yet a person looking to build a house is focusing on economic factors and also social factors, being near family and friends, for example*' (IFA).

The primary focus of those interviewees representing groups with pro- one-off housing stances when defining sustainable development was the social dimension of sustainable development, in particular the maintenance of rural communities; '*Sustainable development is where people living in the countryside should be*

entitled to continue to do so and build homes if they so wish' (IRL). The ICA representative commented; '*Current planning policy and more particularly, the way in which it is being applied is having a disastrous affect on rural communities. People are leaving yet there are no new people allowed in. Sustainable development is supposed to be about maintaining the rural way of life but this isn't happening*' (ICA).

The main issue raised by the Heritage Council and An Taisce representatives related to the environmental problems associated with one-off housing; '*Sustainable development is the promotion of rural settlement patterns which are socially cohesive and economically viable, while causing minimal environmental destruction. One-off housing is none of these things. One-off housing is the most environmentally destructive, in terms of the countryside aesthetic, soil and groundwater viability and also pollution relating to over-use of motor transport and illegal dumping*' (An Taisce)

The focus of the FoE interviewee was the effect continued construction of one-off housing was having on rural towns and villages; '*many rural towns and villages are suffering from ongoing population decline exacerbated by the construction of single dwellings in the open countryside. These towns are at risk of losing their services and this has happened already. This situation can hardly be considered sustainable development.*'

7.4.2. Sustainable Development and One-off Housing – The Economic Dimension

With regard to the economic dimension of sustainable development, by far the most prominent topic of discussion was that of the tourism industry.

Interviewees who are in favour of one-off housing construction focused on the uniqueness of the Irish countywide and how it was a draw for tourists looking to immerse themselves in the cultural aspects of rural Ireland; '*Dispersed settlement patterns are what the rural Ireland tourists are looking for. Rural Ireland is known*

for the friendliness of local rural people and this is what tourists seek out. They don't want to visit a housing estate. Tourists go where people are. Planners who say that people come to an area to see the landscape and that single houses are a deterrent are talking complete rubbish. If there are no people habituating the landscape, there will be no tourists, generally people don't want to visit deserts. People come for people' (IRDA).

In addition, the importance of tourism, as a significant revenue provider for rural communities was mentioned; '*Rural people are the rural tourist industries workforce. If people cannot get planning permission to build a home, often they are left with no choice but to leave the area. What we are left with is essentially an aging, rural population who work less and spend less. This situation is bad for the tourism industry and also for the economy of rural areas*' (ICA).

By contrast, representatives of the groups against one-off housing construction were of the opinion that the ongoing construction of single dwellings was having a negative effect on the rural tourist industry and by association the rural economy; '*Tourists do not want to visit an area which is overrun by one-off housing which detracts from the landscape which tourists are seeking out, you know, unspoiled, scenic*' (The Heritage Council). The FoE representative commented; '*Rural towns and villages have been affected by the proliferations of one-off housing. Tourists are seeking out more and more isolated rural areas which haven't yet been hit by the one-off housing onslaught to the same extent.*'

All three respondents representing groups against one-off housing also mentioned holiday homes during discussion on the economic dimension of sustainable development; '*Discussing holiday home with regard to the economic benefits they provide to rural areas is a joke if considering the concept of sustainable development as a whole. The minimal economic contribution they make in terms of their construction and revenue generated during summer months is far outweighed by the fact they are an environmental disaster and a complete blight on the landscape. In addition, the construction of these holiday home makes it more*

difficult for rural people with genuine housing needs to get permission because of issues of overcrowding which may place them in difficult economic circumstances if they are left with no choice other than to buy a single dwelling, or renovate an existing one, or move away from the area completely' (An Taisce).

The interviewee representing the IFA had a different view on holiday homes; '*As long as they're properly designed, the application should be considered and not dismissed outright. They bring life to an area and generate income for the rural area but with regard to the money the holiday-makers spend but also due to the fact tourists and the tourist industry are often a significant source of income for rural families. I feel it's the clusters of holiday homes, painted in garish colours which blight the landscape, not unobtrusive single dwellings. Empty houses all together look bad. Even if someone restores a derelict house or knocks it and rebuilds, it will look an awful lot better than what was there before.*' (IFA). However, the IRL representatives opinion on holiday homes was similar to that of the interviewees opposed to one-off housing construction; '*Holiday homes should be confined to towns and villages. They raise land prices and can affect local rural people from getting permission to build their own homes. Tourists are by definition travellers. If they want to experience the rural landscape, they can travel to see it.*'

Interviewees representing groups opposed to one-off housing construction cited the economic unsustainability of this form of settlement with regard to accessing services and facilities; '*Rural dwellers have to travel to access the majority of services and when services are provided, for example, postal delivery and waste collection, they are extremely costly and time-consuming for the service provider*' (An Taisce). In addition, in a point reiterated by the FoE interviewee, the advent of one-off housing was causing a population drain in rural towns and villages, the result being the loss of services and facilities to more urbanised locations resulting in economic implications for the rural area in question as jobs and revenue are relocated elsewhere.

The final issue mentioned by representatives of groups in favour of one-off housing construction was the huge economic difficulties faced by local people being denied the right to build on family land; '*The cost of building a house is greatly reduced when one has a family site and often this is the only option available to young people starting out. They often have no place to go when this is taken away from them other than to remain at home or to rent because they can't afford to buy a house or another plot of land. This has far reaching effects, for example, relating to family structure and family stability heading into the future. People are putting off having children until they get their housing situation sorted*' (ICA).

7.4.3. Sustainable Development and One-off Housing – The Environmental Dimension

With regard to the environmental dimension of sustainable development, the main focus of interviewees representing groups against one-off housing construction was the importance they connected to viewing the countryside as a visual amenity which must be protected and maintained; '*It's often said that we have the environment on loan from future generations and this is so true. The memories of the Irish countryside we've gathered as being a place of amazing rugged, green, unspoilt landscapes and beautiful scenery will not be what our children and grandchildren experience if one-off housing construction continues at its current rate*' (FoE). The An Taisce representative stated; '*Under no circumstances could one-off housing be considered a sustainable housing option. Per unit, they are by far the most environmentally damaging housing option.*'

Both the An Taisce and the Heritage Council representatives questioned the manner by which site characterisation reports for single dwellings are carried out. While agreeing that the introduction of site assessor panels in a number of county council was a positive event, both stated that there was no back-up system in place to query or double check the site characterisation reports; '*In many local authorities, anyone can become a site assessor on completion of a course. While their credential may be genuine, they may have very little experience at carrying*

out the necessary tests yet they are taken at their word. Even in counties where there is a set panel of site assessors from which planning applicants must choose their back-up system to query or dispute the findings put forward. This has to be addressed and a monitoring system put in place.' (An Tasice).

Conversely, interviewees in favour of one-off housing construction put forward arguments which defended this housing type from environmental criticism. The primary argument put forward was the huge improvement in effluent treatment systems in recent years; '*Once the proper facilities are put in place, you're fine. It's not rocket science to treat effluent*' (IRDA). The ICA interviewee remarked; '*As long as the soil supports a waste-removal system, there isn't a problem. The security of these systems have vastly improved so can't be considered unsustainable especially when compared to the situation we have in many towns where old, sewerage systems are crashing under the weight of new developments. They also use harsh chemicals to treat effluent in these big systems and this is hardly sustainable*' (ICA). The IFA representative also compared effluent treatment systems of one-off housing and town and villages; '*Building in the countryside, you've more space to work with to get your sewerage removal facilities right. In a town or village, you're often dealing with sewerage removal facilities that are inadequate. You only have to head up the cliff walk in Kilkee on a windy day to realise the extent of the sewerage removal problem there, whereas with a single dwelling with one waste removal system, there will be no pressure on that system.*'

Respondents also rebutted the argument that one-off housing was visually obtrusive; '*There has always been one-off housing in the countryside. People will use the obstruction of view as an argument for not allowing people to build but I don't think this is an issue as long as people adhere to traditional design plans. There's plenty of the countryside to go around. If a development doesn't block your light, its fine*' (IFA).

7.4.3. Sustainable Development and One-off Housing – The Social Dimension

This section focuses on the social dimension of sustainable development and the issue of community viability in rural areas. Respondents representing groups in favour of one-off housing development stated that there was a total lack of consideration given to this strand of sustainable development by policy decision-makers at national and local level; '*Sustainable development is all about balance. There is going to be a level of environmental degradation with any form of development urban or rural. However, the way the planning system is being currently operated with regard to one-off housing has meant that social degradation and community decline is out of control*' (ICA).

Each of the respondents stated that rural areas were known for the strength of their communities; '*There is a sense of comradeship amongst many rural communities, almost like an extended family. People look out for each other and take care of each other, more so than in urban communities*' (IRL). It was suggested that current planning legislation relating to one-off housing was affecting community cohesion in rural areas; '*Social isolation is becoming a problem which it wasn't in the past. People are moving out of rural areas, some because they want to, which is fine, and some because they have to because they can't get planning permission. This outflux of people isn't being replenished due to the opposition of policy writers to having non-local people living in rural areas. Opponents of one-off housing use social isolation as an argument that one-off housing isn't sustainable from a social point of view, but social isolation in rural areas is a political creation which is only going to get worse if policy makers don't start taking a more rounded view of the sustainable development of rural areas*' (ICA). In addition, the loss of services, the closure of schools and the amalgamation of sports clubs was cited by respondents as being a direct effect of current rural housing settlement strategies; '*We need an influx of new blood to rural areas to remedy this situation. We need new children to fill our schools and new people to join the GAA. The problem is the support is there but the people aren't. This is a*

dire situation for people already living in an area, to see their sports clubs failing because of lack of numbers. It's very disheartening' (IFA).

Another topic of conversation, was the assertion by opponents of dispersed rural housing that the ongoing construction of one-off housing was affecting the cohesion of rural towns and villages; '*Social sustainability depends on people living in the countryside. Obviously, the towns need to be kept vibrant and the services open but the same applies for the countryside. It's not people who wish to be rural dwellers that the towns need for consolidation, it's the commitment of the people who wish to live there. I'm sure if you went into any town and did a survey, you'd find the majority of people will head off to the nearest Aldi or Tesco to do their shopping, these massive big outlets even though they may be thirty of forty kilometres away, and yet they've no hesitation leaving their own town, heading to another town and leaving four or five hundred euro there. There are many factors which contribute to a towns decline but people use one-off housing as a focus of blame, often just to suit their own agenda*' (IFA).

Finally, interviewees in favour of dispersed rural settlement mentioned the assertion by opposing factions, that in the interests of sustainable development, one-off housing should be restricted to farm families; '*The work issue doesn't stand up either, far less people work on the land now, it's not as economically viable. So when they talk about farm families, they are talking about the minority of rural dwellers. A huge proportion of these farming families also have off-farm jobs. About forty percent of people who class themselves as farmers have second jobs. Rural Ireland has changed. What constitutes a local rural person is not the same as it was twenty years ago*' (ICA).

Interviewees against one-off housing construction maintained that concentrated rural settlement allowed rural communities better access to services and to each other. The main issue raised by interviewees who opposed one-off housing construction in relation to the social sustainability was social isolation, a factor they deemed consistent with this type of housing; '*When people retire, they have*

reduced contact with other people. This is magnified when the individual lives in a single dwelling. They have to travel for services and human contact which becomes more infrequent as the person gets older and less capable of attending to such tasks. Then they are heavily reliant on other people to visit them. This wouldn't be the case if they lived in a town or village' (FoE).

Another point raised was that urban people wishing to live in the countryside often have an idealistic view of the rural way of life which is of huge contrast to the experience of actually living there. '*Rural living is quite difficult, the isolation, the need for a car to go anywhere. A lot of people with urban backgrounds talk about quality of life being better in the countryside yet when they move there, they get an awful shock and can't wait to get back to urban living'* (The Heritage Council). The An Taisce representative commented; '*You'll find that people will move to the countryside but don't give up their urban way of life. They work in an urban centre, shop in an urban centre, sent their children to school there, socialise there, they are not contributing to the social fabric of the rural area in any way, shape or form*' (An Taisce). It was suggested that people with urban backgrounds seeking to live in rural areas should take up residence in villages and that there should be financial incentives to encourage this practice; '*People would be able to experience the rural way of life first-hand, while having nearby access to essential services. The threat of social isolation is reduced. Meanwhile, the influx of new people into villages reduces the risk of services being lost*' (FoE).

In summation of this section, all interest group representatives stated that sustainable development, as a concept, was open to interpretation. Not surprisingly, the main focus of pro- one-off housing groups was on the social dimension whereas the central focus of anti-one-off housing groups centred on environmental issues.

7.5. Assessment of National Policy relating to Rural Settlement Patterns

In this section, interviewees were asked to express opinion on the success of both the *National Spatial Strategy for Ireland 2002-2020* (NSS, Published 2002) and the *Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines for Planning Authorities* (RHGs, Published 2005) with regard to their policies relating to the promotion of rural settlement patterns.

The issue of prime interest to interviewees representing groups in favour of one-off housing was what was described as a '*definite bias towards urban settlement structure to the severe detriment of the rural way of life*' (ICA). As the interviewee from the IRDA commented; '*Rural areas are just an afterthought in the National Spatial Strategy. It was focused on consolidating urban settlement and how rural areas could assist in this objective. What this meant was severely reducing one-off housing construction so that more people would be forced to live in urban centres. The National Spatial Strategy was a complete insult to rural people.*' The IFA representative commented that the rural housing strategies as laid out in the NSS were essentially '*urbanisation policies whose continued employment could result in the closing of the door on the rural way of life.*'

Another problem highlighted by pro- one-off housing representatives related to the fact that sustainable development was not given a statuatory definition in the NSS; '*This is problematic because it means that individual interpretations of what constitutes sustainable development is employed in County Development Plans. It also meant that there is a lack of consistency and uniformity in what constitutes sustainable rural housing development across the country, so given the exact same circumstances, an application for a single dwelling could be approved in one local authority and rejected in another*' (ICA). It was also suggested that the NSS was far too general in its prescriptions relating to rural housing policy in that it didn't, and perhaps, couldn't take into account the specifics of variations in location, landscape, and other particulars of each planning application, yet '*these policies*

are being cited as reasons for refusal on planning applications. This has caused huge conflict' (IFA).

Similarly, interviewees representing groups opposed to one-off housing construction had a poor opinion of the promotion of sustainable rural development as prescribed in the NSS. Of primary concern was not the actually policy content which, it was agreed had great potential for improving the sustainability of rural settlement forms, rather the roll-out and operations of the NSS which was described as being '*absolutely disastrous*' (FoE). As the An Taisce representative commented; '*The primary aim of the National Spatial Strategy was the consolidation of villages, towns and larger urban centres, under the premise that this would be of benefit to the rural hinterland as service and facilities would be readily available and secure. In addition, a list of strategically-placed designated gateway towns and hub towns, which were due to house government departments when the decentralisation of government occurred, was drawn up. However, the organised manner by which the decentralisation was supposed to happen was abandoned as vested interests lobbied for the decentralisation of government to their towns, and eventually the government caved. So what was an essentially an excellent policy did not translate well in practice.*'

Turning to the RHGs, interviewees representing groups in favour of one-off housing construction were again not particularly impressed with the prescriptions of the application of these guidelines. A number of reasons were put forward for this position including the lack of clarity in how they were to be applied. As the IFA representative commented; '*The Rural Housing Guidelines could be useful if they were used as guidelines but more often than not, they are being applied as legislation and this was not their intention. There is no need for another tool to be used as a means of rejection of planning applications for single dwellings.*' It was also suggested that variations in the manner by which the RHGs were being utilised by planning officials across different local authorities was resulting in a lack of uniformity in planning decisions relating to one-off housing which was '*completely illegal and unfair*' (IRDA).

Interviewees representing groups against one-off housing construction generally felt that the RHGs were useful in that they provide guidance to planning officers on what type of settlement is considered sustainable in specific areas although the An Taisce representative described them as '*half-baked attempt to keep everyone happy. It's ironic that these guidelines have sustainable in the title yet their affect has been to dilute the rural housing policies of the National Spatial Strategy and allow the construction of more one-off housing in the countryside.*' The primary issue of concern raised was the problem of a lack of utilisation of the guidelines in county and local development plans; '*The translation of these guidelines for local implementation is not being done properly by many local authorities. Features such as differentiating between rural area types and also assessing local need are being ignored*'.

7.6. Assessment of Local Policy relating to Rural Settlement Patterns – The Policy Formulation Process

This section asked for interviewees to discuss and provide opinions on the manner by which local policy relating to rural settlement strategy is formulated.

The primary issue of discussion, with regard to the formulation of local rural housing policy, related to difficulties in ensuring that local needs are met while adhering to the prescriptions of national policy.

It was suggested by interviewees in favour of one-off housing construction that these difficulties related to the generalised nature of national policy, and as national policy does not take into account the variances in social, economic and environmental circumstances in different counties, this has led to conflict at local level during the rural housing policy formulation process; '*Councillors, being from the area are aware of the local situation in terms of housing need. However, planning officers seem fixated on the direct translation of national policy for local use*' (IRDA).

The role of councillors as policy decision-makers was also called into question by interviewees in favour of one-off housing; '*At local level, councillors are supposed to have the power, they are the local planning authority but it appears they are intimidated by the so-called expertise of planners and hide behind them. So planners are really the ones writing the development plans while councillors just approve the final draft. The result is that planners get to interpret rural housing policies however they wish and councillors take on the role of public advocate representing individuals when they have been refused planning permission. It's all backwards. We need strong representatives in council who will not be intimidated by planning officers and demand that rural housing policies are designed with the common good at their core*' (IRDA).

Interviewees stated that there was a need for an element of vagueness with the rural settlement strategies given the general nature of national policy from which it is derived but also to accommodate, the huge diversity of environments within local authorities, in terms of physical landscape and also variances in the social and economic situation. However, it was also stated that while there was a need to ensure the rural settlement strategy was flexible, this left it open to interpretation; '*This should be a good thing because, in theory, it allows for more flexibility in planning decisions, but planners are coming down on the hard side, and using the interpretive nature of the plan to refuse applications for single dwellings*' (IRL).

Interviewees representing groups against one-off housing construction also commented on the difficulties in translating national policy for local implementation; '*It is a hard process adapting national policy and be in keeping with the needs of the county*' (An Taisce). However, interviewees maintained that a balance needed to be reached, which was not the case with regard to the rural settlement strategies of many local authorities; '*A lot of local authorities are very lenient in their adaption of national policy for employment within their functional area. In many County Development Plans, there is a blatant disregard for classifying areas according to the local area types laid out in the National Spatial*

Strategy of no mention of assessing applicants based on their genuine need to build a single rural dwelling' (The Heritage Council).

It was suggested that lenient rural housing policies were a result of a conflict of interest on the part of local elected representatives, given that they are policy decision-makers while also being answerable to the local electorate; '*This situation needs to be looked at. Presently, the overarching objective of achieving the sustainable development with regard to rural housing is being compromised*' (An Taisce).

7.7. Assessment of the Application of Rural Settlement Policy at Local Level

This section of the interview required respondents to provide an assessment of the manner in which local rural settlement policy is being applied. Interviewees were first asked to disclose their opinion of the effectiveness of a local need clause (an eligibility requirement whereby a one-off housing applicant must demonstrate a genuine need to build a single dwelling in a given area) in promoting the sustainable development of rural settlement forms.

Turning first to the opinions of interviewees representing groups in favour of one-off housing construction, both the ICA and the IRL representatives stated that they felt the local need clause was a beneficial addition to rural housing policy and was a necessity in combating problems associated with urban-generated one-off housing, for example, the increased value of rural sites resulting in the pricing local people out of the market, and also, situations where local people have found it difficult to acquire planning permission due to population pressures in an areas caused by urban-generated housing.

However, both interviewees did point out that some county councils were operating too strict a regime with regard to eligibility criteria. The ICA

representative commented; '*This shouldn't be an outright ban on non-local acquiring permission to build in a rural area. This level of strictness disregards people who have shown themselves to be committed to an area and it will also result in a situation where the countryside is being drained of its rural population as people who leave are not being replaced.*'

Both the IFA and the IRDA representative felt that counties who had introduced a local need clause for certain rural area types were operating too strict a regime. One criticism was that planning officers were not differentiating between the different rural area types when applying the clause; '*We have rural areas whose population is declining at a serious rate and yet non-local applicants are not being allowed to build. Programmes should be put in place whereby there is an active drive and incentive to encourage people to go live in these areas*' (IRDA). Both interviewees also discussed the effects of population decline on local communities which they felt the local need clause could only exacerbate; '*The evidence is there in recent years whereby sports clubs have had to amalgamate because they can't field teams on their own. I know of a number of clubs with great senior teams who don't have the numbers to field teams at the underage level which means that these clubs who may be county or All-Ireland* [football championship] *contenders this year may be non-existent in ten years time. It's not the lack of interest that's the cause, the numbers just aren't there*' (IFA).

Turning to the opinions, on the local need clause, of interviewees representing groups against one-off housing construction, all were in favour of the utilisation of a local need clause to prevent the proliferation of one-off housing construction; '*It is an excellent policy addition when it is applied properly*' (FoE). In connection to this point, the An Taisce representative remarked; '*Certain counties do not have a local need clause in place for areas of high one-off housing pressure. This goes against national rural housing policy and needs to be addressed by central government.*'

Interviewees also questioned the ability to enforce the local need clause; '*I have personally come across, and have been made aware of, many instances where people have attempted to circumvent the local need clause by falsifying documents, for inclusion with the planning application, showing that they are local to the area. You have to wonder how many more are slipping through the net. A proper monitoring system need to be put in place whereby a person is put in charge of validating claims of local need*' (The Heritage Council).

Interviewees were also asked to rate the effectiveness of the occupancy clause which is a condition attached to granted permissions for single dwellings in a number of county councils whereby the applicant cannot sell on the house for a given number of years after the application has been granted. This is to ensure that those who have applied for and been granted permission for a single dwelling intend to use the property for their permanent occupation. Each of the seven interviewees agreed that the occupancy clause was an effective way of ensuring the sustainable development of rural settlement patterns. The IRL interviewee remarked; '*The occupancy clause is a great idea and promotes the concept of building and maintaining social cohesion within rural communities. We want people who are dedicated to becoming involved in the social fabric of an area.*'

However, a number of interviewees were concerned that the occupancy clause is not being enforced due to the fact the occupancy of newly constructed single rural houses is not monitored by county councils. The IFA interviewee suggested that the strictness of certain counties' planning regimes with regard to refusing to consider one-off housing planning applications from non-local applicants was to blame; '*I have seen cases whereby people have applied for permission on behalf of others who wouldn't even be considered by the planning authority because of their non-local status. The stand-in applicant obviously had no intention of adhering to the occupancy clause and the lands deeds were passed on as soon as planning permission had been granted.*'

Finally, in this section, interviewees were asked to comment on the statement that the government's promotion of village-type settlements as the most sustainable form of rural housing development had encouraged a situation whereby developers were granted permission to build large housing developments at the edges of towns and villages which are now facing problems due to inadequate infrastructure and services.

Each of the interviewees agreed that this situation has occurred. However, interviewees representing groups against one-off housing construction were of the opinion that it was not national rural housing policy or even local policy which was at fault rather the actions of the local council, in particular planning officers. The FoE interviewee commented '*We have abandoned appeals against individual applicants of one-off housing except in protected areas because we feel the problem is not with the individual but with the system. However, we will appeal larger housing developments which are springing up at either side of villages that do not have the infrastructure to support them. It is the planning office who is at fault here. These developments should never be granted unless provisions are underway, or set firmly in place for the upgrading of water and sewerage infrastructure.*'

Conversely, interviewees representing groups in favour of one-off housing construction were of the opinion that government policy did have a large part to play. The IFA representative was particularly critical of central government in his assessment; '*The whole idea behind the government policy of promoting the concentrated rural settlement patterns was the promotion of sustainable development. Yet, in their haste to drum out policies they didn't stop and think of possible consequences. The situation which is occurring around the country where the infrastructure of many towns and villages is struggling to cope because of all this new development is hardly sustainable but has been allowed to continue unchecked and in many instances, large proportions of these housing estates are unoccupied so if they do fill up, the situation is going to get even worse. The government should be concentrating on developing policies which are better-*

rounded and take into account the uniqueness of dispersed settlement patterns which are a feature of the Irish landscape. Instead, they are trying to adapt European policy to suit the Irish situation which is completely unworkable and totally unsustainable.'

In summation of this section, all pro- one-off housing groups were of the opinion that certain councils were operating too strict a regime with regard to eligibility criteria relating to one-off housing applicants. However, representatives of the ICA and IRL felt that the local need clause was beneficial in combating problems associated with urban-generated one-off housing. Each of the anti- one-off housing group representatives were in favour of the local need clause given its role in preventing the proliferation of one-off housing. However, its effectiveness and the ability to enforce it were questioned.

All interest groups felt that the occupancy clause was an effective way of ensuring rural settlement sustainability but again questioned the ability of local authorities to enforce and monitor it.

7.8. Assessment of the Performance of Planning Officers

This section documents the assessment given by representative of interest groups, both for and against one-off housing construction, on the performance of planning officers in their role as policy activators at local level.

Turning first to the perspective of the representatives in favour of one-off housing construction, each condemned the strict interpretation, on the part of planners, of rural housing policy designed with the intention of allowing flexibility in planning decisions; '*Everything has to be black or white with planners which is not the way the planning system should be operated. In counties where new policy has been introduced for one-off housing such as the local need clause, it can be seen that it is being operated too rigidly and often unfairly in areas where it should not apply.*' (IFA).

The IRDA representative was blunter in his assessment; '*A large portion of planners are basically bureaucrats on a power trip and they can get away with it. There is no logic to planning. It is used to abuse people's rights because it's all based on subjective opinions. If there were any logic to planning, you wouldn't have the level of housing anomalies that pop up. A house for a well-known public figure was granted recently, a mansion of about 50,000 sq ft. I know of houses in the same area one-fifteenth of that size, three-bed houses that have been refused. The reasoning given for one was that it was strident and obtrusive on the landscape. Planning can be summed up in two words, wealth and power. There is no other logical explanation for the things that go on. It is power and the abuse of power.*'

The perceived lack of consistency in the outcomes of planning applications for one-off housing was also attributed to a frequent turnover of planning staff in county council; '*Many planners do not stay very long in local authority positions. You can't really blame them given that they are the first port of call for abuse when an applicant is unhappy with a planning decision. However, what works for one planner, in terms of sustainable single rural dwellings, may not work for another. This causes a lot of confusion amongst applicants seeking permission for a one-off house, some of whom are actually engaged in the process of applying for permission when the planner in charge of their application changes*' (IRL).

The perceived high rate of refusal for one-off housing planning applications across the country was attributed to the lack of knowledge on the part of the planner of the area in which they are working; '*Planning officers are taking up positions on county councils yet they have no prior knowledge of the county and may never even have set foot in it before they started working. They are advising policy and making planning decisions on one-off housing, yet very little thought is given to the circumstances of the applicant who is applying for permission to build. Applications are decided in bulk and the sterile decision-making process is based on flawed policy. A vast overhaul of the planning system is required because as it currently stands it's squeezing the life out of rural Ireland*' (IFA).

Turning to the perspective of interviewees representing groups against one-off housing construction, it was suggested that planning officers are often the voice of reason at local level given that elected representatives have a vested interest in keeping the electorate happy; '*Planning officers are trained professionals in their field who have the ability to guide policy direction and make planning decisions fairly, in accordance with policy and without sentiment*' (The Heritage Council). The An Taisce representative commented; '*Local Authority planners are doing their best in often trying circumstances; a huge turnover of planning applications, the constant presence of councillors enquiring after planning applications or making representations on behalf of their electorate, and they are always receive the most criticism of any parties involved in the planning system, given that they are the ones who make the final decisions regarding planning applications. They are doing a good job applying national and local rural housing policy to one-off housing applications and they are, for the most part, getting it right and working within the parameters of the policy drawn up for them by their local councillors.*'

To summarise, interviewees representing groups with a pro- one-off housing stance condemned planning officers' strict interpretation of rural housing policy and misuse of the flexibility contained within when making planning decisions. Conversely, interviewees representing conservation groups described planning as being the voice of reason within local planning authorities, given the fact that they have no allegiance to the electorate and can carry out their duties without bias.

7.9. The Role of An Bord Pleanála

In the final section of the interviews conducted with interviewees representing groups that were both for and against one-off housing construction, interviewees were asked if they felt An Bord Pleanála (a statutory body that operates as an independent appeals board that makes decisions on applications whose outcome is disputed at local level) was a required addition to the planning system.

The general consensus, agreed by the majority of interviewees, was that An Bord Pleanála is a necessary body; '*Yes it is imperative to have an independent body, a third party within the planning system, where refused applicants can lodge an appeal. Local authorities don't always get it right*' (ICA). The An Taisce representative commented; '*There are a lot of factors at play at local level, you know, like intense lobbying, which doesn't occur when an appeal is made to An Bord Pleanála. This independent appeals system is necessary as the right decisions aren't always made at local level.*'

However, the IRDA representative reserved a lot of criticism for the workings of An Bord Pleanála. The main criticisms and points of argument put forward are documented in the following interview extracts;

'*An Bord Pleanála needs to be completely overhauled. As it stands, it does not appear to offer a democratic system for appealing the planning decisions made by local authority planners...When you think about it, the board of An Bord Pleanála is comprised of ten people who in charge of making the final decisions relating to all aspects of development in Ireland, this is ridiculous. But what is even worse is the complete lack of rural representation on the board. The two board members representing rural interests are actually professional planners who were working as senior planners for An Bord Pleanála at the time of their appointment and the two of them were nominated by the same organisation, which is farcical given that there are forty prescribed organisations who can nominate board members...The current composition of the board is not representative of all sectors of society as was the original intention. Indeed, a situation where professional planners are assessing the work of other professional planners hardly seems democratic or representative of Irish society in any way, shape or form*' (IRDA).

7.10. Conclusion

This chapter provides insight into the extent to which interest groups, both for and against one-off housing, felt they have been able to influence the agendas of national and local policy relating to rural settlement structure. It also assess the perspective on the success of policy as it currently stands while providing insight into their own, often conflicting, opinions of the sustainability of one-off housing.

Three of the four groups in favour of one-off housing stated that, in general, all applications for one-off housing should be considered. The forth was of the opinion that rural people should be allowed to build but urban-generated housing should be curtailed. The conservation groups were of the opinion that one-off housing was extremely problematic from an environmental perspective and should only be allowed in cases of genuine rural need. However, even in these instances site suitability needed to be given prime consideration.

Groups, both for and against one-off housing, stated that sustainable development is highly interpretive. Not surprisingly, the main focus of groups with pro- one-off housing stances was the social dimension of sustainable development whereas the environment was of central importance for conservation groups. Discussions relating to sustainable development highlighted the hugely conflicting interpretations held by both groups.

Concerning involvement in the rural housing debate, the denial of people's right to chose where the live, a lack of consistency in approving/refusing one-off housing applications and over-stringent planning regimes were the main reasons put forward by pro- one-off housing interests. The conservation groups stated that a necessity to campaign against any loosening of restrictions on one-off housing construction (as was the stated intention of the RHGs prior to their publication) had prompted their involvement. The media was cited by all groups as being the best outlet to get their views heard and also to refute the viewpoints of opposition

groups. However, An Taisce felt that, in the instance of the rural housing debate, it had received poor media coverage.

With regard to influencing national policy decision-makers, several of the pro-one-off housing groups commented that given their high membership numbers and public support, they were in a position to influence, hence the success of the campaign for the loosening of one-off housing restrictions. It was stated the introduction of the RHGs illustrates the success of pro- one-off housing lobbying at national level. This situation is indicative of the pluralist thesis of state operations in that the State is described as a weak unit operating in an environment of strong external influence and controlled by politicians who are concerned with appeasing the electorate.

The conservation groups mentioned their prescribed status as a means for influencing national policy. Again, this perception is in keeping with the pluralist perspective in that power is distributed in such a way so that no one group can dominate.

In relation to influencing local policy-makers, and illustrating the prescriptions of the pluralist perspective, pro- one-off housing groups stated that is was possible to exert influence through the lobbying of councillors and that many were sympathetic to their viewpoint being of rural background. Again, conservation groups cited their prescribed status as allowing them to exert influence at local level.

It was suggested by pro- one-off housing groups that planners are using the interpretive nature of county development plans to refuse applications for one-off housing. It was also suggested that planning officers are often the main policy-makers at local level through the asserting their planning expertise. Planning officers were described as '*bureaucrats on a power trip*' and that many planning decisions could essentially be described as an abuse of power. This perception suggestions a managerialist modus operandi on the part of planning officers

whereby their planning decisions are reflective of the views and opinions of bureaucratic administrators.

Conversely, planning officers were described by conservation groups as being the voice of reason, acting in accordance with local policy and without the incorporation of their personal convictions. This perspective is in allegiance with the common self-perception held by planning officers themselves with regard to their role in local government.

Chapter seven has documented the perspectives of interest groups with regard to sustainable development, one-off housing and rural housing formulation and activation at national and local level. Chapter eight documents the experiences of individuals (who have been engaged with the planning system through applying for permission to build a one-off rural house) of local planning operations.

CHAPTER EIGHT:

THE EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES OF INDIVIDUALS ENGAGED WITH THE LOCAL PLANNING SYSTEM

8.0. Preamble

One of the primary aims of this research project was to garner the perspective and examine the experiences of the planning system of individual applicants who had applied for permission to construct a one-off house. The role of this chapter within this thesis is to highlight the consequences, both positive and negative, for the individual engaging with the planning system. It is also necessary to examine the personal costs (both economic and social) for the individual, of the executive decision-making power held by planning officers to refuse planning applications for one-off housing.

There are different criteria which an applicant must meet, both within and across case-study authorities, in order to be considered eligible for permission to construct a single dwelling. As previously detailed, both Clare and Galway county councils have implemented settlement strategies which have strict conditions relating to the eligibility of an individual to build a detached rural house. These criteria vary depending on, for example, population and housing pressures, and environmental concerns in the authority in question. Both councils have categorised their respective functional areas into rural area types to allow for consideration of these factors. Both the location of the proposed site for one-off housing development and the eligibility requirements associated with the rural-area type in question are taken into account when assessing a planning application.

By contrast, the CDPs of Roscommon and Cavan do not stipulate such eligibility criteria for applicants applying to build a single dwelling. Instead all applications are to be considered subject to good planning practice.

The aforementioned differences in planning regime, relating to one-off housing construction, across the four case-study authorities are also apparent in the content of the planning application forms which are submitted as part of any application. The application forms for local authorities, including the four case-study authorities, seek the same standard information relating to the applicant and the proposed site of development. Focusing on one-off housing, the information of relevance includes:

- Personal information pertaining to the applicant and his/her representatives
- The location of the development
- A description of the proposed development
- The legal interest of the applicant regarding the site
- The planning history of the site
- Information regarding the use of a pre-planning service
- The reason for selecting the proposed site for development
- Information regarding proposed waste management and water-supply details

For applicants in Co. Clare, there is an appendix to the application form entitled 'Clare Rural Housing Policy Designation' which lists rural-area types and the criteria which applicants must meet in each type of area in order to be eligible to receive such permission. It also lists the relevant documentation which must be supplied as proof of eligibility.

Galway county council requires applicants seeking to construct a single dwelling in particular area types[17] to submit a second, additional application form. This form, entitled 'Rural Housing need application form associated with application for rural housing' requires applicants to provide a detailed, supported account of their need to build a single dwelling in the given area. There is particular focus on the social and economic contribution the applicant will make to the area in question. Neither Roscommon nor Cavan county councils seek further information from the applicant, apart from what is required on the standard form.

[17] Gaeltacht areas, areas of significant landscape sensitivity, 15km zone surrounding Galway city

The differing procedures put in place for obtaining information, which allows for an assessment of planning applications for one-off housing construction across the four case-study authorities, are thus apparent. On one hand, counties Galway and Clare exhibit stringent assessment criteria, while counties Roscommon and Cavan adopt a more lenient approach.

The postal questionnaire surveys, from which the findings of this chapter are derived, have been constructed in such a manner as to elicit whether and to what degree such differences have impacted on respondents' interaction with the planning system and their evaluation of its operations. Information was obtained from respondents who had been refused planning permission for a single dwelling relating to:

- The history of the site for which planning permission was sought
- The applicant's personal affiliation with the site and the area in question
- The applicant's rationale in choosing the site for development and also for opting to construct a single dwelling rather than availing of another housing type
- The planning-related processes with which the applicant engaged when applying for permission, e.g. use of pre-planning service, use of third party representation, etc.

Given the obvious differences in eligibility criteria across the case-study authorities, it was felt that an examination of the above factors might provide insight in the way in which such eligibility criteria can influence the outcome of one-off housing planning applications, and the impacts on applicants.

In addition, in the case of Co. Clare, postal surveys were also administered to a sample group of individuals whose applications had been granted permission for a single dwelling in the case-study year of 2005. This allowed for an examination and comparison to be made of the factors within one case-study county which may have played a role in a planning officer's decision to grant or refuse.

In all instances, for comparative purposes, the postal survey was administered to potential respondents who had been refused or approved permission to construct a single dwelling based on a full planning permission application. In the discussion which follows, respondents from Co. Clare who were refused permission to construct a single dwelling in 2005 will be referred to as *Clare Refused* and those who were granted permission will be termed *Clare Approved.* There were 197 respondents in total: 38 from Co. Roscommon, 38 from Co. Cavan, 36 from Co. Galway, 40 from *Clare Approved*, and 45 from *Clare Refused.*

The perspectives of applicants (who have been both granted and refused permission to build a single rural dwelling) with regard to the manner by which national and local planning systems are being operated and also the way in which local planning officers are carrying out their duties are important as they provide insight into how the general population views the functionings of the local state and their role in rural planning matters. The pluralist and managerialist interpretations of state operations are employed to aid understanding of the empirical evidence collected from the questionnaire surveys; in essence the extent by which the general populace views local rural settlement planning as being influenced by considerations of managerialism and/or pluralism.

8.1. Proposed Site Planning History (Pre-2005)

This section seeks to examine the site planning history of planning applications submitted in 2005, in an attempt to decipher whether the existence and outcome of prior planning applications may have had an impact on later planning decisions. The results obtained are documented in Appendix 7 (Tables A7.1-A7.3, Figures A7.1-A7.3). It should be noted that due to the small sample size, given the reduced number of respondents who had made a planning application prior to 2005 (Table A7.1), any broader generalisations cannot be made with any statistically significant degree of confidence regarding a wider population and therefore are relevant solely in the context of this study.

With regard to an assessment of the relative strictness of the planning regimes in counties Clare and Galway, when compared to counties Roscommon and Cavan, an examination of differences in refusal rates connected to site-planning history revealed no obvious trends to support this assertion (Table A7.3). A higher proportion of respondents in Roscommon (23.68%) and Cavan (23.68%) did not have knowledge of the planning history of the site on which they wished to build compared to *Clare Refused* (8.89%) and Galway (16.67%). This could be connected to a lack of familiarity with the site, for example, it was not family-owned land nor acquired from a personally-known third-party. Such figures may be indicative of a higher proportion of non-local applicants in Cavan and Roscommon than in Clare and Galway, given the absence of local need eligibility requirements in the former authorities. In addition, given the relative leniency of the planning regimes in Roscommon and Cavan, respondents may not have felt the same necessity as those in Clare and Galway to seek out such information when constructing a planning application.

Turning to the type of permission sought in the pre-2005 applications (Table A7.2), one feature of note is that a lower proportion of respondents in Roscommon (7.9%) and Cavan (2.9%) who sought outline permission[18]. The figures for *Clare Refused* and Galway were 13.3% and 8.3% respectively. These figures may be an indication of perceived difficulties in acquiring full planning permission for one-off housing in Clare and Galway in that a larger number of applicants sought to assess their chances of eventually securing permission to build by initially submitting an outline application.

With regard to the outcomes of the pre-2005 planning applications, one application was withdrawn by applicants in both counties Cavan and Roscommon, with the former stating that they had been advised to do so because the application was unlikely to be successful at the time and that this would avoid a 'bad planning

[18] Outline planning permission means a planning authority has given permission in principle for development, but not for a specific building proposal. Full planning permission is still required before building can commence.

history' on the site. It is interesting also to note (Table A7.3) that many of the pre-2005 planning applications for one-off housing had been successful in *Clare Refused* (41.2%), Galway (27.3%) and Roscommon (31.3%) while, in all instances, the subsequent 2005 application was refused. However, these figures do not differentiate between applications that were for outline and full planning permission.

An examination of the disparities between the *Clare Approved* and *Clare Refused* groups revealed the expected trends. Of the *Clare Approved* respondents, just four out of 40 stated that there had been a pre-2005 application lodged (one respondent did not know). This figure is significantly lower than that for the *Clare Refused* respondents, where 17 of the 45 respondents confirmed the existence of a pre-2005 site-planning history. Of the four respondents representing the *Clare Approved* category, who confirmed an earlier application for a single dwelling, all were successful in their 2005 application securing permission to build. This suggests that previous site planning history, particularly in instances where it had been unsuccessful, may negatively affect the future planning aspirations of the site in question.

However, given the initial parameters whereby possible respondents were selected for receipt of the survey had been based on their granted 2005 application for full planning permission to construct a single dwelling, the prior applications in the *Clare Approved* category were unconnected to the 2005 application, given that each of the four were of planning permission type *Permission Consequent* meaning that they had been granted permission to build based on a previously-granted outline permission. This would suggest that the previous timeframe for construction of the granted single dwelling had expired warranting the submission of a new application, or that the applicants wished to submit a new plan for consideration.

8.2. Respondents' Reasons for Seeking to Construct a Single Dwelling

This section examines the reasons which were of primary importance in influencing the respondents' decision to seek planning permission for the construction of a single rural dwelling.

In the postal questionnaire survey, respondents were asked why they had applied for permission to construct a detached house in a rural area rather than choosing another housing option. They were provided with a list of ten possible reasons accounting for their decision to seek planning approval for a single dwelling. Respondents were made aware that they could select more than one option and were asked to rank their selected options in order. Respondents were also given the option of citing an alternative reason. However, none of the 197 respondents across all four case-study utilised this option.

The possible reasons were assigned an alphabetic code for purposes of display in tables.

- Reduced cost compared to buying a house in a rural area [A]
- Reduced cost compared to buying a house in an urban area [B]
- Having been brought up in a detached rural house [C]
- Preference of a detached rural house as opposed to a semi-detached or terraced house [D]
- Better environment to raise children (as opposed to living in an urban area) [E]
- Visual landscape/scenery [F]
- Health reasons [G]
- Better quality of life (as opposed to living in an urban area) [H]
- Returning Emigrant [I]
- Second/holiday home [J]

The most frequent answers from each case-study authority were calculated based on their positioning in the overall top three order of preference for each case-study authority. Moving downwards from the top three order of preference, the perceived popularity of the answers was less statistically significant as fewer respondents chose to provide 4th, 5th and 6th preference answers. Table 8.2.1-Table 8.2.6 list the most important reasons underlying the applications.

Looking at the case-study areas as a whole and the most popular reasons provided for applying for planning permission to construct a one-off house, by far the most prevalent and highest-preference answer was that the respondent had been brought up in a single dwelling. This suggests a strong and long-standing association with rural living which respondents wish to continue with the construction of their own property. The reduced cost of constructing a house compared to buying a house which had already been built also featured prominently as the second most popular reason given. This is perhaps indicative of a situation whereby a large number of respondents have access to a site on family-owned land. In addition, the actual cost of buying a site and hiring a building contractor to construct a dwelling is generally less expensive than purchasing a built property.

The third most popular answer given in response to the query as to why respondents sought planning permission to construct a single rural dwelling, pertained to the visual landscape and scenery of the area in question. This may indicate a familiarity with the area. The site may be family-owned or one nearby. Also, if respondents were to buy a built property, they may not have the same level of choice with regard to location.

Table 8.2.1. Co. Roscommon – Most common reasons for choosing to apply for permission to construct a single rural dwelling

		Popularity of Answer/ Number of Occurrences		
		1st	2nd	3rd
Order of Preference	1st	A (13)	C (10)	H (6)
	2nd	H (8)	A/C (6)	B (4)
	3rd	A (5)	B/H (4)	C (3)

Most popular answers cited by respondents from Co. Roscommon:

1. Reduced cost compared to buying a house in a rural area
2. Better quality of life (as opposed to living in an urban area)
3. Brought up in a detached rural house
4. Reduced cost compared to buying a house in an urban area

Table 8.2.2. Co. Cavan – Most common reasons for choosing to apply for permission to construct a single rural dwelling

		Popularity of Answer/ Number of Occurrences		
		1st	2nd	3rd
Order of Preference	1st	F (9)	C (8)	A (6)
	2nd	C/D/F (6)	H (5)	A (4)
	3rd	E (6)	F/C/D/A (4)	H (2)

Most popular answers cited by respondents from Co. Cavan :

1. Visual landscape/scenery
2. Brought up in a detached rural house
3. Preference of a detached rural house as opposed to a semi-detached or terraced house
4. Reduced cost compared to buying a house in a rural area

Table 8.2.3. Co. Galway – Most common reasons for choosing to apply for permission to construct a single rural dwelling

		Popularity of Answer/ Number of Occurrences		
		1st	2nd	3rd
Order of Preference	1st	C (9)	D/F (8)	A (5)
	2nd	C/D (7)	F (6)	A (4)
	3rd	C (7)	D/F (6)	A/E (3)

Most popular answers cited by respondents from Co. Galway:

1. Brought up in a detached rural house
2. Preference of a detached rural house as opposed to a semi-detached or terraced house
3. Visual landscape/scenery
4. Reduced cost compared to buying a house in a rural area

Table 8.2.4. Co. Clare (*Refused*) – Most common reasons for choosing to apply for permission to construct a single rural dwelling

		Popularity of Answer/ Number of Occurrences		
		1st	2nd	3rd
Order of Preference	1st	A/C (11)	D (8)	E (7)
	2nd	D (7)	E/F (6)	A/H (5)
	3rd	H (8)	F (7)	C/E (5)

Most popular answers cited by respondents from Co. Clare (Refused):

1. Reduced cost compared to buying a house in a rural area
2. Brought up in a detached rural house
3. Preference of a detached rural house as opposed to a semi-detached or terraced house
4. Better environment to raise children (as opposed to living in an urban area)

Table 8.2.5. Co. Clare (*Approved*) – Most common reasons for choosing to apply for permission to construct a single rural dwelling

		Popularity of Answer/ Number of Occurrences		
		1st	2nd	3rd
Order of Preference	1st	C (15)	H (13)	E (5)
	2nd	H (11)	E (10)	C (6)
	3rd	E (9)	C (6)	H/B (5)

Most popular answers cited by respondents from Co. Clare (*Approved*)

1. Brought up in a detached rural house
2. Better quality of life (as opposed to living in an urban area
3. Better environment to raise children (as opposed to living in an urban area)

The forth most frequently-rated answer was the preference for a detached rural house as opposed to another housing type. There is a similarity in the direction of answering as this reason is closely connected to the higher-placed answers in that there is an obvious affinity with a rural lifestyle and dispersed settlement patterns.

In a similar vein, a better quality of life associated with residing in a rural area as opposed to an urban area, was fifth in the order of preference. The belief that a rural environment was preferable to an urban environment for raising children was listed as the sixth most popular answer. However, its relatively low standing in the order of preference could suggest that child bearing may not be a top priority of many respondents. However, its appearance again suggests a long-standing commitment to living in a rural environment. These 4th, 5th and 6th most popular reasons for applying for planning permission to construct a single dwelling may indicate that respondents have experience of living in an urban environment, perhaps through work or attendance at college. Another possible explanation is an underlying negative attitude towards urban living associated with disadvantages such as higher crime rates, traffic congestion, noise pollution, and so on.

The reduced cost of building a rural house compared to buying a house in an urban area was the final answer which featured, appearing seventh on the order of preference. Interestingly, all the respondents who chose this answer as one of their preferences were concentrated solely in the Roscommon and *Clare Approved* case-study areas. In the case of the Clare *Approved* case-study group, this could be connected to the strict planning regime in operation in Co. Clare which has forced respondents to consider this option. There is no obvious explanation for its occurrence in Roscommon responses. Its low standing could suggest that respondents chose to rate all options which applied to them, including this one. Another reason may be that respondents work in urban areas in, or in close proximity to, the county but wish to live (or remain living) in a rural area.

Three of the ten possible responses failed to feature among the top three answers provided by any of the respondents, namely health reasons, returning emigrants

and second/holiday homes. Subject to good planning practice, one of the exception clauses permitting one-off housing in both the Clare and Galway settlement strategies is the construction of a single rural dwelling for exceptional health reasons if supported by medical documentation. However, this reason was chosen by just one respondent, as a fourth-preference answer in the *Clare Refused* case-study category.

Returning emigrants are also eligible, in each of the four case-study authorities, to apply for permission to construct a one-off house. Again, just one of the 197 respondents chose this option, having cited it as a second-ranking preference. Similarly, the use of the dwelling as a second/holiday home was cited as a first-preference answer by one respondent from Co. Cavan.

An interesting point of note, as revealed in Tables 8.2.1-8.2.5, is that the Clare Approved category showed the least correlation with any of the other four categories, namely Roscommon, Cavan, Galway and *Clare Refused*.

8.3. Respondents' Personal Affiliation with Proposed Development Site

This section relates to the 2005 applications focusing on the manner by which the site was acquired, the reason for site selection, the applicants' legal interest in the site in question and the proposed occupancy of the site, the purpose being to establish the level of attachment, on the part of respondents, to the rural area in which the proposed site for development was located.

8.3.1. Legal Interest in Proposed Site for Development

In an attempt to ascertain the level of commitment the respondent has for setting up home in the area where the site is located, the first topic which was addressed was the applicant's legal interest in the site. A bar graph documenting the findings is located in Appendix 7 (Figure A7.4).

The majority of respondents across the case-study areas owned the site. Of those respondents who occupied their site, in all instances the site was owned by an immediate family member (e.g. a parent, a child or a sibling). In instances where respondents chose the option 'other', the majority stated that they were a prospective buyer and would purchase subject to obtaining planning permission. In addition, five *Clare Approved* respondents, two *Clare Refused* respondents, and one respondent from Co. Cavan stated that the site was part of family land and that they intended to buy it subject to planning permission being granted.

Ownership of, or family ties to the site in question appear to have had some significance with regard to planning decisions. This assertion is confirmed in the findings from the comparative study which occurred in Clare county council. 92.5% of respondents who had been approved planning permission owned or had family ties to their site in comparison to just 65% amongst those refused planning permission. These findings are perhaps not surprising given that Clare county council operated a strict planning regime and has a local need clause in place in areas under strong urban pressure.

However, given the high proportion of applications which have been refused across each case-study authority (including counties Cavan and Roscommon who operate lenient regimes) despite the indication of ownership or family ties, it would appear that this connection to the site may not be one of the primary parameters within which applications for single rural dwellings are considered, rather a secondary concern after site suitability and housing design are examined.

Interestingly, when compared to the authorities operating strict planning regimes, respondents from the Cavan authority indicated a high refusal rate of applications where the applicant owned or had family ties to their site (86.5%). The fact that the spatial patterns of dispersed rural housing have altered in recent decades given the transition from an agricultural to a service-based economy and also that Co. Cavan is within commuting distance of the Greater Dublin Area have led to problems relating to urban sprawl and ribbon development, more so than witnessed in Co. Roscommon, the other case-study authority operating a lenient

planning regime. Therefore, it may be suggested that environmental protection and the prevention against continued urban sprawl and ribbon development have taken precedence amongst policy activators over ownership of or a family connection to land.

8.3.2. Site Acquisition

With regard to the circumstances by which the site was acquired, the findings are documented in bar graph form in Appendix 7 (Figure A7.5).

In concurrence with the findings of section 8.3.1, having family ties to the site for which planning permission appears to be a significant factor with regard to the granting of planning permission, as highlighted by the comparative statistics of the *Clare Approved* (90%) and the *Clare Refused* (17.8%) groups. These findings suggest that while ownership of the site in question may not be a decisive factor with regard to the granting of applications for single dwellings, family ties to the land are considered by policy activators. Indeed, the proportion of family-owned sites is also much lower in each of the case-study groups (who were refused permission) than the *Clare Approved* group. These findings may be explained by the fact that in counties Roscommon and Cavan there are no eligibility clauses in their respective local rural housing policies. Therefore, one might expect the history of site acquisition of these applicants to be varied. Turning to the findings for Galway county council, the refusal rates for individuals seeking to build on family land was the highest of the three options relating to site acquisition. This again, suggests that the primary decisive factors with regard to the planning success of applications for single rural dwellings are related to siting and design above the applicant's relationship to the site.

8.3.3. Factors of Importance in Site Selection

Respondents were asked to choose from a selection of possible factors which they felt were of primary importance in their reasoning for selecting their site. The possible reasons are listed below, each option being assigned an alphabet code.

- Family land [A]

- Affordable [B]
- Family nearby (not family land) [C]
- Visual Landscape/scenery [D]
- Close to urban centre (village/town/city) [E]
- Close to work [F]
- Close to national/regional road network [G]
- Investment Purposes [H]

As seen in Section 8.2, respondents were advised that they could select more than one option, ranking their responses (1, 2, 3, etc.) according to personal preference. Respondents could also provide alternative reasons for their decision in selecting the site. However, not one of the 197 individuals surveyed chose this option.

The results of this analysis and the most popular answers cited by respondents from each case-study groups are documented in the following tables (8.3.3.1-8.3.3.5).

Table 8.3.3.1. Co. Roscommon – Most common primary factor of importance in selecting a site

		Popularity of Answer/ Number of Occurrences		
		1st	2nd	3rd
Order of Preference	1st	B (12)	A (8)	D (4)
	2nd	B (8)	A/C (5)	D (3)
	3rd	B (4)	A/D (3)	C/G (6)

Most popular answers cited in selecting a site

1. Affordable
2. Family Land
3. Visual Landscape/Scenery
4. Family nearby (not family land)

Table 8.3.3.2. Co. Cavan – Most common primary factor of importance in selecting a site

		Popularity of Answer/ Number of Occurrences		
		1st	2nd	3rd
Order of Preference	1st	B (10)	A (8)	G (7)
	2nd	B (8)	F (4)	C/G (2)
	3rd	B (3)	A/C (2)	E/F/G (1)

Most popular answers cited in selecting a site

1. Affordable
2. Family Land
3. Close to national/regional road network
4. Close to work

Table 8.3.3.3. Co. Galway – Most common primary factor of importance in selecting a site

		Popularity of Answer/ Number of Occurrences		
		1st	2nd	3rd
Order of Preference	1st	A (9)	C (8)	B (7)
	2nd	A/C (7)	D/E (4)	B (3)
	3rd	D (4)	A/B (3)	C/E/F (2)

Most popular answers cited in selecting a site

1. Family Land
2. Family nearby (not family land)
3. Affordable
4. Visual Landscape/Scenery

Table 8.3.3.4. Co. Clare (Refused) – Most common primary factor of importance in selecting a site

		Popularity of Answer/ Number of Occurrences		
		1st	2nd	3rd
Order of Preference	1st	A (12)	B (10)	C/D (8)
	2nd	B (14)	C (10)	E (3)
	3rd	D (10)	B (5)	C/E (4)

Most popular answers cited in selecting a site

1. Affordable
2. Family Land
3. Family nearby (not family land)
4. Visual Landscape/Scenery

Table 8.3.3.5. Co. Clare (Approved) – Most common primary factor of importance in selecting a site

		Popularity of Answer/ Number of Occurrences		
		1st	2nd	3rd
Order of Preference	1st	A (26)	B (5)	C (4)
	2nd	B (11)	A (8)	D (5)
	3rd	D (9)	B (8)	E (5)

Most popular answers cited in selecting a site

1. Family Land
2. Affordable
3. Family nearby (not family land)
4. Visual Landscape/Scenery

Examining the case-study groups together as a whole, the two factors cited by respondents which stood out as being the most important when selecting a site for construction were *affordability* and *family-owned land.* The selection of 'affordability' as one of the top answers in each of the four case-study areas could be viewed as indicative of a failing central government policy promoting concentrated settlement. These findings appear to correlate with the perceptions of many interviewees (see previous chapters) that attempts at promoting sustainable concentrated rural settlement have been hampered, in many cases, by the building of inadequately-serviced rural housing estates, often situated beyond walking distance from the local town/village, where the main priority of their construction seems to be maximising developer profit. Given the additional cost associated with buying a property as opposed to building, the situation described above do not offer an attractive alternative for people looking to own their own home in the countryside. Considering that the deeds to a family plot will often be given to family members at little or no cost or for a fee which falls far below the market value, this leaves just the architectural, application and construction costs for the applicant. Even in circumstances where the land is sold at market value, the cost of the site plus the costs associated with building a dwelling are far less than if one were to buy a built property as developer's profit is thereby eliminated.

The third and forth placed reasons for selecting a site related to the 'proximity of family' and 'visual landscape and scenery.' These reasons were selected approximately half the number of times when compared to first and second choices. The proximity of family is again evident of the respondents' ties to the area.

The importance credited to the visual landscape and scenery when selecting a site may suggest affiliation with the area when considered in conjunction with the higher-placed answers relating to family connections. It could be suggested that the respondent has a long-standing appreciation for the surrounding visual landscape and, therefore it is a factor of importance in their site selection.

The fifth-, sixth- and seventh-placed factors of importance, namely; proximity to urban centre, proximity to workplace and, proximity to national/regional road network, were of far less significance. Indeed, the latter two options only featured strongly in the Cavan case-study group. This questionnaire survey was undertaken in 2007/2008 when housing prices, especially in Dublin, were at their peak. Therefore many individuals and families chose to move to areas, such as Co. Cavan, within commuting distance of their families and/or employment. In addition, the cost of building a house was much less expensive than buying a property. These factors may explain the fact that *proximity to national/regional road network* was a more prevalent response in Co. Cavan than the other three case-study areas. That these applications were refused may be due to the possibility that they went against local policy of protecting against urban sprawl and ribbon development. The fact that the options of proximity to an urban centre and of proximity to national/regional road network obtained low response rates in the other case-study areas, may lend further credence to the assertion that many respondents have demonstrated an affinity to the area in which their site is located because these two options are both concerned with 'outside' connections which have little or no direct association with the site in question.

One possible option 'investment purposes' did not feature as a factor of primary importance during site selection. It received just two citations overall, both as first preference answers, one from Co. Cavan and one from Co. Galway. This low figure is perhaps indicative of the growing awareness of the general public and potential applicants of the difficulties associated with acquiring planning permission for a second/holiday home or an investment property in a rural area.

As can be seen above, when the case-study authorities are examined individually, Roscommon, Galway, *Clare Refused* and *Clare Approved* each have the same options listed as the top four significant factors, albeit in differing orders.

In counties Cavan and Roscommon, affordability was the most important consideration for respondents in their site selection. In Co. Galway, the fact that

the site was family owned was the most significant issue. Again both affordability and family ownership of the site featured as the dominant factors of importance in selecting a site in the *Claire Approved* and *Clare Refused* groups. Family ownership of the site was by far the most prevalent factor in the *Clare Approved* group having been chosen as a first preference answer by 26 out of a possible 40 respondents.

As detailed, the responses obtained from Co. Cavan respondents illustrated a marked difference from the other case-study areas in that the third and fourth preference answers, proximity to the workplace and proximity to national/regional road network, were unique to this county. As previously suggested, this may be related to an urban-generated housing need on the part of respondents, who work in close proximity to their selected site but are not originally from the area.

8.3.4. Proposed Occupancy of Dwelling

Respondents were asked to state the proposed occupancy of the site for which planning permission had been sought. The findings are presented in Appendix 7 (Figure A7.6).

The majority of respondents across all case-study groups proposed to make the dwelling their permanent residence. This was the case for all of the respondents from the *Clare Approved* group who were all granted permission to construct a one-off house. Two respondents each from case-study groups Roscommon, Galway and *Clare Refused* proposed letting the property. It is interesting to note that when initially questioned as to whether the property was to be used for investment purposes, just two respondents, one each from counties Cavan and Galway, had stated that this was their intention. Furthermore, an additional five respondents drawn from counties Cavan (1), Galway (1) and *Clare Refused* (3) confirmed that they had intended to sell the property if they had been successful in their planning application. Therefore a number of respondents seem to have made misleading responses in this survey, which may also have been the case with regard to their planning application. If this had indeed been the case, and the

application had been approved, it would mean that these applicants, by selling on the property, would have been in breach of the prevailing standard occupancy conditions which are standard in counties Clare and Galway, an ongoing situation which has been previously acknowledged by local councillors, local planning officers and pro-conservation interests.

Six respondents representing counties *Clare Refused* (4), Galway (1), and Cavan (1) chose the 'other' option to set down their own explanations. Each of the six respondents stated that they initially intended to rent the property to defray costs. Four of these respondents (*Clare Refused* [2], Galway [1], Cavan [1]) stated that they then intended to move into the property, with the remaining respondent from the *Clare Refused* group stating that an intention to give it to his/her son.

8.4. Personal Association of Applicant with Area

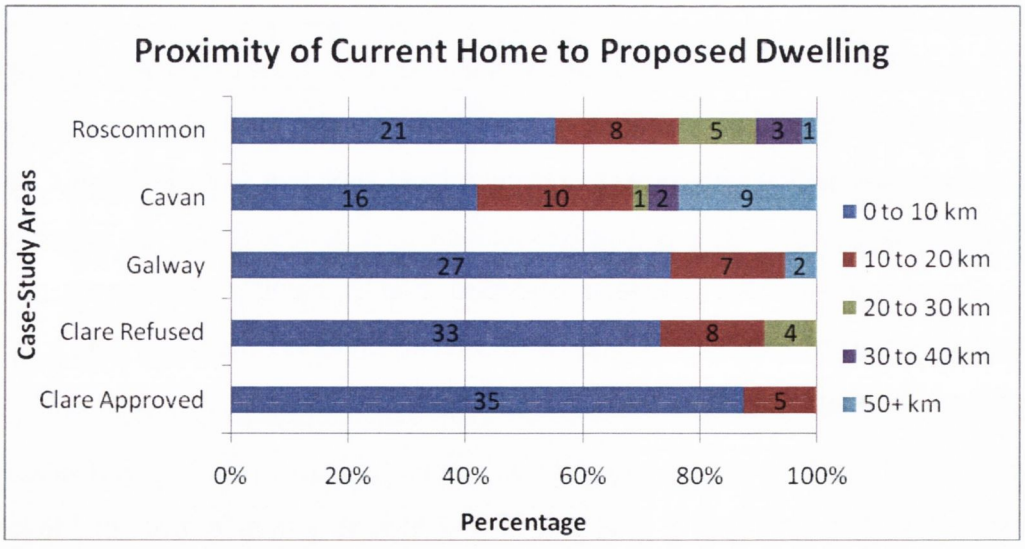
At this juncture, the line of questioning focused more closely on the applicants and their personal affiliation with the area in which they wish to build a one-off house. Respondents were firstly questioned as to whether they were local to the area. The term local (in accordance with national policy) is defined as being born in the area or living in the area for at least the past ten years. The findings are documented in Appendix 7 (Figure A7.7).

The majority of respondents considered themselves to be local to the area in which they sought planning. Apart from Co. Cavan, the results for each of the groups were greater than 80% with respect to being a local applicant, with 100% of *Clare Approved* respondents citing themselves as locals. At 71.1%, this lower figure for Co. Cavan supports the previous assertion that a significant proportion of respondents from Co. Cavan represent an urban-based demand for single dwellings from non-locals.

Respondents were then asked to state the proximity, in kilometres, or their current home to the site. The results are presented in Figure 8.4.1 below. Again, the first point of note is the particularly low proportion of respondents from Co. Cavan who live within 10 kilometres of their site, which lends further credibility to the theory that a significant proportion of applications in this case-study group were urban-generated.

Looking at the responses for each case-study group as detailed in Figure 8.4.1., it is interesting to note the variations in what respondents' classed as being local. Following an examination of the returned questionnaire surveys, it was established that, in Co. Roscommon, four of the five respondents who lived between twenty and thirty kilometres away from the proposed site of development considered themselves as being local to the area. This was also the case for one respondent from Co. Cavan. The respondents from Co. Galway who considered themselves as local applicants lived within 20 kilometres of their site. With regard to the *Clare Refused* group, four respondents' living between 10-20km from their site considered themselves to be local, while another four living the same distance away considered themselves as non-local. With regard to the *Clare Approved* group, all respondents lived within twenty kilometres of their site and all considered themselves to be local.

Figure 8.4.1.

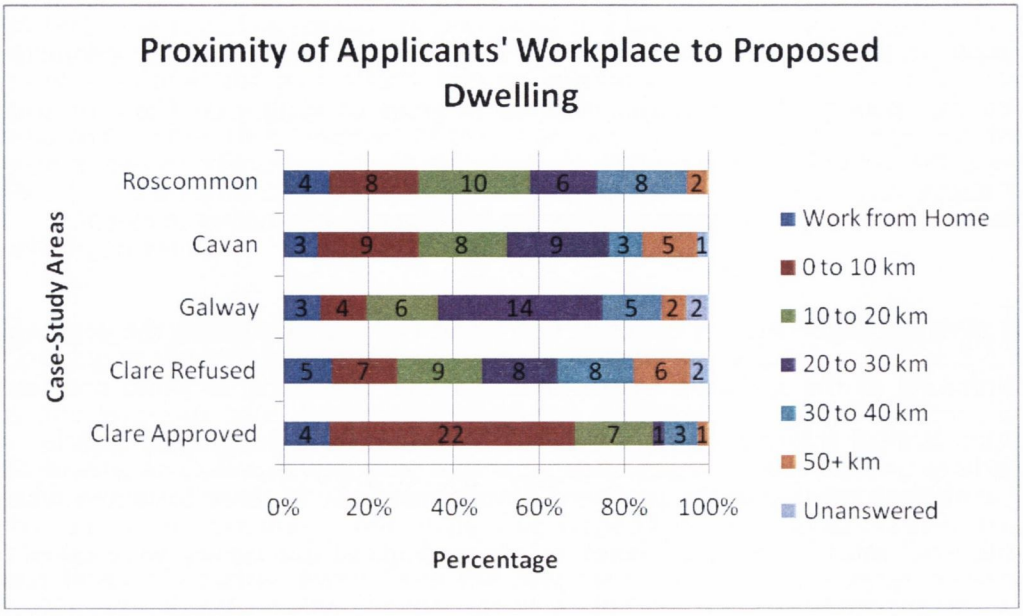


The above findings are most likely connected to the location of the area. For example, in the west of Clare or Galway, a 'local area' can span many kilometres given the sparsity of population, whereas in areas of south-east Clare or south Cavan, for example, urban centres are in much closer proximity to one another, with the intervening rural areas often being less than 20 kilometres in extent.

The planning authorities of counties Clare and Galway emphasise the economic contribution of the applicant to the area in which they wish to build and thus, require detailed information regarding the occupation and geographic location of the workplace relative to the proposed development site in those instances where 'local need' must be proven. Therefore, respondents of this survey were asked to state the proximity of their workplace to the site for which planning permission was applied. The findings are documented in Figure 8.4.2 below.

An examination of the figures for the *Clare Approved* and *Clare Refused* groups revealed huge differences in the responses. 68.4% of respondents from the *Clare Approved* group intended to work from home or travel no more than ten kilometres for work. The comparable figure for the *Clare Refused* group is 26.7%. If the parameters are extended to a distance of up to 20km, the figure increases to 86.7% for the *Clare Approved* group and 46.7% for the *Clare Refused* group. This differential is likely to reflect the fact that proximity to the workplace is a factor which is taken into account when assessing planning applications.

Figure 8.4.2.



Given that Co. Galway's planning application form devotes a section to occupation and the location of the applicants workplace, and working off the assertion that the proximity of the proposed dwelling to the applicant's workplace is a factor which may be influential in the outcome of decisions, it is perhaps not surprising that the workplace of the majority of Co. Galway respondents (58.4%) was located at a distance of 20km or greater from the proposed site.

The comparative figures from counties Cavan and Roscommon, where there are no eligibility requirements for establishing local need, revealed results which were quite similar with 57.9% and 52.7% respectively working at a location which is less than 20km from the site of proposed development. Interestingly, these figures are considerably higher than for both the *Clare Refused* group (46.7%) and Galway (36.1%), where the establishment of local need is a requirement.

8.5. Respondents' History of Residence in a Detached Rural Dwelling

This section aims to establish the level of personal identification of respondents with rural lifestyles and residing in rural areas where dispersed settlement patterns predominate. Respondents were asked to record their occupancy with regard to their prior/current home[19] and whether this accommodation is a detached rural house. In this instance, occupancy refers to whether the house is owned or rented by respondents or whether they are living in the parental home. Respondents were also asked whether their parental home was a detached rural dwelling. The responses are detailed in Appendix 7, Figures A7.8, A7.9 and A7.10.

Turning first to the respondents' current/prior accommodation, the *Clare Refused* group reported the highest rate of owner occupancy at 46.7%. The Clare refused group also had a high proportion of respondents who stated that their current/prior home was not a single dwelling (26.7%). These figures suggest that a significant proportion of respondents from the Clare Refused group had been committed to living in an urban area prior to the submission of the 2005 application. This is not surprising when that fact that 80% of Clare Refused respondents were aged 30 or over.

By comparison, the *Clare Approved* group reported the lowest rate of owner occupation in their current/prior dwelling at 10%. In addition, each of the 40 respondents in this group stated that their current/prior home was a single rural dwelling. This was also the case with regard to the parental home. This contrast may have had a bearing on the different outcome of planning applications between the *Clare Approved* and *Clare Refused* groups.

Despite the fact that 82.2% of *Clare Refused* respondents had described themselves as being local to the area in which they had applied to build a house, a larger proportion stated that their current home was not a one-off dwelling, which

[19] Current/prior accommodation based on addressed obtained from planning application form.

suggests that a proportion of applicants from this group were urban-based, and this goes against the prescriptions of the CDP with regard to certain rural areas types.

The questionnaire survey findings, as they relate to Co. Cavan, suggest that a significant proportion of respondents are not currently residing in the area in which they grew up. This assumption is made based on the high figures for property rental, considered in conjunction with the low figure for residing in the family home, essentially respondents have moved away and are renting. For example, respondents from Co. Cavan reported the highest rate of property rental at 57.9%, approximately 20% higher than the other case-study groups. They also revealed the lowest proportion of respondents residing in the family home (26.3%) and the highest proportion of respondents currently residing in a property that is not a single dwelling (34.2%). The reoccurring suggestion that a considerable number of Cavan respondents are originally from urban centres is further supported by the fact that this group reported the highest figure stating their current residence was not a single rural dwelling. In addition, this group represents the lowest of respondents who stated their parental home was a single rural dwelling (31.6%).

The Roscommon case-study group revealed the highest proportion of respondents who are currently residing in their family home at 52.8%. This is perhaps not surprising as the Roscommon group also reported the highest number of respondents aged 29 or under (60.5%). In addition, 84.2% of Roscommon respondents reported that their parental home was a single dwelling. However, 23.7% are now living in a property which is not a single dwelling. Therefore, there are a proportion of respondents who have lived in single dwellings but are now living in an alternative property type, most probably in an urban setting. This may be connected to a need to relocate for employment opportunities.

The Galway group revealed quite a high proportion of respondents residing in their family home at 42.1%. In addition, the results for this group revealed a large proportion of respondents who are owner occupiers of their current property (23.7%). The fact that this percentage is quite high is interesting as planning

applicants in Co. Galway have to provide a detailed account of the future occupation of their (former) home should they be granted permission to build. The fact that the respondent is already a home-owner may have had a bearing on the success of their application.

The aim of sections 8.1 to 8.5 was to establish the applicants' connection to the area in which they were seeking to build and how this connection, or lack thereof, may have affected the success of their application. A number of interesting findings relating to applicants' motivations in choosing their sites are documented. The differing motivations across the case-study authorities and how they relate to the success of the application (as seen in the comparative study in Co. Clare) illustrate the variety contained across planning regimes in Ireland, ranging from strict to lenient, and also the difficulties associated with translating national policy for local implementation.

8.6. The Experiences of Applicants' in Engaging with the Planning System

This section aims to document respondents' experiences of engaging with the planning system during the 2005 application process for a single dwelling. The primary aim is to examine the similarities and differences in the experiences of applicants across the four case-study authorities, and also between those who either received approval or were refused planning permission to construct a single dwelling in county Clare. It examines the different stages of the planning application process of relevance to one-off housing from the perspective of the applicant.

8.6.1. Use of Pre-Planning Services

The purpose of pre-planning is to afford the opportunity to an applicant for planning permission to seek advice from the planning authority on the proposed development. While it is not compulsory to do so, this is strongly advised by each

authority and it appears as a section on the planning application forms of all four case-study authorities where applicants must state whether or not they had used the service. Given the emphasis placed on this service by all four case-study authorities, it was considered important to establish whether applicants felt that availing of this service was a necessary and/or productive endeavour with regard to siding the progression and potential success of their applications. Respondents were asked if they had availed of the pre-planning service, in their respective planning authorities, prior to submitting their planning application. The findings are detailed in bar graph form in Appendix 7 (Figure A7.11).

Across all case-study groups the majority of respondents had not availed of the pre-planning service. The results for Co. Roscommon however, did show a significantly higher proportion of applicants engaging in a pre-application consultation with the planning office at 44.7%. With regard to the results from Co. Clare, it is interesting to note that a smaller proportion of respondents who were approved planning permission for a single dwelling availed of the pre-planning service compared to those who were refused at 30.0% and 35.6% respectively. These figures may also suggest anticipation on the part of members from the *Clare Refused* group of prospective problems with their application in that they may have availed of the pre-planning service to attempt to address these issues prior to submitting an application.

Respondents who had availed of the pre-planning service were asked if they found it to be useful. The respondents' answers to this question are documented in Appendix 7 (Figure A7.12). Perhaps, not surprisingly, given the success of their planning applications, the *Clare Approved* group reported the highest level of approval with the pre-planning service. Seven out of 12 respondents stated that they had found the consultation useful. By comparison, the *Clare Refused* group had one of the lowest approval ratings with just four out of 12 respondents reporting positive reviews of the service. This is perhaps a consequence of being subsequently refused planning permission.

Respondents who did not avail of the pre-planning service were asked why they had chosen not to do so. The results are documented in Appendix 7 (Figure A7.13). Aside from the *Clare Approved* group the majority of respondents stated that they did not know that this service existed. This is interesting given that a question is present on the planning application forms of all case-study authorities regarding applicants' use of the pre-planning service. However, if a third-party agent had been employed in the submission of the planning application, the applicant may not have seen the application form.

The majority of respondents from the *Clare Approved* group stated that they did not feel that availing of the service would be of any great benefit to the success of their application.

In the instances where respondents chose the 'other' option, two reasons were put forward for non-use of the service. The first of these was reported solely by respondents from Co. Clare (*Clare* Approved – 3, *Clare* Refused – 2) and concerned the waiting time before the consultation took place. One respondent from the *Clare Approved* group elaborated; '*There was no time allowance to use the service. There was a waiting list of up to six months and the local area plan was about to change bringing our site into a pressure area. This would have ruled us out to apply then*' (ClaA27)[20]. The second reason put forward was that respondents had a third party acting on their behalf in the submission of their planning application who had knowledge of the workings of the planning system.

8.6.2. The Use of a Third Party to Act on Applicant's Behalf

Given that planning applicants are generally lay-people with little required knowledge of local rural housing policy or on-going interaction with the planning system, it was important to establish whether applicants felt it necessary to employ a more experienced representative to act on their behalf when compiling their

[20] All respondents are identified by county; Clare=Cla; Galway= Gal; Roscommon=Ros and Cavan=Cav. In the instance of Co. Clare, Respondents were additionally identified according to whether they were approved or refused planning permission, e.g., *Clare Approved*=ClaA; *Clare Refused*=ClaR. Each survey was assigned a number. For example, in the instance of the *Clare Approved* group, survey 12 out of 40 is denoted as ClA12.

application and interacting with the local planning office. In the comparative study, undertaken in Co. Clare, the findings were expected to provide insight on the extent to which utilising third-party representation may have affected the outcome of the application. Respondents were questioned as to whether they chose to have a person/agent act in their interest when submitting their planning application for a single dwelling. The findings are detailed in Appendix 7 (Figure A7.14)

With the exception of Co. Roscommon, significant numbers of respondents had engaged a third party to represent them during the planning application process. However, in counties Cavan Galway and *Clare Refused*, this was not a large majority. By contrast, thirty-seven out of forty applicants from the *Clare Approved* group had used a third-party as their representative. This suggests that the employment of a third-party, with a level of expertise in planning matters, may have positively affected the outcome of the application.

Respondents who had used third-party representation were asked to state the occupation/profession of their representative. Six different professions were mentioned which are listed in Table 8.6.2.1, with the corresponding number of respondents for each case-study group who availed of their services.

Table 8.6.2.1. Occupation of Third-Party Representatives

Occupation of 3rd Party	**Case-Study Groups**				
	Roscommon	Cavan	Galway	Clare Refused	Clare Approved
Draughtsman	7	3	9	8	8
Auctioneer	-	-	-	1	-
Architect	10	15	11	14	19
Engineer	-	1	1	-	-
Planning Consultant	1	5	-	4	12
Building Contractor	-	-	-	1	-

It should be noted that several respondents stated that they had more than one third-party representative acting on their behalf. Architecture was, by far, the top

profession listed across the case-study groups. In the answering of this question, it was not intended, that respondents should include the person who had drawn up their plans as third-party representation as, given the level of expertise required, the vast majority of respondents would have had to avail of an architect/draughtsman to design the scheme. This was a failing of the survey design, which was overlooked on examination of responses from the pilot survey. However, it must also be considered that in instances where a respondent stated that an architect/draughtsman had acted on their behalf, their role was not solely confined to designing the plans as they may have also acted as a representative for the applicant.

The use of planning consultants also featured very strongly in the *Clare Approved* group suggesting that the use of an agent who is a qualified planning professional may have had a bearing on the outcome of the application.

Respondents were also asked why they chose to be represented by a third party. The most popular response was that it was necessary for the design and preparation of drawings and plans of the proposed dwelling which are submitted as part of the application. A significant number also reported that they felt that third-party representation was necessary given their own lack of expertise in planning matters. The following survey excerpts are examples of the most common responses in this regard:

- '*Knew what the council required*' (Cav04)
- '*More knowledge about the right way to go to obtain planning permission*' (Gal18)
- '*Experience in dealing with the planning office*' (ClaR05)

In addition, four respondents from Co. Clare (*Clare Approved* – 3; *Clare Refused* – 1) stated that they had been advised to use an agent qualified in planning matters.

8.6.3. The Inclusion of Representations from Public Representatives

Respondents were questioned as to whether they had included third-party representations with their planning application for a single dwelling in order to establish whether successful applicants felt that third-party representation played a significant role in the acquiring of permission to build a single rural dwelling and also whether refused applicants felt that the omission of this representation was detrimental to their application. The inclusion of this question also allowed for an examination of whether there was a correlation in the rates of utilisation of third-party representation and the success, or otherwise, of the application. These representations included both written and oral representations. Public representative refers to a public leader or person of standing within the local community, for example: TDs, local councillors, local clergy, or indeed any person whom the applicant feels will benefit their application. The findings of this question are detailed in Appendix 7 (Figure A7.15).

By far the most common group to provide representation were local councillors. Indeed, when questioned as to why it was necessary to include representations with a planning application, the most common response mentioned local councillors and their access to the planning office, one respondent from Co. Galway commenting that; '*We were advised to have representation by a local councillor who offered to look out for our application at monthly meetings and keep us informed of proceedings*' (Gal22). Indeed, the most common response amongst respondents who had used councillors to make representations on their behalf was that doing so allowed them to have contact with the planning office. One respondent remarked; '*We wouldn't have known our application was likely to be refused had it not been for out councillors enquiries. This gave us the option to withdraw and amend the application and then submit it again. It is a complete joke of a system*' (ClaA36).

Another reason put forward, which was especially prevalent in counties Clare and Galway, was that representations were necessary to provide proof to the planning

office that the applicant was a local to the area in which they were applying for planning permission.

8.6.4. Site-Suitability Testing

A site-suitability assessment is necessary to determine whether or not a particular site can ensure the safe disposal of wastewater from a development. Local authorities are responsible for determining who is qualified to carry out site suitability assessments within their functional areas. In some cases, local authorities draw up a panel of designated persons who may carry out this assessment. This is the case for counties Clare and Galway. There are thirty-six qualified assessors on the Co. Clare panel and fifteen on the Co. Cavan panel. Planning applicants wishing to conduct a site suitability assessment must choose an assessor from the panel.

In other local authorities, the onus is on the applicant to select a suitably qualified person to carry out the site assessment. This is the case in counties Galway and Roscommon. The site suitability report, which must be submitted as part of the application, is a standard form for all local authorities. The submitted report must include the site assessor's details, including their relevant qualifications and experience.

The use of a panel from which applicants can select a site assessor ensures a level of uniformity in the standard of site suitability reports. However, the small numbers of assessors approved to these panels can mean waiting lists to have the site characterisation report completed which can be very frustrating for the applicant wishing to submit their application.

On the other hand, placing the onus on the applicant to seek out a suitably qualified assessor also has its drawbacks. The qualifications and/or the experience of the assessor whom the applicant chooses may not meet council standards. However, this may not be revealed until the planning application is being assessed. At this stage, the applicant has already paid for one site characterisation report and

will therefore be obliged to pay for a second. Meanwhile, the progress of the planning application has been delayed.

Respondents were asked how long the process of site assessment took, from contacting an assessor to completion of the report. This question was included to establish whether there were significant differences in the time-frame for completion between case-study authorities. The results are detailed in Appendix 7 (Figure A7.16). As illustrated, the results for Cavan and Roscommon are almost identical, despite the existence of a panel in Co. Roscommon. Respondents from Co. Galway reported a longer waiting time for the site-suitability report to be conducted with 16 respondents reporting a waiting time of more than four weeks compared to just thirteen in both counties Cavan and Roscommon.

The fact that the results for the *Clare Approved* and *Clare Refused* groups contrast greatly suggests that the waiting time for site suitability testing to be completed is dependent on an element of luck and also the availability of the particular assessor chosen from the panel by the respondent.

8.6.5. Development Contribution Scheme

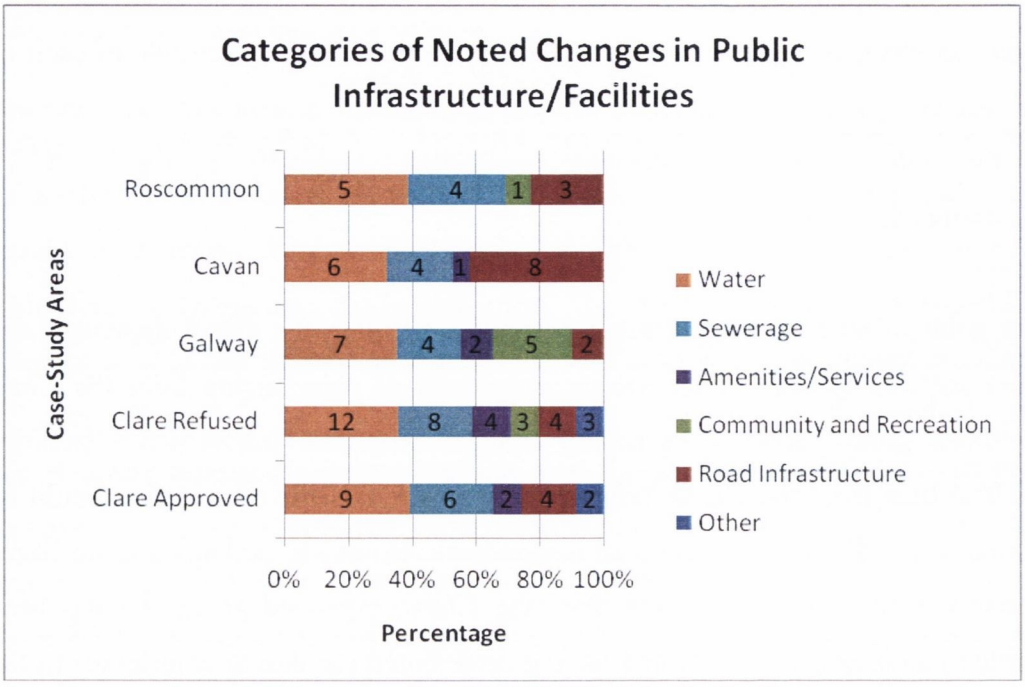
Under Section 48 of the *Planning and Development Act, 2000*, a planning authority can, when granting a planning permission under Section 34 of the Act, include a condition requiring the payment of a development contribution in respect of public infrastructure and facilities, such as the refurbishment, upgrading, enlargement or replacement of roads, car parks, sewers, waste water facilities, the provision of community facilities and amenities. Each of the four case-study authorities has a development contribution scheme in place, whereby a sum of money is paid to the council. For example, this amounted to €3,570 for a standard-sized single dwelling in Co. Clare in 2005. This figure varies across county councils and is also dependent on the type and size of the property. Respondents from each case-study groups were asked whether, to their knowledge, there had been any changes/improvements made to public infrastructure and/or community facilities/amenities, in the area in which their site is located, during the five years

prior to receiving the questionnaire survey. This question was included to establish whether the development contribution scheme has had a notable impact with regard to changes/improvements to public infrastructure and facilities in each of the case-study authorities and also whether respondents' assessments were skewed by the outcome of their planning application. Appendix 7, Figure A7.17 documents the responses.

One point of note is the contrast in responses between the *Clare Approved and Clare Refused* groups. A far greater proportion of respondents from the *Clare Approved* group reported witnessing changes in public infrastructure/facilities (50.0%) than from the *Clare Refused* group (24.4%). This discrepancy could be related to the differing locations of respondents. However, perhaps a more likely scenario is that the respondents from the *Clare Approved* group, having been granted planning permission, and having contributed (or due to contribute) to the development scheme, have become more aware of what this contribution is being used for. Another possible explanation is that respondents from the *Clare Refused* group, understandably disgruntled at having been refused planning permission, have failed to acknowledge any changes to public infrastructure and/or facilities in this survey.

Figure 8.6.5.1 records the changes in public infrastructure and/or facilities that were noted by respondents in each of the case-study groups.

Figure 8.6.5.1.



In the five instances where respondents chose the 'other' option, the description of the changes witnessed could have been included in one of the other five categories (e.g. road repaving) or were irrelevant to the question (e.g. a new cluster of holiday homes).

8.7. Experiences and Perspective of Applicants Refused Permission

This section focuses on respondents who were refused permission to construct a single dwelling in 2005. It examines what, if any, proactive steps the respondents has taken in light of their refused application and how they plan to move forward in their quest to construct a single dwelling, if indeed this remains their intention.

8.7.1. Availing of Advice or Representation from a Public or Private Representative

Respondents were questioned if, in light of their planning refusal, they had sought advice or representation from a public or private representative, for example, a local councillor or a solicitor. The findings are documented in Appendix 7 (Figure A7.18).

In each case-study area, the majority of respondents chose not to avail of advice from a public or private representative. This figure was particularly high for Co. Cavan as was the number of respondents who chose not to answer the question.

The respondents who did seek advice or representation were asked to state the nature of this advice/representation. The overwhelming majority who sought advice had contacted a local councillor (9 out of 10 in Co. Roscommon; 4 out of 4 in Co. Cavan; 13 out of 18 in the *Clare Refused* group; and 11 out of 12 in Galway). These figures provide some insight to the numbers of refused applicants annually who contact their local councillor for advice on how to proceed.

Each of the respondents stated that they sought guidance on what their options were. As one respondent commented: "*I wanted to know what to do next. Should I appeal or submit a new application and what were my chances of getting permission the second time? Our councillor spoke to the planner for us*" (Ros02).

8.7.2. Seeking Advice from the Planning Office

Respondents were also asked whether they had contacted the planning office directly for advice or information concerning their refused application. The results are illustrated in Appendix 7 (Figure A7.19).

Again, the proportion of respondents from Co. Cavan who had chosen not to seek advice was particularly high when compared to the other case-study authorities. In

Co. Clare, a greater number of refused applicants chose to speak to the planning office directly rather than speak to a local representative.

When respondents who sought advice/information directly from the planning office were asked if they had found it useful, the response was overwhelmingly negative across all groups apart from respondents drawn from Co. Roscommon. The responses are detailed in Appendix 7 (Figure A7.20).

Of those who stated that they had not found the planning office advice useful, the majority were disgruntled that they were informed that the planning refusal could not be overturned and stood as it was. As one respondent commented:
"*We were advised that we should not apply for planning permission in the area as there were already five recent applications that had been approved and the ground could not take the soakage from any more houses. She implied that if just my application had been in, we would have had a better chance. Since then, the houses have gone up and further applications have been granted. This is because the planner has changed*" (ClaR07).

Others reported that they were unhappy with the 'dismissive attitude' of the planner with whom they had dealt, one person saying: "*We were treated like time-wasters. What they don't realise is that this is our future they are disregarding. They are leaving us in limbo*" (Ros14). Another commented: "*I was advised that I should have taken a more diligent approach to the application, i.e. follow up. I was given the usual no-brain rigmarole*" (Cav06).

Another complaint, in counties Clare and Galway, related to the respondent's eligibility to apply for the construction of a single dwelling and the difficulty in proving local need when the applicant is from the area. One respondent, from Co. Galway commented:
"*I thought I had proven my eligibility. I am not from the area but I have lived here for over ten years. I provided all the relevant documentation, and representations from my former school principal and my local priest, but I was still refused on the*

grounds of local need. I contacted the planning office directly to see why this was the case and whether I needed to supply more documentation but the planner was extremely evasive and basically said a refusal can't be overturned. It's a complete disgrace" (Gal30).

Of the respondents who viewed their post-planning-refusal interaction with the planning office more favourably, the majority reported that the advice they had received was useful in that it provided information on the best course of action which the respondent could take to ensure a successful application in the future. As one respondent, from Co. Roscommon, stated: "*He explained the reasons for refusal thoroughly and also how we could improve our house design to meet the required standards of the council. We have since submitted an application for the same site which has been granted*" (Ros11).

8.7.3. Future Intentions Regarding the Acquirement/Construction of a Dwelling

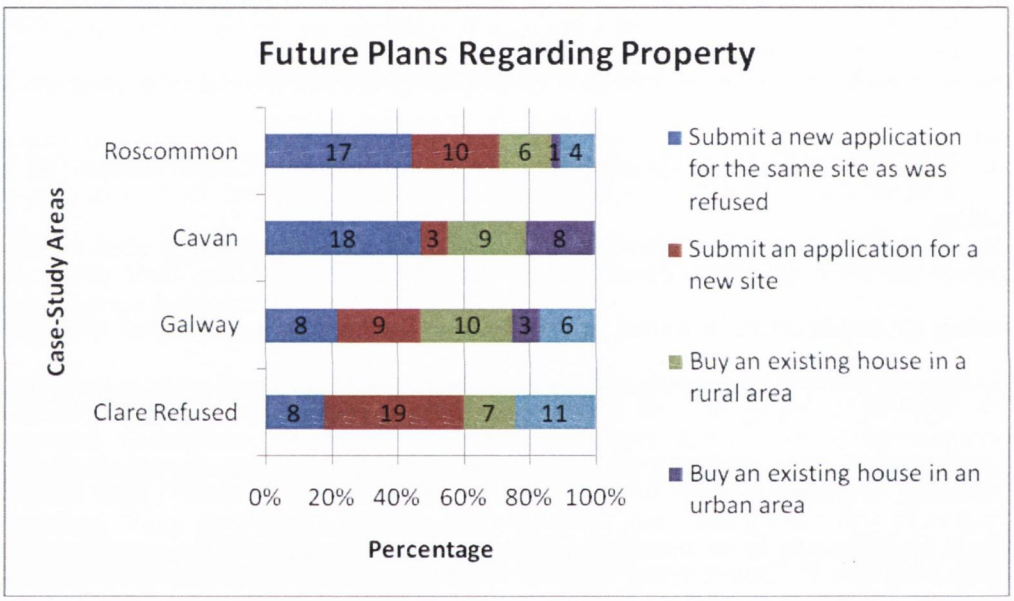
Respondents were asked to divulge their future plans regarding their plans for acquiring or constructing a house in the future. The results are detailed in Figure 8.7.3. Among those whose applications had been refused in local authorities which are considered to be lenient regimes, there is a level of consistency amongst respondents, regarding their future plans. A level of consistency also existed amongst respondents from counties Clare and Galway, authorities considered to have strict planning regimes. There was a significant difference between the respondents from lax and strict local authorities in the likelihood of their submitting a new application for the same site. This was a more probable scenario in counties Cavan and Roscommon.

There was greater variance across the case-study local authorities amongst respondents who stated that they planned to submit an application for a new site. The most likely scenario for those who have chosen this option is that they have access to family land or land belonging to a third party known to them and intend

to choose an alternative plot on this land, perhaps with the option of purchasing if the new application is granted.

The alternative scenario whereby a respondent has/intends to buy a new site is quite unlikely when one considers the cost involved, especially when there is no guarantee that this future application will be granted either. Also the difficulties associated with selling on the original site, which has been refused planning permission, must be considered. Of those respondents who selected the 'other' option, all stated that they intended to remain in their current accommodation.

Figure 8.7.3.



Respondents were asked if they had already started the process of buying a new house or whether they had submitted a new application to build a single dwelling. Their responses are documented in Table 8.7.3.

Table 8.7.3. Initiation of new process to acquire a house

Case-Study Authority	Yes	No
Roscommon	28	6
Cavan	24	14
Galway	18	12
Clare Refused	28	6

As can be seen, the majority of respondents, who had stated their intention to purchase, had begun the process. The figures for those who had not initiated this process are broadly similar to the figures relating to applicants who stated that they intended to buy a new house. This similarity may be related to the fact that these individuals are saving for a deposit to buy a house, whereas, with respondents seeking to build a property, the main costs are after the planning application process has been completed.

Respondents who stated that they wished to submit a new application for a single dwelling were asked if they had done, or intended to do, anything differently regarding their approach to the planning application process. A large proportion of respondents stated that they would consider using the pre-planning service on this occasion. The figures for respondents who said that they would consider using the pre-planning service on this occasion were examined as a percentage of the figures for respondents who had not used the service during their 2005 application; Roscommon – 76.2% (of people who had not used the pre-planning service in 2005 would consider using it now); Cavan – 65.5%; Galway – 54.55%; Clare Refused – 68.75%. A number of respondents also stated that they would consider employing the services of a planning consultant (Roscommon – 4; Cavan – 4; Galway – 6; Clare Refused – 9). One respondent commented; "*I will definitely get a planning consultant on board the next time. I was out of my depth with the planning application and I think that's probably why I got refused. I didn't really know what I was doing*" (ClaR21).

A number of respondents also stated that they would include representations from local representatives with their future application. One respondent, from Co. Galway, succinctly summarised a widespread feeling: "*I will avail of the pre-planning service and employ third-party representation. I will go to whatever lengths are necessary to cover all negative rebuffs. I certainly can't depend on due process*" (Gal17).

8.7.4. The Personal Consequences of Refusal

This section aims to uncover the consequences for the individual of being refused planning permission for a detached rural house. Respondents were invited to describe any personal hardships they incurred as a result of being refused. These consequences can be both economic and social in nature. Given that the answering of this question required a written statement rather than choice of a pre-determined option, a lower proportion of respondents chose to answer this open-ended question. In all, eighty-seven respondents out of a possible one-hundred and fifty provided examples of how they had been affected as a result of the refused application.

The most common consequence was that of financial loss, 67 respondents reporting this consequence. As one respondent commented: '*It cost us approximately €2,500, between getting the drawing done, the site inspected, application costs and getting time off work*' (Ros26). Another remarked: '*I am left hugely out of pocket. I have a site for which I can't get planning permission and is worth far less than what I paid for it*' (Gal17).

Another common consequence reported by 29 respondents was the frustration, worry and stress associated with submitting the planning application, and receiving refusal. The following summarises the general consensus of respondents who provided information with regard to this consequence; "*The whole process was extremely stressful and frustratingly slow and then they broke our hearts and refused us after making it as difficult as possible. It is not an experience, I would like to repeat*" (ClaR22).

Eight respondents reported that a result of the refused planning application was that they were forced to remain living in their current home, which each reported as a negative consequence for varying reasons. The following survey excerpts detail a range of respondents' comments.

"*I am thirty-three years of age and still living at home with my parents. I can't afford to buy another site or build a house at the moment, although I am saving hard. It is extremely frustrating and depressing to be in this situation and I would say it has impacted on my quality of life*" (Ros 21).

"*I do not have a house. I live with my daughter and son-in-law which is very unsatisfactory*" (ClaR12).

"*As a result of the refused permission we are still in rented accommodation which has now cost almost as much as the site*" (Cav32).

Two respondents from this group specifically reported that they were now "*stuck in an urban location, even though I'm a local* [to the area where planning permission was sought] *and want nothing more than to move back there*" (Gal35).

Respondents were asked whether, given their experience with the planning system, there were any important discussion points which they felt had been omitted from the survey. Again, given that this question was to be answered by a written statement, a smaller proportion of respondents chose to answer it or stated that they felt all issues of relevance had been included, than when presented with closed-ended questions. In all, 26 respondents provided an answer to this question.

The majority of respondents (16) mentioned a lack of communication channels with the planning office while the application was being processed. As one respondent commented; "*There is no opportunity to discuss grievances during the course of the assessment of the planning application, then it is just refused and we must start again, incurring more costs*" (Cav16). Related to this point, and

mentioned by six respondents, was the length of time the planning office takes to make a decision. Five of the respondents who raised this point were from the Co. *Clare Refused* group, the sixth being from Co. Galway. The primary grievance reported by respondents was the "*transparent request for further information just days before the decision is due*" (ClaR09). One respondent commented; "*I know there isn't much consideration put into the applications, if they are overworked they send out a further information request for another six weeks. Meanwhile our lives are put on hold*" (ClaR16).

Eight respondents questioned the qualifications and experience of the planning officers in charge of assessing their planning applications. One respondent asked; *"What's the qualification of those making the decision, a quick-fix year-long course? I've been living here all my life and know my land inside out and yet they're the experts"* (Ros26). Another remarked: "*I believe the person who turned down my planning application was not a rural person and did not have a clue what he or she was on about*" (ClaR09). In addition, the high turnover of planning officers was mentioned by three respondents, two from the *Clare Refused* group and one from Co. Galway; "*There is a lot of change of planners in my county which can be very difficult for areas and applicants as all planners have their own design preferences and opinions. There can be consistency issues*" (Gal28).

8.7.5. The Perspective and Experiences of those Granted Permission

This section focuses on respondents whose were applications were granted planning permission. The respondents in the section comprised the group of 40 respondents from Co. Clare who were successful in their 2005 planning application. It examines how respondents have proceeded since they received permission.

Respondents were initially asked if they had appealed any of the conditions of their planning approval to An Bord Pleanála. Only one of the forty respondents had chosen to do this. This respondent was partly successful in his appeal which was related to a design aspect of the property.

Respondents were then asked if the construction of the house had commenced or was completed. Just eight respondents had yet to initiate construction of the property, although these all stated that they did intend to commence construction in the future. The sole respondent who elaborated on why construction had yet to commence stated that he was awaiting a fall in construction costs. Each of the 32 applicants who had completed the construction of their single dwelling was residing in the property. As previously mentioned, all 40 applicants stated that they intended to make the property their permanent residence.

As with those who had been refused permission, respondents in this group were asked whether, given their experience with the planning system, there were any important discussion points which they felt had been omitted from the survey. Thirteen respondents chose to answer this question. Nine mentioned the issue of local need and the difficulty in proving eligibility. As one respondent commented: "*The land has been in the family for over 100 years and I have always lived in the area and had all the right criteria. Yet, they* [the planning department] *still made it hell to get permission*" (ClaA27).

In addition to the above point, five respondents questioned the consistency with which the local needs clause was being applied by Clare County Council. All three respondents spoke of instances whereby non-locals were managing to get permission and cases where houses were being built and then left unoccupied. Their concerns are summarised in the following survey excerpt;
'*I feel that more attention needs to be given to the granting of these applications. These applicants are lying to get past the local rural rule which is very frustrating and wrong. I would only be happy to see houses which are to be occupied full time being granted permission in my area. There are 10 houses on my local rural road and only 5 are occupied by local rural people and occupied all year round*' (ClaA19).

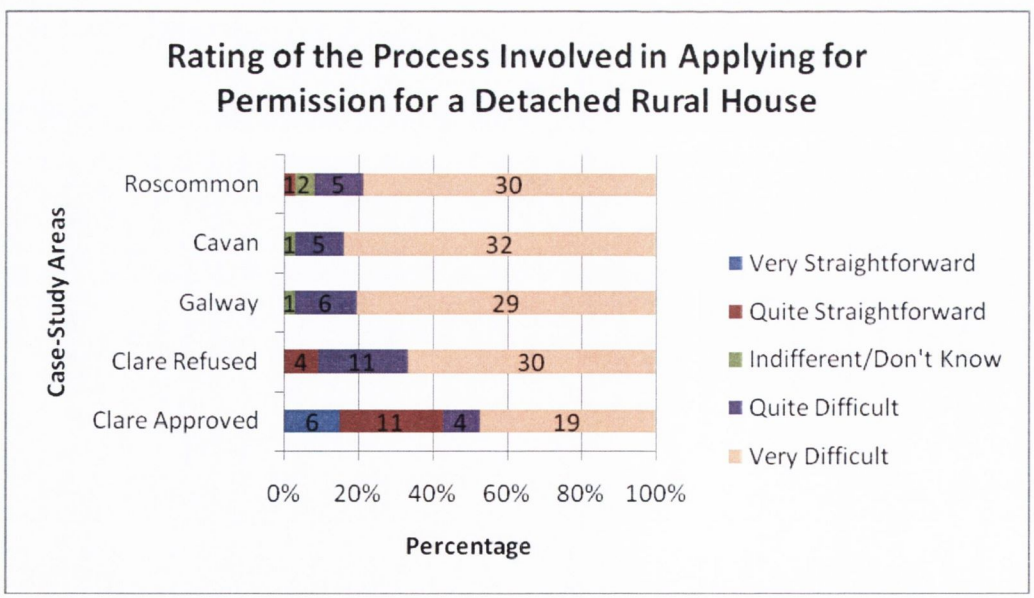
However, in contrast, two respondents stated that they felt the local need clause was unnecessary, one respondent noting that; "*The one thing I would have an issue*

with is that a person should be able to get planning in an area even if that person is not local" (ClaA08) Another remarked; "*The planning office should promote the building of residential houses in rural low density areas but they don't at all. Additional homes makes an area vibrant and enhance the rural area & is a good place for rearing children & also good for the development of the economy in rural areas*" (ClaA21). In a related topic, one respondent commented on the "*attitude of people not from a rural setting who feel that single developments are destroying the countryside*" (ClaA23) stating that such a perspective was detrimental to both rural society and its economy.

8.8. Rating the Planning Process

Respondents were asked to evaluate the processes involved in applying for permission to build a single dwelling in a rural area with regard to how straightforward or difficult they found the whole process. The results are detailed in Figure 8.8.

Figure 8.8



The overwhelming majority of respondents who had been refused planning permission described the planning application process as being very difficult. Indeed, when the responses for those who described the planning process as being 'very difficult' or 'quite difficult' are totalled, the percentages are 92.1% for Co. Roscommon, 97.4% for Co. Cavan, 97.3% for Co. Galway and 81.1% for the group which had been refused planning permission from Co. Clare. Significantly, the proportion of *Clare Approved* respondents who described the planning process as being 'very difficult' or 'quite difficult' was also large at 57.5%.

Respondents were asked why they had chosen this rating. The following selection of responses summarises the feelings of respondents who classed the planning application process for a single dwelling as 'very difficult' or 'quite difficult.' The proportion of *Clare Approved* respondents who described the planning process as being 'very difficult' or 'quite difficult' was also large at 57.5%.

'*Indifference of planner as to the personal needs of the applicant. The black and white approach to the suitability of the applicant with a mightier than thou attitude from an invisible pedestal of security'* (Gal09).

'Completely unapproachable planner and a ridiculous amount of paperwork' (Cav26).

'*Planners completely contradict themselves. They say one thing then change their mind. They are a disgrace and often have very little experience and seem to be on a power trip'* (ClaR13).

'*You can never be sure that your application will be successful ever after a pre-planning consultation. It's worrying for locals to get planning when you see so many holiday homes going up*' (ClaA07).

'*Everything has to be exactly as planning department criteria require. Applications can be refused for the simplest of things, i.e. wording in newspaper*

notice being incorrect. No lee-way for error. Also different interpretation from different planners' (ClaR43).

Not one respondent who had been refused permission described the planning process as being 'very straightforward', and just five, one from Co. Roscommon and four from the *Clare Refused* group stated that they had found the planning process 'quite straightforward.' Only six of the 40 respondents from Co. Clare who had actually been granted planning permission described the process of acquiring permission as 'very straightforward,' while a further eleven described it as 'quite straightforward.' Again, respondents were asked to explain why they had chosen the rating. The following survey excerpts are examples of the reasoning of respondents:

'*The person who did our plans knew what was acceptable to the council, also the site was zoned as clustered development*' (ClaA08).

'The whole planning process moved quite swiftly and we experienced no problems' (Cla16).

'*No problems in acquiring the granting of permission. Received good up-to-date information during application being processed*' (ClaA02).

8.9. Conclusion

The planning systems of local authorities in Ireland operate under varying levels of stringency with regard to the curtailment of one-off housing construction. Of the case-study authorities utilised in this study, counties Clare and Galway operate strict controls over one-off housing development whereas counties Cavan and Roscommon operate with greater laxity in their approach to one-off housing.

Both Clare and Galway utilise policy instruments such as rural area typologies and the local need clause to control the development of dispersed settlements. By contrast, counties Cavan and Roscommon do not stipulate eligibility criteria stating that all applications for one-off housing will be considered.

Based on the factual data obtained and reviewed during the questionnaire survey process, it initially proved difficult to utilise the conceptualisations of state (pluralism and managerialism) employed as the theoretical framework of this thesis to aid understanding of the empirical findings. With regard to counties Clare, Galway and Roscommon, while variances within and between these case-study areas were noted and have been analysed in preceding sections, the outcomes of planning applications, when correlated with the factual data obtained regarding applicants and the sites in question, were within the parameters of the prescriptions of respective local rural housing policy. This suggests that planning officers are operating a professional, non-political role and implementing planning decisions regarding one-off housing on a technical, non-biased basis.

However, the analysis of factual data obtained from respondents in Co, Cavan suggests that local planning officers may be adopting a managerialist approach with regard to rural housing policy activation. A number of findings analysed in the main body of this chapter highlight this assertion. For example, despite the absence of a local need clause, the significant proportion of non-local applicants in the sample suggests there is a system of refusal in place for applicants who are not local to the area of the proposed development, and also, for applicants who are seeking to move to rural areas from urban locations. This raises the consideration that the planning authority of Co. Cavan is operating a stricter planning regime than the prescriptions of the CDP would suggest. It is indicative of a rigid interpretation of the local rural-settlement strategy, which is perhaps not surprising, given that Co. Cavan is within commuting distance of Dublin city.

A number of factors, which appear to be influential with regard to the outcome of one-off housing applications in each of the four case-study authorities, were

indentified during the course of this chapter. There appears to be a strong connection between the proposed-site for development being family-owned and the success of the application. There also appears to be a significant correlation between the proximity of the applicant's workplace and the decision to grant permission. By contrast, site ownership was shown to be an insignificant factor in influencing the outcome of a planning decision.

The survey findings indicated a high level of dissatisfaction among respondents for planning officers and the planning system more generally. Of those respondents who had used the planning service, the majority found to be very inadequate with regard to the progression of their planning application. Again, when the applications had been refused, the majority of respondents in three of the four case-study authorities (Roscommon excluded) found the planning officer to be very unhelpful and dismissive with regard to their requests for further information. This situation is perhaps indicative of a managerialist perception of the operations of local planning officers (on the part of individuals who have been refused planning permission for a single rural dwelling) whereby planning officers view themselves as removed from political control and influence, therefore being impervious to local need, operating instead as independent agents promoting their own beliefs and interests.

With regard to the personal consequences of refusal, financial loss was the most commonly cited consequence, followed by stress and worry with regard to the outcome of their application. The vast majority of respondents in the four case-study authorities described the process involved in applying for a single dwelling as 'very difficult' or 'quite difficult.' Significantly, the proportion of respondents from the Co. Clare case-study group who had been approved planning permission for a single dwelling and described the process involved in applying for a single dwelling as 'very difficult' or 'quite difficult' was also very large, again suggesting a disengagement within the planning system and a lack of recognition for the dearth of experience of applicants with regard to the processes involved in applying to build a single rural dwelling.

CHAPTER NINE:
CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to provide and empirical understanding of the manner by which sustainable rural development is conceived, formulated into policy, and operated in Ireland by documenting the perspectives and experiences of stakeholders involved in, and affected by, the Irish planning system.

Sustainable Development and One-off Housing

Interviews with various stakeholders involved in the planning system revealed huge variations in personal constructions of sustainable development, especially as they apply to one-off housing. Generally speaking, stakeholders who considered one-off rural housing the least sustainable housing option comprised the central government group,[21] local planning officers and conservations groups. Stakeholders who felt that the continued construction of one-off housing was in keeping with the sustainable development of rural areas comprised the majority of councillors and the pro- one-off housing groups.

The manner in which one-off housing was described, in terms of its sustainability, varied greatly even amongst stakeholders who shared similar views. The weightings placed on the three dimensions of sustainable development; environmental sustainability, economic sustainability and social sustainability also highlighted vast differences in opinion between stakeholders, with regard to their defining of the concept.

The central government group cited mainly economic considerations when discussing the drawbacks of one-off rural housing as a sustainable rural settlement form, for example, the costs of service provision to dispersed settlements. This group also stated that one-off housing was in defiance of national policy in that the continued proliferation of this form of settlement would affect the cohesion of

[21] Shorthand for central government elected representatives and central government officials

urban centres, leading to the further loss of services. Environmental sustainability was of particular importance to planning officers who focused on the technical aspects of siting and design, citing the need to prevent further damage to the landscape as a visual amenity. Again, highlighting their occupation within the planning sphere, planning officers stressed the importance of site suitability testing for proposed one-off housing to ensure minimal environmental degradation. Not surprisingly, concern for the environment and the impact of one-off housing on the physical and visual landscape were of prime importance to conservation interests.

Conversely, the primary considerations put forward in support of one-off housing by the majority of local councillors and groups in favour of one-off housing were social factors such as the strong ties connecting rural communities. Similarly, given restrictions on one-off housing in national and local policy, the majority of arguments put forward in criticism of one-off housing curtailment related to concern for the societal and economic futures of rural areas.

The manner by which the three dimensions of sustainable development are perceived in the context of one-off housing contrasted greatly amongst stakeholders, with opposing groups often employing contradictory arguments to illustrate the context in which one-off housing should be considered a sustainable pattern of rural settlement. For example, many stakeholders regardless of their position in favour or against the construction of single rural dwellings cited the rural tourism industry as an example when making their case as to the benefits or disadvantages of rural one-off housing construction. One faction stated that dispersed settlement was of economic benefit as tourists wished to be immersed in the rural lifestyle and be in contact with local rural people. In contrast, the opposing group stated that one-off housing construction was economically detrimental to the tourist industry as tourists did not come to see rural landscapes spoiled by an abundance of one-off housing.

Notwithstanding the huge variance in interpretations of sustainable development as it applies to rural settlement structure, each stakeholder group was confirmed in

the belief that their personal conviction of sustainable development was correct. These findings lend empirical support for the work of Scott (2005) relating to his analysis of the rural housing debate in Ireland. He contends that the rural housing debate is characterised by conflicting constructions of sustainable development and rurality.

Sustainable Development and Rural Settlement Strategies – National Policy Formulation

The National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020 (NSS) was, according to the central government group, prepared within the context of ensuring a balanced regional approach to achieving social and economic prosperity which can be contained within the capacity of existing environmental systems. This group contended that the NSS was an excellent policy framework for the promotion of sustainable development. This assertion was also favoured by local planning officers and conservation interests.

The central government group suggested that the introduction of the NSS had allowed for the increased coordination of local authorities with regard to the formulation of county development plans. This viewpoint is in contradiction to the perspectives of Gkartzios and Scott (2009) and Scott and Brereton (2010) who suggest that there is a good deal of variation in the content of development plans across local authorities. However, the central government group did suggest that there is a problem with regard to the relaxed and selective manner by which the prescriptions of national policy are being implemented at local level.

Another problem connected to the formulation of the NSS and highlighted by the central government group, local authority planners and conservation groups was that the effectiveness of the NSS had been diluted due to the large number of gateways and hubs which were selected. It was suggested that the critical mass of this number of urban centres (22) could not be achieved.

A further issue mentioned by the central government group and planning officers was the total disregard displayed at local level for the prescriptions of the NSS. This related to the over-zoning of land for residential purpose at local level which detracted from the consolidation of the selected gateways and hubs. The situation, as described, supports the assertions of Gkartzios and Scott (2009, 1776) who state that, at present, '*local land-use policy plans are failing to provide the wider spatial development context and vision for managing local rural change.*' In this instance, local authorities are preoccupied with the economic development (through the attraction of capital) of their functional areas to the detriment of rural sustainability in a national context.

Another point made, by the central government group and the groups against one-off housing construction, was that the NSS was undermined due to the fact that it was essentially ignored by the other government departments. These assertions are in keeping with the writings of Kitchin (2010). The primary example cited by Kitchin was the Department of Finance programme for decentralisation of government departments in 2003 which did not concentrate decentralisation to the gateways and hubs, as prescribed by the NSS, but to 25 different counties.

There is a clear divide between the various categories of stakeholders interviewed during this study with regard to their assessment of national policy relating to rural settlement structure. The central government group, local authority planners and conservation groups shared similar perspectives with each stating that national policy promotes balanced and sustainable national and regional development. By contrast, the majority of local councillors and pro- one-off housing groups describe the NSS as being extremely biased towards urban settlement structures at the expense of the rural way of life. The NSS was also described by these groups as being too general and vague with regard to rural housing policy which councillors contended had led to a conflict at local level when formulating local policy.

The divisions between stakeholder groups were also apparent when examining assessments of the *Rural Housing Guidelines for Planning Authorities* (RHGs).

The majority of the central government group, planning officers and conservation groups were of the opinion that the RHGs are a useful addition to the national framework for guiding sustainable development in Ireland, in that they provide guidance relating to rural-area types and the situations and locations where one-off rural housing is to be restricted while ensuring that local rural people with genuine rural housing need can build, subject to good planning practice.

However, a minority of the central government group reported that the RHGs were a 'step backwards' with regard to the sustainable development of rural areas. Groups against one-off housing described the prescriptions of the guidelines as an attempt to 'suit everybody.'

Local councillors and pro- one-off housing interests criticised the lack of clarity at local level with regard to the specific role of the RHGs. It was suggested that planning officers were employing the prescriptions of the guidelines as policy, with pro- one-off housing interests stating that this practice had led to the refusal of planning applications for one-off housing.

The Role of Interest Groups in Influencing National Policy

The central government group stated that interest groups played a role in 'guiding' the content of the NSS by participating through the normal channels of communication such as submitting an observation on the public reports which were released during the NSS preparation process.

With regard to influencing the content of the RHGs, the central government group agreed that this had occurred. It was suggested that the prescriptions of the guidelines were designed with more concern for appeasing the electorate than with ensuring the sustainable development of rural areas. The dual role of Government members as public representatives and national policy decision-makers was called in question. The groups in favour of one-off housing construction stated that given the backing of the public, the government could not ignore them and had to take their ideas on board when formulating the rural housing guidelines.

However, local planning officers questioned the actual level of influence exerted by interest groups with regard to the formulation of the RHGs, describing them as very generalised, with elements that could be read to suit interests both for and against one-off housing.

Conservation interests commented more generally with regard to their ability to influence national policy, citing their prescribed status as enabling them to provide guidance and advice to government departments.

Sustainable Development and Rural Settlement Strategies – Local Policy Formulation

The most prevalent issue when discussing local policy formation was the difficulties involved in translating national policy for local implementation. This was especially apparent with regard to rural settlement strategies given the generalised nature of related policy descriptions in this regard in the NSS.

Local councillors suggested that given these circumstances, an element of flexibility was necessary in local rural settlement policies to account for the huge variations in social, environmental and economic conditions at local level. However, this flexibility had allowed for a strict interpretation of rural housing policy, by local planners, which was never its intention.

As mentioned previously, the central government group and the groups against one-off housing suggested that local authorities are adopting a lax and selective approach with regard to the manner by which the prescriptions of national policy are being incorporated into local policy. They cited the dual role of local councillors at local level, first as public advocates for their electorate but also as policy-makers, as being responsible for this situation.

The majority of councillors stated that their first priority was to their constituents and securing a rural settlement strategy to meet their needs, while complying, as

much as possible, with national policy. By contrast, planning officers stated that it was essential to ensure compliance with national policy. Meeting local needs was extremely important but the primary focus has to be the formulation of a sustainable rural settlement strategy that meets the prescriptions of national policy.

These conflicting viewpoints illustrate the high level of conflict which occurs between councillors and planners during the CDP preparation process. Local councillors suggested that there was an element of contempt towards them evident on the part of planners given that they are not in the 'driving seat' when it comes to making final decision on national policy. Indeed, planning officers confirmed a level of discontentment with regard to the power wielded by councillors, stating that often despite their expertise in planning matters, they were confined to providing guidance and offering recommendations.

The Role of Interest Groups in Influencing Local Policy

With regard to their own perception of their ability to influence policy-makers at local level, pro- one-off housing groups stated that it is possible to exert influence through the lobbying of councillors and that many are sympathetic to their viewpoint being from rural backgrounds. Conservation groups again cited their prescribed status as allowing them to exert influence at local level.

The Application of Local Policy and the Role of Planning Officers

With regard to their own assessment of their work as policy-activators at local level, planning officers stated that personal opinion was not a factor when making decisions on one-off rural housing applications. These decisions were based solely on the details of local rural-housing policy. Various stakeholders were in agreement with this assertion, including conservations groups and a proportion of both the councillor and central government groups. Despite previous statements to the contrary, approximately half of the councillors interviewed stated that planners were doing their best to comply with local policy. Again, the conservation groups and half of the central government group were of the opinion that planners are doing a good job in often 'trying' local circumstances.

By contrast, several stakeholders criticised the manner by which planning officers are activating rural housing policy. Approximately half of the councillors interviewed stated that personal opinion plays a significant role in the outcome of planning decisions. These councillors, along with the groups in favour of one-off housing construction, also criticised the frequent turnover of planning officers in local authorities which, it was suggested, has led to a further lack of consistency regarding the outcome of planning decisions for one-off rural housing applications.

With regard to experiences of one-off housing applicants, who have been refused permission to construct a single dwelling, financial loss was the most commonly cited consequence of their involvement with the planning system, followed by stress and worry relating to the outcome of their application.

In summation, the situation in Ireland regarding the formulation and activation of sustainable rural settlement strategies at national and local level is characterised by huge variation.

The Theoretical Framework for Understanding Empirical Research

This section illustrates the manner by which the empirical findings of this thesis offer insight into the managerialist and pluralist conceptions of state. It examines the perspective of each category of interviewee from a self-evaluation of their own role within the planning system to an evaluation of the operations of each of the other stakeholders.

Central Government Elected Representatives/Central Government Officials

As the central government elected representatives (CGERs)/central government officials (CGOs) category comprised of two actor groups, it was necessary to decipher the personal perspectives and operational agendas of both with regard to rural housing planning and practice.

With regard to the personal perception of their role within the planning system, it may be suggested that the mindset of both actor groups is in keeping with the managerialist perspective of state operations. For example, all interviewees cited the use of official channels for public participation as being the most suitable mode of communication in national policy formation. This is indicative of a managerialist thought process whereby established formal structures are considered the most appropriate. In addition, the appreciation for the necessity of professionalism and expertise in policy decision-making highlights an allegiance to the managerialist approach.

Local councillors were perceived by the central government group to be operating a pluralist agenda with regard to their actions at local level. They were described as being particularly receptive to interest group demands, particularly those of pro-one-off housing groups, which was described as having a negative impact on local rural housing policy and practice as they related to the promotion of sustainable rural settlement patterns.

Conversely, local planning officers were considered, in many instances to be operating too rigid a regime. They were described by both actor groups in the central government category as having adopted a managerial role in accordance with their own personal agendas. While it was agreed that the personal objectives of planning officers was the promotion of sustainable rural settlement patterns, it was suggested that their educational background was skewing their perception of the composition of sustainable development to focus considerably more energy on the environmental aspects.

The perspectives of the central government group on the role of interest groups indicate recognition of pluralist discourses in state operations, for example, the acknowledgement of the ability of external factors to influence national policy formation. However, this assertion was made by CGERs who are dependent on the public for election and not the CGOs who occupy a professional role. Indeed, CGOs cited the role of interest groups at national level as being to 'guide' not

'influence' policy direction. This could be seen as an assertion of their authority as managers of the planning system. However, in keeping with pluralist conceptions of the states, there was general agreement that interest groups exerted a considerable amount of pressure on central Government in the months prior to the publications of the RHGs and that these groups were able to influence the policy direction in this instance. It was suggested that the publication of these guidelines, which were seen as a loosening of restriction on one-off housing, was an attempt to appease the public and gain favour with the electorate prior to the local elections in 2004. This is a prime example of the pluralist conception of state which Dunleavy (1971; cited by Kirk, 1980, 58) describes as '*operating in an environment of strong external influences and controlled by politicians who concentrate overwhelmingly on building and maintaining an electoral majority.*'

Again, the role of interest groups in influencing local policy formulation was acknowledged by both actor groups within this category as was associated with, as mentioned, the pluralist agenda of local councillors.

Local Authority Elected Representatives

Two contrasting perceptions of how councillors operate their role within the planning system can be employed in this discussion, drawing on evidence from the empirical findings of this research and managerialist and pluralist conceptions of state. Firstly, given that, proportionally, there are a greater number of councillors in favour of one-off housing construction may suggest that councillors working within lenient planning regimes are reluctant to pass rural housing policy which they perceive as being too strict. In this instance, it can be concluded that councillors are the primary operators of a managerialist framework at local level. The fact that there are strict planning regimes operating concurrently may be indicative of a situation whereby councillors in these local authorities have become reliant on the expert knowledge systems of professional planning officers during local policy formulation. This situation is indicative of contrasting managerialist operations in place at the local policy formulation stage, with different primary actors (planning officers) and a contrasting outcome. However,

the majority of local councillors across each of the case-study authorities indicated pluralist ideals describing their constituents as being their first priority, hence the importance, from their perspective, of securing rural settlement strategies which meet the needs of their constituents. The above contentions highlight the complexity of the ongoing conflict at local level regarding the best policy framework for ensuring sustainable rural settlement prevails.

With regard to policy formation at central government level, local councillors felt that the motives of policy-makers were questionable given the perceived 'urban bias' of the *National Spatial Strategy* (NSS), suggesting a managerialist allegiance to a professional body of knowledge and European thought process which was detrimental to Irish rural communities given their unique housing circumstances. However, councillors also suggested, in keeping with pluralist conceptions of state operations, that central government elected representatives (CGERs) and, by proxy, central government officials (CGOs) are too exposed to pressure from external factors, such as interest groups, which has resulted in national rural housing policy which is extremely generalised and all-embracing, incorporating too many 'focal' urban centres for their visions of sustainable rural settlement structure to be conceivable in reality.

Approximately half of local councillors had a negative opinion with regard to the performance of planning officers at local level who were perceived as operating a managerialist agenda in conflict with the needs of people residing within the functional area of the authority. The primary frustration related to the perception that planning officers were embracing their personal perspectives regarding the sustainability of one-off housing in their planning decisions for single dwelling applications. In keeping with this managerialist view of the operations of planning officers, many stated that planning officers were projecting an urban bias in their decision making, stemming from and allegiance to their educational background and code of practice, at variance to the democratic requirements of their occupation.

The level of influence exerted by interest groups at local level was, in keeping with managerialist teachings, described by councillors as being dependent on the size of, and resources available to, each group. Despite this, a high level of pluralistic empathy was displayed for local pro- one-off housing groups, with many councillors situating themselves in an advocacy role for these groups.

Local Authority Planning Officers

Considering the empirical evidence acquired through interviews with local planning officers, it can be seen that planning officers perceive themselves as occupying and enacting a technical, non-political role based solely on carrying out the prescriptions of local rural housing policy in a professional, non-biased manner.

Both actor groups within the central government category were of the opinion that local planning officers were operating the planning system at local level too rigidly. The perception that planning officers are acting in accordance with their own personal agendas with regard to the promotion of sustainable rural settlement patterns and the implementation of relevant policy through planning decisions is in alliance with the managerialist body of thought.

Similarly, local councillors considered planning officers to be inflexible with regard to the manner in which they operate local rural housing policy. This perception is in addition to the contention that planners employ their personal perspective and interpretations when making decision regarding one-off housing applications suggesting that they (planning officers) are operating managerialist agendas in that they are functioning with regard to their own knowledge systems as opposed to the requirements of the democratic process.

With regard to the perceptions held by interest groups on the operations of planning officers and how these opinions inform understanding of pluralist and managerialist approaches to rural settlement planning in Ireland, there was huge contrast between groups for and against one-off rural housing construction. It was

suggested by pro- one-off housing groups that planning officers are using the interpretive nature of county development plans to refuse applications for one-off housing. It was also suggested that planning officers are often the main policy-makers at local level through the asserting their planning expertise. Planning officers were described as '*bureaucrats on a power trip*' and that many planning decisions could essentially be described as an abuse of power. This perception suggestions a managerialist modus operandi on the part of planning officers whereby their planning decisions are reflective of the views and opinions of bureaucratic administrators. Conversely, planning officers were described by conservation groups as being the voice of reason, acting in accordance with local policy and without the incorporation of their personal convictions. This perspective is in allegiance with the common self-perception held by planning officers themselves with regard to their role in local government.

The findings of the questionnaire survey, distributed to individuals who had been both refused and approved planning permission for the construction of single rural dwellings, indicated a high level of dissatisfaction with local planning officers with the inadequacy of the pre-planning service and the dismissive nature of planning officers following refusal cited as reasons for this opinion. These assertions again offer credence to the general contention expressed by each of the (other) stakeholder categories that planning officers are engaged in a managerialist mindset in that they appear unreceptive to local need and are working in accordance with their own agenda.

Interest Groups

Interest groups, by their very existence, are promoting a pluralist agenda in their attempts to stir policy to be in allegiance with their own position on the issue(s) of concern. The manner by which they attempt to achieve this in the instance of rural housing policy appears to vary in accordance with their position wither in favour or against one-off housing construction.

Generally, conservation groups operate using the formal channels for communication, for example, utilising their prescribed status at national and local level or placing formal objections to granted one-off housing applications which are felt to be at variance with local policy. Conversely, pro-off off housing groups have adopted traditional lobbying tactics aided by the significant public interest in rural housing matters with public opinion being overwhelmingly in favour of one-off housing construction.

The two actor groups within the central government category were both in agreement that interest groups play a significant role in guiding national policy formulation. There was a significant acknowledgement of pluralist influence at national level, specifically with regard to pro one-off housing interests and the 'excellent' campaign involved in lobbying for the loosening of restrictions on single rural dwelling construction.

The role of interest groups was described by local councillors as being to inform and provide knowledge on issues of local concern so that councillors have a well rounded perspective when specifying the details of local rural housing policy. However, as previously discussed, there is an overwhelming body of evidence which suggests that pro- one-off housing groups have been particularly successful in the operation of their pluralist agendas.

While conservation groups were described as being the most prominent, planning officers cited groups in favour of one-off housing construction as being the most influential given the ability to employ councillors to further their pluralist agenda.

As disclosed in the preceding text, the empirical findings of this research, with regard to perceptions of national and local rural housing policy and practice, suggest that contrasting interpretations of the state co-exist through the (perceived) actions of various stakeholders involved with the planning system. It is important to note that the degree to which these theoretical conceptions hold true must be

considered in concurrence with the fact that these constructions of state are based on perception and opinion of the manner in which the Irish planning system is being operated.

The relative roles of the managerialist and pluralist approaches in the promotion of sustainable development in rural areas are also dependent on the perspective of the various stakeholders whose viewpoints have been examined throughout the course of this thesis.

For example, national policy promotes concentrated rural settlement as being the most sustainable form of settlement in rural areas. This viewpoint is held by a number of stakeholders, notably the central government group, local planning officers and conservation interests, the perspective being that the consolidation of rural towns and villages provides a secure infrastructure to support the rural hinterland, which will provide economic, environmental and social benefits. If this perspective is taken as the starting point to examine the effects of pluralist agendas in operation within the planning system, it can be argued that pluralist operations at central government level have had a negative impact on the sustainable development of rural settlement patterns, such as the loosening of restrictions on one-off housing, not just in response to the pressure exerted by the pluralist agendas of pro- one-off housing groups and the general public, but also as an attempt to gain favour with the electorate. Similarly, at local level, the dual role of councillors as policy decision-makers and elected representatives can and has been described as having a negative impact on the sustainable development of rural areas. Councillors are considered to be formulating rural housing policy in accordance with the pluralist approach, given that they are mindful of the wishes of their electorate above considerations for sustainable development.

In addition, working within this perspective, it can also be suggested that the managerialist operations of planning officers regarding their overly strict and rigid interpretation of rural housing policy and their allegiance to a professional body of knowledge to the detriment of democratic process (a perception held by the

majority of stakeholders) may have actually deflected some of the negative impact of the loosening of one-off housing restrictions meaning that their operations are, in fact, beneficial to the promotion of the sustainable development of rural areas.

Conversely, the managerialist and pluralist approaches in operation within the planning system can also be evaluated using another commonly-held perspective which suggests that strict rural housing policies, both with regard to formulation and implementation, have had a detrimental effect on the sustainable development of rural areas particularly social sustainability. In this instance, the pluralist agendas (as described above) in operation within the planning system can be considered to have had a positive impact on the promotion of the sustainable development of rural areas whereas the managerialist agendas of local planning officers may be described as detrimental.

A similar line of argument, to that outlined above, can also be put forward when considering whether the strictness of laxness of planning control policy has had an influence on sustainable settlement development.

Future Research

Given the findings of this study, there are a number of suggestions for future research projects which would add weight to the recently increasing volume of research relating to the sustainable development of rural areas. Of particular interest, given the introduction of the *Planning and Development (Amendment) Act, 2010*, would be a similar research project, based on the perceptions and experiences of stakeholders in the planning system, to be undertaken in the future. This would allow for an assessment of whether the prescriptions of the Amendment Act have made a difference with regard to the successful operation of the *National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020.*

The Irish experience in rural settlement planning is somewhat unique given the more commonplace concentrated rural settlement forms found in Europe (such as

the hamlet, waldhufendorf and clachan) as opposed to the tradition of dispersed rural housing which is characteristic of the Irish rural landscape. In addition, the longstanding ties Irish people have to land and property – Ireland has one of the highest owner occupier rates in Europe – has contributed to the huge public resistance associated with any perceived interference with regard to property right (e.g., the right to build in one's land). Furthermore, in many jurisdictions where dispersed settlement is a feature of the rural landscape, its growth and form are strictly monitored and controlled through planning regulation (e.g., the prairie settlement which is based on the quarter-section in North America) and/or the population pressures are far less than the current situation in many areas of rural Ireland (e.g., Locorotondo in the Province of Bari in southern Italy). Given this situation, it may prove difficult for broader lessons to be learned from the Irish experience. However, this perspective-based account of the manner of operation of the Irish planning system with regard to the promotion of the sustainable development of rural settlement patterns may prove to be a useful employment, as a theoretical and contextual reference, in future perspective-based studies relating to the workings of national and local infrastructural planning systems.

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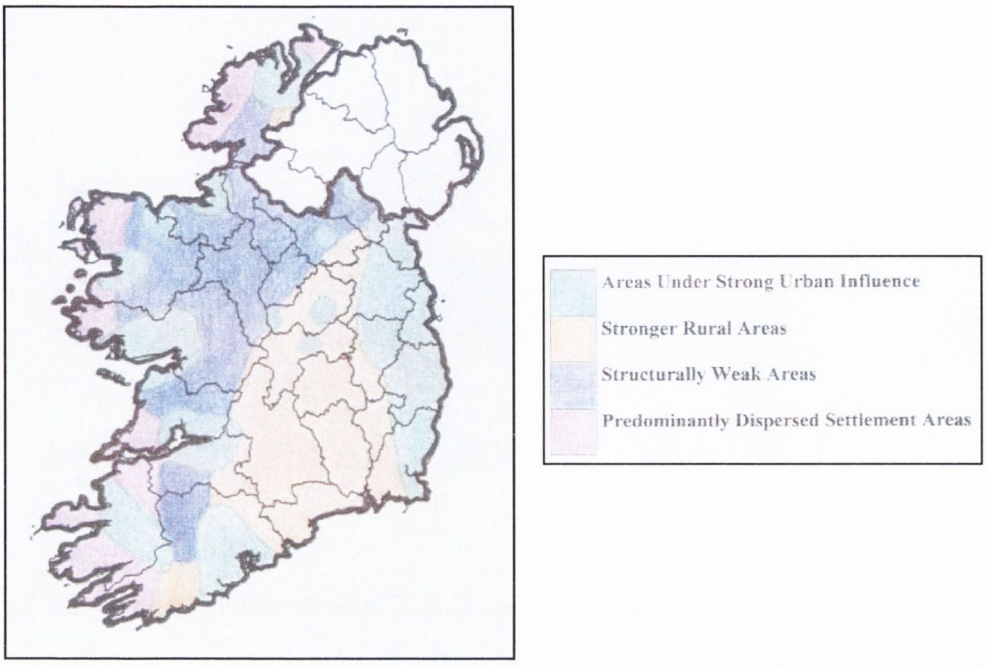
Appendix 1: Choosing Case-Study Authorities – Stage 1

Analysis based on National Spatial Strategy rural typologies map (not to scale)



Counties selected: Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon, Longford, Cavan, Monaghan, Mayo, Galway, Clare and Kerry.

Appendix 2: Examples of In-depth Rural Typology Analysis

The following images are examples of the rural area typology, constructed by Walsh *et al.* (2007), being applied to sample of the counties selected during Stage 1 of choosing the case-study authorities for the project (Chapter 3, Section 3.2.2).

The rural area types laid out in this typology loosely correspond with the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) rural area types:

NSS rural area typology	**Walsh et al. (2007) rural area typology**
Predominantly dispersed settlement areas	Traditional rural areas
Structurally weak areas	Diversifying areas
Areas under strong urban influence/Stronger rural areas	Areas under strong urban influence
Urban areas	Urban areas

Image 1. Rural Area Type Identification Key (Walsh *et al.* 2007)

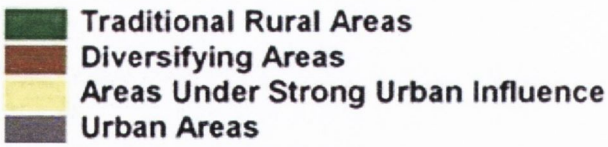


Image 2. Co. Cavan

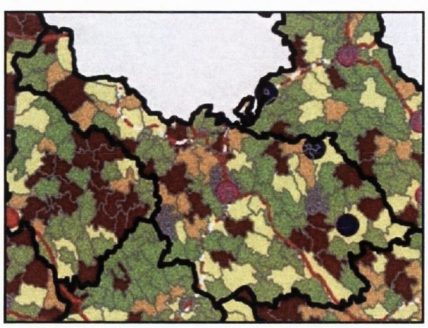
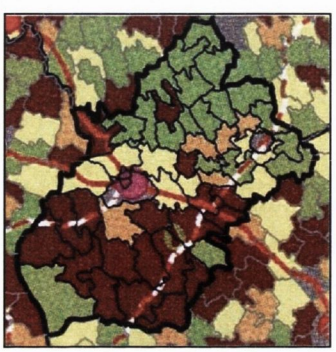


Image 3. Co. Longford

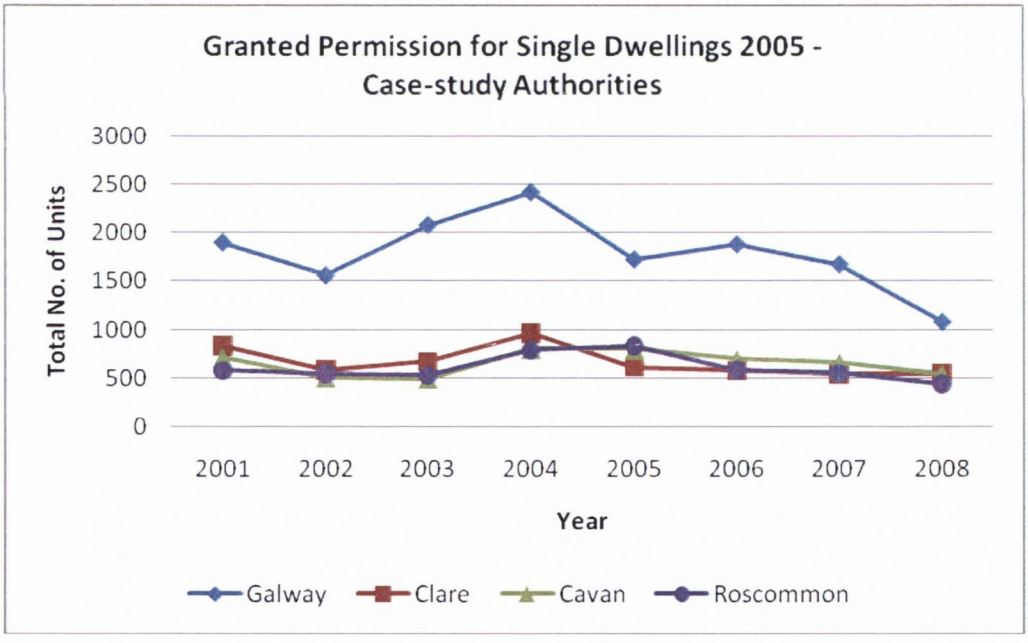


Appendix 3. Case-Study Authorities: Analysing Key Trends in 2005

Co. Clare – One-off Housing: analysis of trends

Clare County Council has a high approval rate for one-off housing (36.8%) when considered as a proportion of all housing for which permission was granted in 2005. However, the total number of single dwelling applications granted, 608, is quite low when considering the size, in terms of acreage and the population, of the county. In terms of the total unit amount of single dwellings for which planning permission was granted in 2005, both Cavan and Roscommon have higher final figures of 803 and 836 respectively, despite their significantly lower population size. The number of granted permissions for single dwellings, spanning the time period 2001-2008, were examined to see if the low approval numbers for Co. Clare were unique to 2005. The findings are illustrated in the graph below.

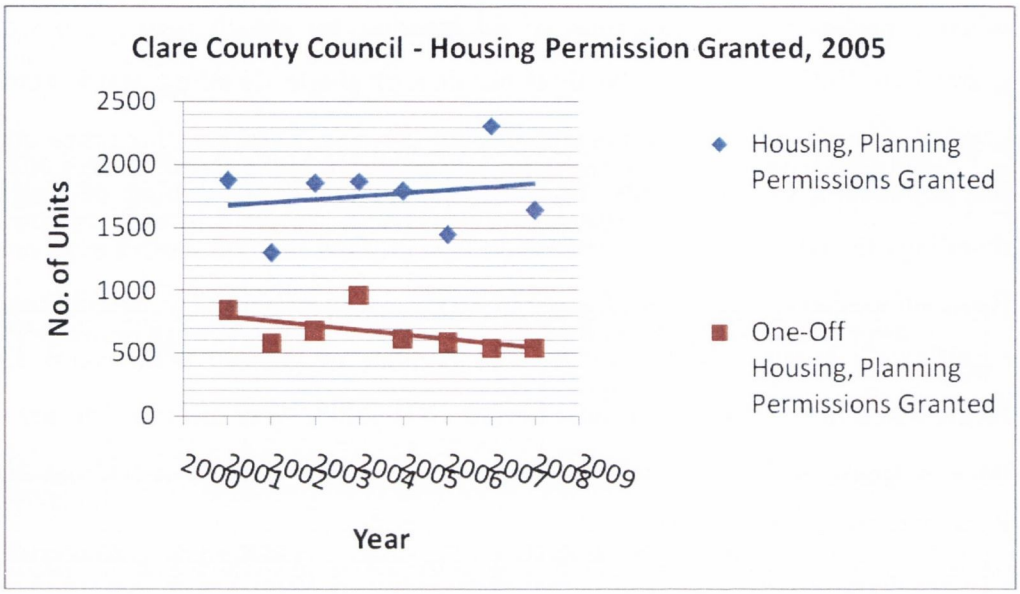
Figure 1



As can be seen above, the total number of planning permissions granted for single dwellings in Co. Clare in 2005 is relatively consistent across the timeframe and at a par, in terms of units granted, with Co. Roscommon and Co. Cavan. Turning to the approval rating for one-off housing as a proportion of

total housing applications granted, the following simple linear graph indicates an overall reduction in the relative approval rating for single dwellings over the timeframe spanning 2001-2008.

Figure 2



Co. Clare's planning authority may be perceived as a strict regime with regard to approving both overall housing permissions and single dwelling permissions, given the size and population of the county and, considering the above data; low planning approval figures, both in terms of total units for housing and for one-off dwellings, and an overall reduction in single dwelling planning approvals as a proportion of total planning approvals over the timeframe 2001-2008. In addition, the refusal rate for one-off housing applications as a percentage of total single dwelling applications, for the case-study year 2005, is also high at 25.23%[22].

[22] The planning refusal rates, for the four case-study authorities, were compiled following an examination of planning applications for the year 2005. The total sample comprised of refused and granted applications for Full Planning Permission for a one-off house in 2005. The refusal rate is a proportion of the total sample.

Co. Galway – One-off Housing: Planning approval Analysis

Galway County Council has a high rate of one-off housing application grants in terms of total approved planning applications for housing (50.3%).This high figure may be somewhat explained by the fact that Galway city, the county's primary urban centre, has a separate planning authority and planning applications for housing in this administrative area are not included in the above figure. Therefore, the number of one-off housing applications in Co. Galway may appear inflated relative to the figures for the other three case-study authorities, given the omission of this large urban centre.

However, in criticism of the above point, it must be noted that the city of Galway extends beyond its administrative limits with its environs stretching into the functional area of Galway County Council. Therefore, given these circumstances, it should be expected that the approval rate for multi-development housing applications is also high relative to the other case-study authorities, as an urban centre the scale of Galway city has considerably affects the housing type and settlement structure of its hinterland.

In an attempt to provide further comparatives between the four case-study authorities, figures relating to granted planning applications for housing in Co. Galway, inclusive of its primary urban centre, Galway city, have been correlated. In terms of permissions granted for one-off housing, as a percentage of total housing permissions granted in 2005, the percentage of granted applications for one-off housing falls from 50.3% to 45.9%. However, this new data is speculative and cannot be used as an indication of a strict/lenient planning regime as more than one planning authority is involved.

The 2005 figures for Galway County Council show it has a high rate of planning approval for single dwellings when viewed as a proportion of total granted permissions for housing. This is connected to both the size (acreage 2nd nationally, after Cork) and population of the county. An analysis of trends in housing planning approval from 2001-2008 show this to be a consistent statistic, despite a significant drop in total permissions granted in 2008 (see Figure 3 below). However, focusing specifically on planning applications for

single dwellings in 2005, Co. Galway has the highest refusal rate of all case-study authorities, standing at 26.12%.

Figure 3

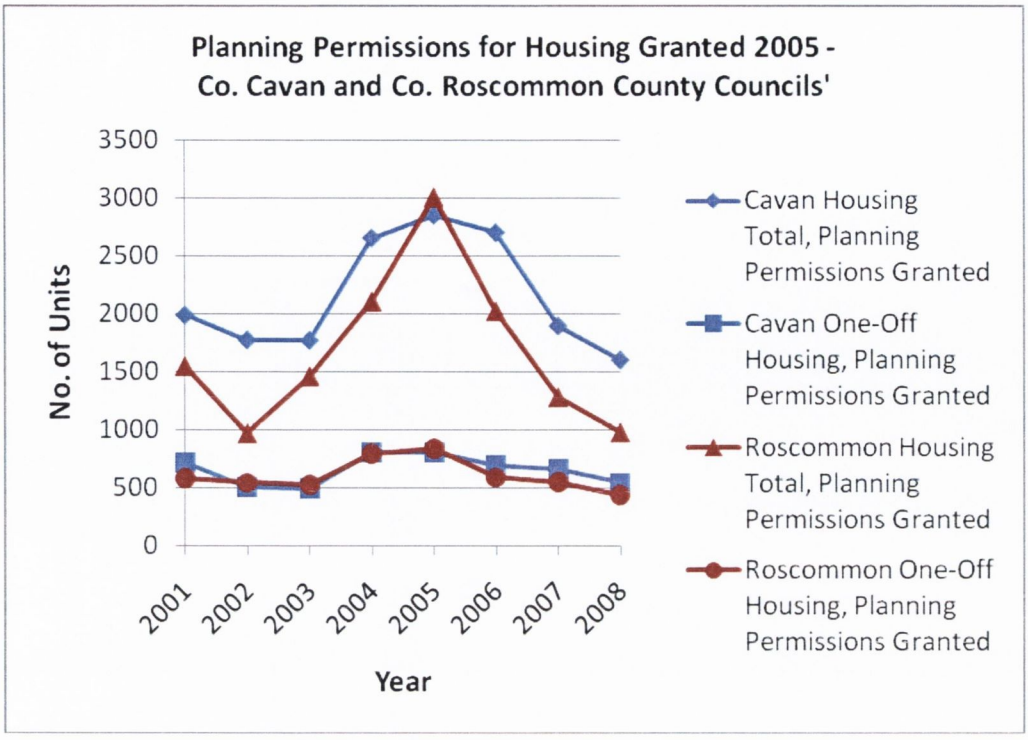
Considering the above information collectively, it can be surmised that there is a high demand for one-off housing within Galway County Council's administrative area. This accounts for the high approval rate for one-off housing in terms total permissions granted for housing in 2005. However, the County Development Plan has been shown to be quite strict in terms of the conditions relating to eligibility when applying for planning permission for a single rural dwelling and this is reflected in the high refusal rate for one-off housing applications in the case-study year, 2005.

Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon – One-off Housing: Planning approval Analysis

At 28.2% and 27.8% respectively, the planning approval statistics of Cavan and Roscommon fall towards the lower end of local authorities analysed[23], with regard to permissions granted for single dwellings as a percentage of overall housing permissions granted in 2005. Trends in housing applications granted for the timeframe 2001-2008 were examined and are graphed below.

[23] Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon, Longford, Cavan, Monaghan, Mayo, Galway, Clare, Kerry. See Table X, Chapter 3. Section X

Figure 4



There is a significant growth in total planning permissions granted for housing during the given timeframe, peaking for both Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon in 2005, the case-study year, before subsiding again. Therefore, it is important to note that the approval rating for one-off housing applications as a proportion of total housing applications would have been higher for both local authorities had a different case-study year be chosen. This suggests a general leniency, in the planning authorities of Co. Cavan and Co. Roscommon, for granting permission for one-off housing. As with Co. Galway, the high level of one-off housing approval may also be connected to the 'rurality' of the counties, particularly in the case of Co. Roscommon which does not have the same urban housing pressures as Co. Cavan. Indeed, the significance of 'urban pressure' may be reflected in the fact that Co. Cavan has a refusal rate of 25.42%, similar to those seen in Co. Clare and Co. Galway, while the refusal rate for single dwellings as a proportion of total one-off housing applications in Co. Roscommon is significantly lower at 21.28%.

Appendix 4. Master copy of interview questions

A	Central Government Elected Representatives/ Central Government Officials
B	Local Authority Elected Representatives
C	Local Government Planning Officials
D	Relevant 3rd Parties

QUESTIONS	A	B	C	D
Position on Rural Housing				
What is your opinion on one-off housing and rural settlement patterns more generally? **PROMPT:** Why do you take this position?	X	X	X	X
Role of Interest Groups				
What were the major concerns that provoked your organisation to become involved in the national debate relating to rural housing? **PROMPT:** E.g. inequity current restrictions on development / inadequacy of current restrictions on development.				X
What steps/action have you taken to engender discussion and to get your views across to the general public? How successful do you feel you have been?				X X
How significant are interest groups, both for and against one-off housing, in terms of their influencing national policy relating to rural housing. **PROMPT:** for example, prior to the publication of the rural housing guidelines?	X	X	X	
What steps have you taken to put you in a position to influence policy decision makers at a national level? Do you feel you have been successful?				X X

(To your knowledge) How significant is the presence of interest groups at local level? **PROMPT:** In terms of, for example, lobbying councillors/election candidates, engendering public discussion, etc?	X	X	X	
(From your experience) Do you feel that interest groups can influence decisions on rural housing policy and settlement strategies at local level? How?	X	X	X	X
Is it still important to maintain a public profile on the issue of rural housing? Where do you feel your efforts are best focused? **PROMPT:** Government level, local authority level, community level…				X X
Local Elections				
To what extent do you feel the rural housing debate manifested itself during the 2004 local elections campaign? **PROMPT:** Issue on the doorsteps, lobbying by interest groups	X	X	X	X
Did you feel it necessary to make public your position on rural housing given the intensity of the debate at the time? Why do you feel other councillors/candidates felt the need to do so?		X X		
Does your own position on rural housing follow the party line?		X		
Do you feel your position (or the position of your party) on rural housing affected your success at the local elections? **PROMPT:** Loss/gain of votes To what extent do you feel that the stance of an individual candidate on the one-off housing issue may have affected their election success? **PROMPT:** Given the intensity of the debate at the time Do you feel the success of other candidates in the local elections was affected by their stance on rural housing?	X	X X	X	X

Did your organisation become involved in the local elections? **PROMPT:** Lobbying candidates, engaging with the electorate, putting forward candidates, etc.				X
Position and Understanding of Sustainable Development				
With rural settlement in mind, how would you define sustainable development?	X	X	X	X
Sustainable development is often described as comprising three central attributes: the environmental, social and economic aspects. (I'd like to) Discuss the importance of these three dimensions with regard to rural housing patterns, e.g. one-off housing, clustered village-type settlements.				
Firstly, your opinion on the importance of the environmental side of sustainable development when considering rural housing patterns **PROMPT:** E.g. impact on landscape, effect of individual septic tanks	X	X	X	X
Secondly, your opinion on the significance of the social side of sustainable development in terms of rural housing patterns **PROMPT:** For example, Community structure and viability, etc.	X	X	X	X
Thirdly, your opinion on the importance of the economic side of sustainable development in terms of rural housing patterns **PROMPT:** For example, the practicality of rural settlement types in terms of developing or maintaining infrastructure, services etc.	X	X	X	X
Assessment of National Policy relating to Rural Settlement				
(I'd like to discuss) the rural housing component of the National Spatial Strategy from its conception to final structure.				
Who is involved in formulating the rural settlement strategy component? **PROMPT:** E.g. government officials, outside consultants, researchers, elected representatives	X X			

By what basis was the current strategy chosen as being the most suitable for achieving the sustainability of rural housing patterns? **PROMPT:** E.g. compliance with EU policy, previous research Following the research and consultation phase, who is responsible for drawing up and finalising the rural settlement strategy?	X			
(In your opinion) What have been the major successes of the National Spatial Strategy (and subsequent policy) in terms of the promotion of sustainable rural settlement patterns? Where is there scope for improvement?	X X	X X	X X	X X
What has been the outcome of (having) a sustainable development ethos in rural housing policy? **PROMPT:** Has this emphasis had positive or negative consequences?	X	X	X	X
The idea of sustainable development was not (specifically) defined in the Planning and Development Act, 2000. Has this restricted the promotion of sustainable rural settlement strategies?	X	X	X	X
One criticism of the NSS is that urban centres are the driving forces of regional development. This may marginalise rural areas. What is your opinion of this criticism?	X	X	X	X
What is your opinion of the Rural Housing Guidelines for Planning Authorities? **PROMPT:** aptness, impact	X	X	X	X

Assessment of Local Policy relating to Rural Settlement – Formulation				
Turning to the formulation of local policy on rural settlement: What rural settlement factors are taken into account when putting together the County Development Plan? What groups are involved, (e.g. Strategic Policy Committees, councillors, researchers, planners)		X X	X X	
How difficult is it, to ensure local needs are met while complying with national policy when formulating a rural settlement strategy? **PROMPT:** Given the differences between local authorities in terms of the social, environmental and economic circumstances.	X	X	X	X
To what extent do the personal opinions of local councillors influence the content of the rural settlement strategy (especially with regard to one-off housing)?	X	X	X	X
Assessment of Local Policy relating to the promotion of Sustainable Rural Settlement – Operations and Impact				
How is local need for one-off housing determined in _____ County Council? What is your opinion of the local need clause as a means of controlling one-off housing construction?	 X	X X	X X	 X
An issue that has been raised is that the occupancy clause is not being enforced. **PROMPT:** (Houses are sold before the occupancy timeframe is completed. This is seen as a back door for non-locals who can buy but not build) Have you seen this as a problem? How is fulfilment of the occupancy clause monitored by the council?	 X	 X X	 X X	 X

Restrictions on single dwellings to locals in areas of high dispersal may affect community viability. **PROMPT:** numbers for schools, sports clubs, etc. What are your opinions on this?	X	X	X	X
How are possible environmental impacts of one-off housing construction monitored? **PROMPT:** testing the suitability of land for septic tanks and percolation areas		X	X	
(To your knowledge) What other housing options are available to people as an alternative to building one-off housing? **PROMPT:** Social and Affordable, rental schemes, etc.	X	X	X	X
How is the building process for individual dwellings monitored to ensure that the terms of the permission have been adhered to?		X	X	
The promotion of village-type settlements has (in some cases) encouraged large housing developments at the edge of towns and villages, causing problems due to inadequate infrastructure. What are you opinions regarding the appropriateness of this form of development?	X	X	X	X
What improvements do you feel could be made to the rural settlement strategy component of the County Development Plan?	X	X	X	X
Implementing Local Policy – The Role of Planners				
How much regard do you feel is being paid to the County Development Plan by planners when considering planning applications for one-off dwellings? How often is reference made to the directions of the Development Plan when making individual planning decisions on applications for single dwellings?	X	X 	 X	X

How much regard is being be paid to Local Area Plans when considering planning applications for one-off dwellings (given their non-statutory nature)? How often are Local Area Plans referred to when making decisions relating to applications for one-off dwellings (In your experience)?	X	X	 X	X
To what extent do you feel a planner's own position on one-off housing comes into play when making planning decisions regarding one-off housing applications **PROMPT:** What one planner construes as sustainable development may be viewed in a different light by another planner? How important is your own personal position on one-off housing when making planning decisions regarding one-off housing applications	X	X	 X	X
Have you seen personal opinion on one-off housing to be of importance in planning decisions made by other planners?			X	
An Bord Pleanála				
What is your opinion on the necessity of An Bord Pleanála?	X	X	X	X

Appendix 5. Survey for Applicants Refused Planning Permission for a Single Rural Dwelling

The Planning System and Detached Houses in Rural Areas – Refused Applications, 2005
Questionnaire Survey

Unless otherwise directed, please answer the questions in numerical order. Please use additional sheets if necessary.

Section A: Previous Applications (pre-2005)

Question 1.
Have there been any previous planning applications for a detached house on your site prior to your 2005 application?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know

If **Yes**, please answer questions **1a and 1b**

Question 1a.
What type of planning permission(s) was sought in the pre-2005 application?

☐ Full permission ☐ Outline permission

☐ Permission consequent on Grant of Outline Permission ☐ Don't know

Question 1b.
Was the pre-2005 planning permission?

☐ Granted (incl. With conditions) ☐ Refused

☐ Withdrawn ☐ Deemed Invalid

☐ Don't know

Section B: 2005 Application

Question 2.
Please state your legal interest in the site for which planning permission for a detached house was applied in 2005:

☐ Owner ☐ Occupier (please specify relationship to owner) _____

☐ Other (please specify) _____

Question 3.

How did you acquire the site on which you applied for permission to build the house?

☐ Family land

☐ Acquired from third party – Previously unknown to you

☐ Acquired from known third party – known to you
(State relationship to you, e.g., neighbour, friend)

_____

Question 4.

Why did you apply for permission to construct a detached house in a rural area rather than choosing another housing option? (If you wish to select more than one option, please indicate order of importance: 1, 2, 3, etc.)

☐ Reduced cost compared to buying a built house in a rural area

☐ Reduced cost compared to buying a house in an urban area

☐ Brought up in a detached rural house

☐ Preference of detached house as opposed to semi-detached, terraced house

☐ Better environment to raise children (as opposed to living in an urban area)

☐ Visual Landscape/scenery

☐ Health reasons

☐ Better quality of life (as opposed to living in an urban area)

☐ Returning Emigrant

☐ Second/Holiday Home

☐ Other (Please Specify)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Question 5.

Please choose from the following list the factor(s) which was of primary importance in selecting your site (If you wish to select more than one, please indicate order of importance: 1, 2, 3, etc.)

- ☐ Family land
- ☐ Affordable
- ☐ Family nearby (not family land)
- ☐ Visual Landscape/scenery
- ☐ Close to urban centre (village/town/city)
- ☐ Close to work
- ☐ Close to national/regional road network
- ☐ Investment purposes
- ☐ Other (please specify)

_____

_____

_____

_____

Question 6.

Please state the proposed occupancy of the house for which planning permission was sought:

- ☐ Your permanent residence
- ☐ For letting
- ☐ For sale
- ☐ Other (Please specify)

_____

_____

_____

_____

Question 7.

Are you local to the area in which you applied for permission to construct a detached house? (Born in area or living in areas for 10 years prior to planning application for dwelling)

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Question 8.
What is the proximity in kilometres (approx.) of your current home to site for which planning permission was applied?

☐ 0-10 km. ☐ 10-20 km. ☐ 20-30 km.

☐ 30-50km. ☐ 50+ km.

Question 9.
What is the proximity in kilometres (approx.) of your workplace to site for which planning permission was applied?

☐ (Will) work from home ☐ 0-10 km. ☐ 10-20km.

☐ 20-30 km. ☐ 30-50km. ☐ 50+ km.

Question 10.
Is your present accommodation?

☐ Owned by you ☐ Rented by you

☐ Parental home

☐ Other (specify) _____

_____

_____

Question 11.
Is your present accommodation a detached rural house?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Question 12.
Is/Was your parental home a detached rural house?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Question 13.
Given a choice, all other considerations aside, would you prefer to live in a rural area (detached house) or an urban centre (village, town, city)?

☐ Rural Area ☐ Urban centre

Question 14.
Did you avail of the pre-planning service prior to submitting your planning application?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If **Yes**, continue to **question 15**
If **No**, skip to **question 16**

Question 15.
Did you find this service useful?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Detail: _____

Skip to **question 17**

Question 16.
Why did you not avail of this service?

☐ Didn't know it existed ☐ Did not feel it would be useful

☐ Other (specify) _____

Question 17.
Did you have a person/agent (e.g. architect/private-sector planner) acting on your behalf in the submission of your planning application form?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If **Yes**, please answer **questions 17a and 17b**

Question 17a.
Please indicate the occupation/profession of your representative(s):

_____

Question 17b.
Why did you choose to be represented by a third party in your planning application?

_____

Question 18.
What was the waiting time (approx.) for a panel member to complete your site suitability assessment and wastewater treatment tests?

☐ < 1 week ☐ 1-2 weeks ☐ 2-4 weeks

☐ 4-6 weeks ☐ > 6 weeks

Question 19.
Did you include any representations from public representatives with your planning application form?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If **Yes**, please answer questions **19a and 19b**

Question 19a.
Why did you feel this was necessary?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Question 19b.
Please list occupation/profession of person(s) who made representations on your behalf (e.g., Councillor, T.D., Member of Clergy, etc.).

_____

_____

_____

Question 20.
Do you feel the area in which you applied for permission for a single dwelling will benefit from the Development Contribution Scheme?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know

Question 21.

To your knowledge, in the past five years, have there been changes in public infrastructure and facilities in the area in which you applied for permission for a detached rural house?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know

If **Yes**, please answer **question 21a**

Question 21a.

Please indicate, by category, where these changes have occurred:

Category	Tick as appropriate	Brief description
Water		
Sewerage		
Amenities/services		
Community and Recreation		
Road Infrastructure		
Other		

Question 22.

Please select one of the following options to describe how you would rate the processes involved in applying for planning permission for a detached rural house.

☐ Very straightforward ☐ Quite straightforward ☐ Indifferent/don't know

☐ Quite difficult ☐ Very difficult

☐

Question 22a.

Why did you choose this rating?

Question 23.
In light of the refused application, did you seek representation or advice from a public or private representative? E.g. Local councillor, T.D., solicitor, etc.

☐ Yes ☐ No

If **Yes**, continue to **question 24**
If **No**, skip to **question 25**

Question 24.
Please specify nature of advice/representation:

_____
_____
_____
_____

Question 25.
In light of the refused application, did you contact the planning office for advice/information?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If **Yes**, continue to **question 26**
If **No**, skip to **question 27**

Question 26.
Did you find the information provided helpful?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Detail: _____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Question 27.

What are your plans for the future with regards to acquiring/building a house?

- ☐ Submit a new application for the same site
- ☐ Submit an application for a new site
- ☐ Buy an existing house in a rural area
- ☐ Buy an existing house in an urban area
- ☐ Other (Detail:)

_____

_____

_____

Question 27a.

Please state if you have already engaged in any of these processes:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Question 28.

If you intend to, or have already, submitted a new application for a detached rural house – will/have you done anything differently this time with regards to your approach to the planning application process?

E.g. Availing of pre-planning service, employ third-party representation, other, etc.

Please specify particulars:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Question 29.

Please describe the personal consequences of having been refused permission for a detached rural house.

For example: on financial circumstances; current accommodation; impact on your quality of life, etc.

Question 30.

Please select your age category:

☐ 18-24 ☐ 25-29 ☐ 30-39 ☐ 40-49

☐ 50-59 ☐ 60-64 ☐ 65+

Question 31.

Given your experience with the planning system (relevant to your single-dwelling planning application, 2005), are there any important discussion points which you feel have not been addressed in this survey?

Appendix 6. Survey for Applicants Approved Planning Permission for a Single Rural Dwelling

The Planning System and Detached Houses in Rural Areas – Approved Applications, 2005 Questionnaire Survey

Unless otherwise directed, please answer the questions in numerical order. Please use additional sheets if necessary.

Section A: Previous Applications (pre-2005)

Question 1.
Have there been any previous planning applications for a detached house on your site prior to your 2005 application?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know

If **Yes**, please answer **questions 1a and 1b**

Question 1a.
What type of planning permission(s) was sought in the pre-2005 application?

☐ Full permission ☐ Outline permission

☐ Permission consequent on Grant of Outline Permission ☐ Don't know

Question 1b.
Was the pre-2005 planning permission?

☐ Granted (incl. With conditions) ☐ Refused

☐ Withdrawn ☐ Deemed Invalid

☐ Don't know

Section B: 2005 Application

Question 2.
Please state your legal interest in the site for which planning permission for a detached house was applied in 2005:

☐ Owner ☐ Occupier (please specify relationship to owner) _____

☐ Other (please specify) _____

Question 3.

How did you acquire the site on which you have been granted permission to build the house?

☐ Family land

☐ Acquired from third party – Previously unknown to you

☐ Acquired from known third party – known to you
(State relationship to you, e.g., neighbour, friend)

_____

Question 4.

Why did you apply for permission to construct a detached house in a rural area rather than choosing another housing option? (If you wish to select more than one option, please indicate order of importance: 1, 2, 3, etc.)

☐ Reduced cost compared to buying a built house in a rural area

☐ Reduced cost compared to buying a house in an urban area

☐ Brought up in a detached rural house

☐ Preference of detached house as opposed to semi-detached, terraced house

☐ Better environment to raise children (as opposed to living in an urban area)

☐ Visual Landscape/scenery

☐ Health reasons

☐ Better quality of life (as opposed to living in an urban area)

☐ Returning Emigrant

☐ Second/Holiday Home

☐ Other (Please Specify)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Question 5.

Please choose from the following list the factor(s) which was of primary importance in selecting your site (If you wish to select more than one, please indicate order of importance: 1, 2, 3, etc.)

- ☐ Family land
- ☐ Affordable
- ☐ Family nearby (not family land)
- ☐ Visual Landscape/scenery
- ☐ Close to urban centre (village/town/city)
- ☐ Close to work
- ☐ Close to national/regional road network
- ☐ Investment purposes
- ☐ Other (please specify)

_____

_____

_____

_____

Question 6.

Please state the proposed occupancy of the house for which planning permission was sought:

- ☐ Your permanent residence
- ☐ For letting
- ☐ For sale
- ☐ Other (Please specify)

_____

_____

_____

_____

Question 7.

Are you local to the area in which you applied for permission to construct a detached house? (Born in area or living in areas for 10 years prior to planning application for dwelling)

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Question 8.
What is the distance in kilometres (approx.) of your previous home to site for which planning permission was granted?

☐ 0-10 km. ☐ 10-20 km. ☐ 20-30 km.

☐ 30-50km. ☐ 50+ km.

Question 9.
What is the distance in kilometres (approx.) of your workplace to the site for which planning permission was granted?

☐ (Will) work from home ☐ 0-10 km. ☐ 10-20km.

☐ 20-30 km. ☐ 30-50km. ☐ 50+ km.

Question 10.
Was your previous (or current, if not living in new dwelling) accommodation?

☐ Owned by you ☐ Rented by you

☐ Parental home

☐ Other (specify) _____

_____

_____

Question 11.
Is your previous accommodation (or current, if not living in new house) a detached rural house? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Question 12.
Is/Was your parental home a detached rural house?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Question 13.
Given a choice, all other considerations aside, would you prefer to live in a rural area (detached house) or an urban centre (village, town, city)?

☐ Rural Area ☐ Urban centre

Question 14.
Did you avail of the pre-planning service prior to submitting your planning application?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If **Yes**, continue to **question 15**
If **No**, skip to **question 16**

Question 15.
Did you find this service useful?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Detail: _____

_____

_____

_____

Skip to **question 17**

Question 16.
Why did you not avail of this service?

☐ Didn't know it existed ☐ Did not feel it would be useful

☐ Other (specify) _____

_____

_____

Question 17.
Did you have a person/agent (e.g. architect/private-sector planner) acting on your behalf in the submission of your planning application form?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If **Yes**, please answer questions **17a and 17b**

Question 17a.
Please indicate the occupation/profession of your representative(s):

_____

Question 17b.
Why did you choose to be represented by a third party in your planning application?

_____

_____

_____

Question 18.
What was the waiting time (approx.) for a panel member to complete your site suitability assessment and wastewater treatment tests?

☐ < 1 week ☐ 1-2 weeks ☐ 2-4 weeks

☐ 4-6 weeks ☐ > 6 weeks

Question 19.
Did you include any representations from public representatives with your planning application form?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If **Yes**, please answer **questions 19a and 19b**

Question 19a.
Why did you feel this was necessary?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Question 19b.
Please list occupation/profession of person(s) who made representations on your behalf (e.g., Councillor, T.D., Member of Clergy, etc.).

_____

_____

_____

Question 20.
Do you feel the area in which you applied for permission for a single dwelling will benefit from the Development Contribution Scheme?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know

Question 21.

To your knowledge, in the past five years, have there been changes in public infrastructure and facilities in the area in which you applied for permission for a detached rural house?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know

If **Yes**, please answer **question 21a**

Question 21a.

Please indicate, by category, where these changes have occurred:

Category	Tick as appropriate	Brief description
Water		
Sewerage		
Amenities/services		
Community and Recreation		
Road Infrastructure		
Other		

Question 22.

Please select one of the following options to describe how you would rate the processes involved in applying for planning permission for a detached rural house.

☐ Very straightforward ☐ Quite straightforward ☐ Indifferent/don't know

☐ Quite difficult ☐ Very difficult

Question 22a.

Why did you choose this rating?

Question 23.
Did you appeal any of the conditions placed on planning approval to An Bord Pleanála?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If **Yes**, continue to **question 24**
If **No**, skip to **question 25**

Question 24.
Was the appeal to An Bord Pleanála successful?

☐ Yes ☐ No

☐ Partly successful (Incl. details below)

_____
_____
_____
_____

Question 25.
Has the construction stage of the house commenced/completed?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If **Yes**, skip to **question 27**
If **No**, continue to **question 26**

Question 26.
Do you intend to proceed with the construction of the house?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If **Yes**, skip to **question 28**
If **No**, please answer **question 26a**

Question 26a.
Why have you made this decision?

_____
_____
_____
_____

Skip to **question 29**

Question 27.
Are you currently living in the house?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Question 28.

Do you intend to:

☐ Make the house your permanent residence ☐ Rent

☐ Other (Please specify) ☐ Sell

_____

Question 29.

Please select your age category:

☐ 18-24 ☐ 25-29 ☐ 30-39 ☐ 40-49

☐ 50-59 ☐ 60-64 ☐ 65+

Question 30.

Given your experience with the planning system (relevant to your single-dwelling planning application, 2005), are there any important discussion points which you feel have not been addressed in this survey?

Appendix 7. Bar Graph Illustrations of Responses to Questionnaire Survey (Chapter 8)

Table A7.1 Existence of Pre-2005 Application

	Yes	No	Don't Know	Sample Size
Roscommon	16	13	9	38
Cavan	8	21	9	38
Galway	11	19	6	36
Clare Refused	17	24	4	45
Clare Approved	4	35	1	40

Figure A7.1

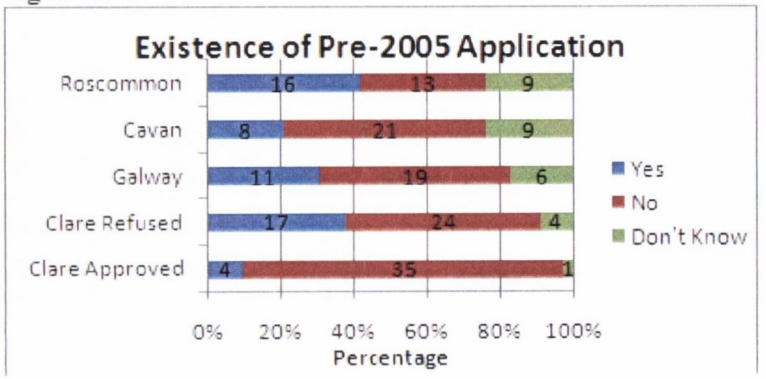


Table A7.2 Pre-2005 Planning Application Type

	Full Permission	Outline Permission	Permission Consequent	Unknown
Roscommon	12	3	1	0
Cavan	6	1	0	1
Galway	8	3	0	0
Clare Refused	11	6	0	0
Clare Approved	0	0	4	0

Figure A7.2

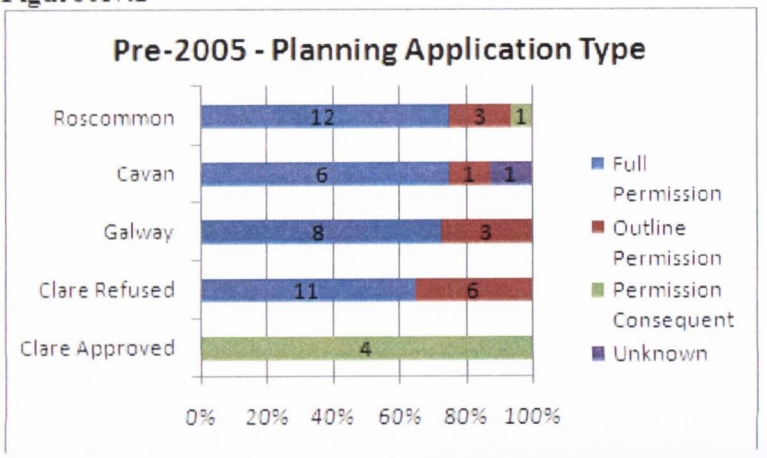


Table A7.3 Outcome of Pre-2005 Application

	Granted	Refused	Withdrawn
Roscommon	5	10	1
Cavan	1	7	0
Galway	3	7	1
Clare Refused	7	10	0
Clare Approved	4	0	0

Figure A7.3

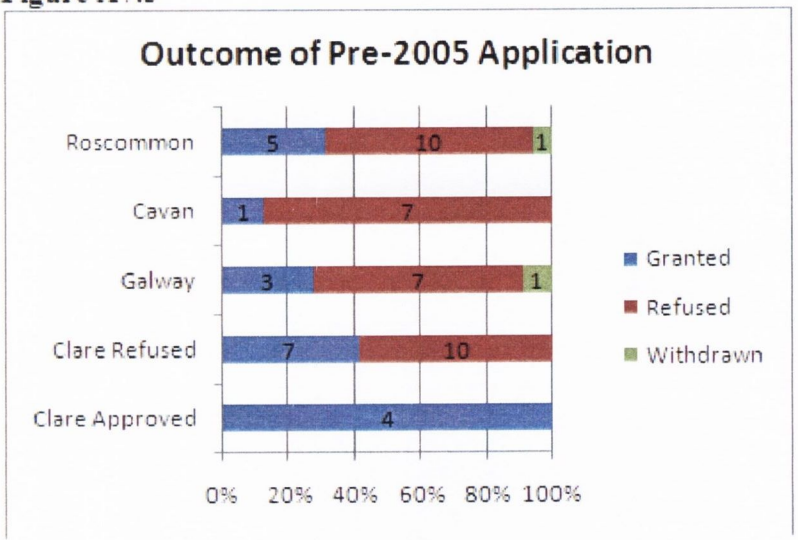


Figure A7.4.[24]

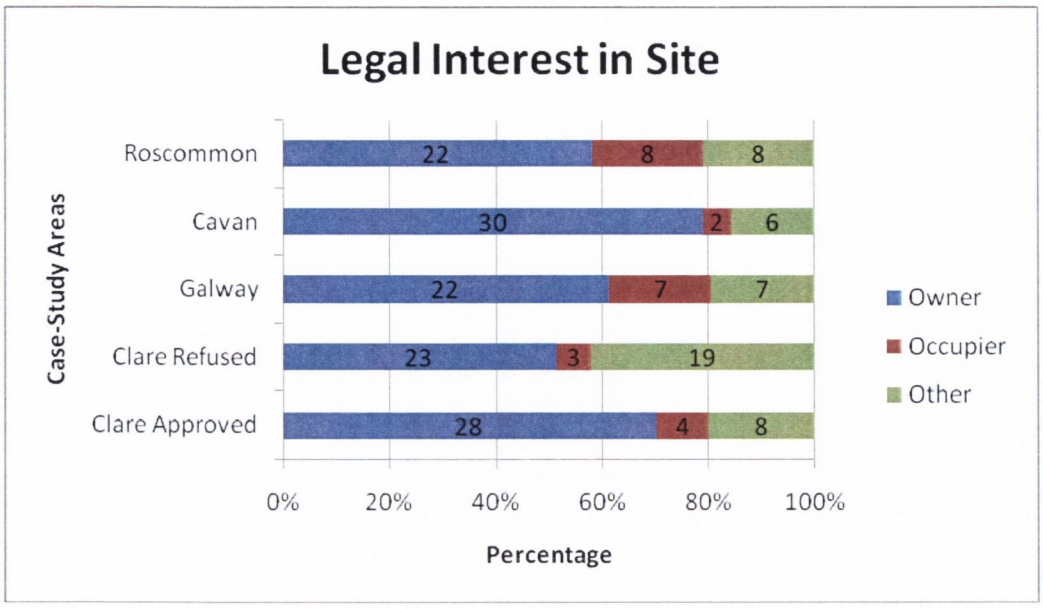
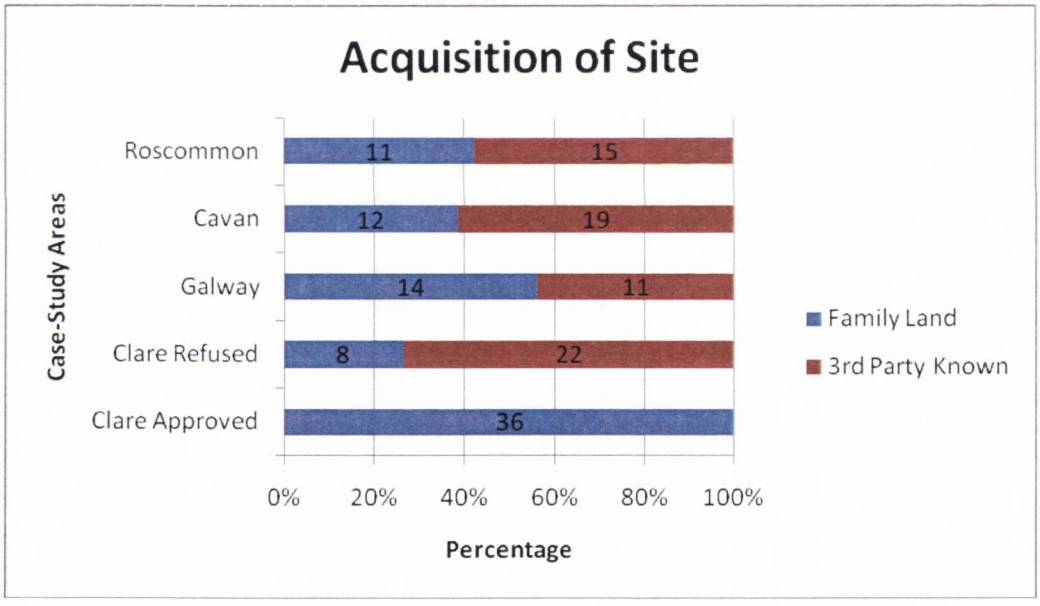


Figure A7.5.



[24] The numbers on the bars of each chart refer to the number of respondents who chose a particular answer. The percentage is represented by the coloured bars.

Figure A7.6

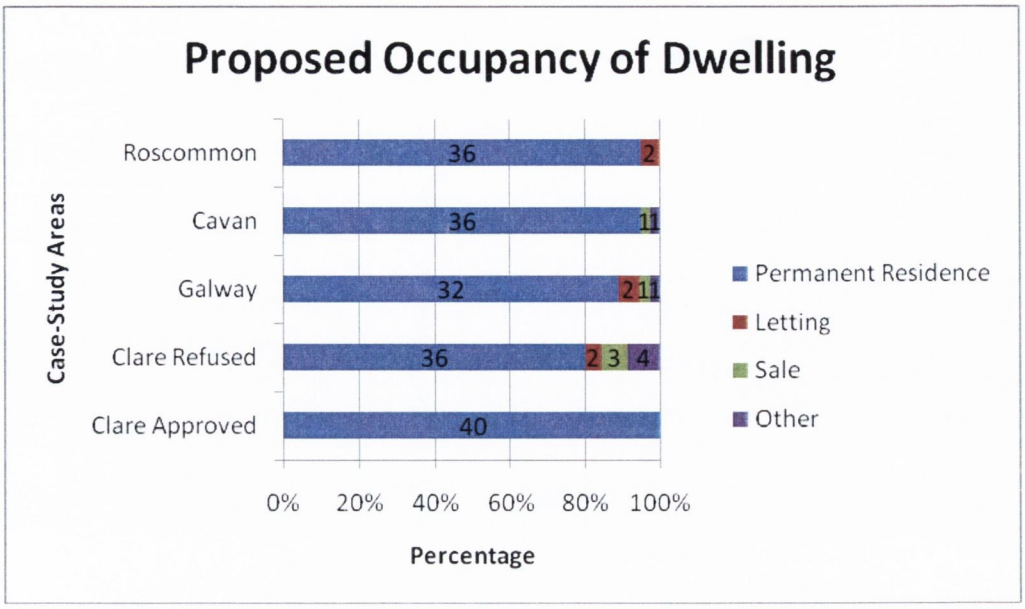


Figure A7.7

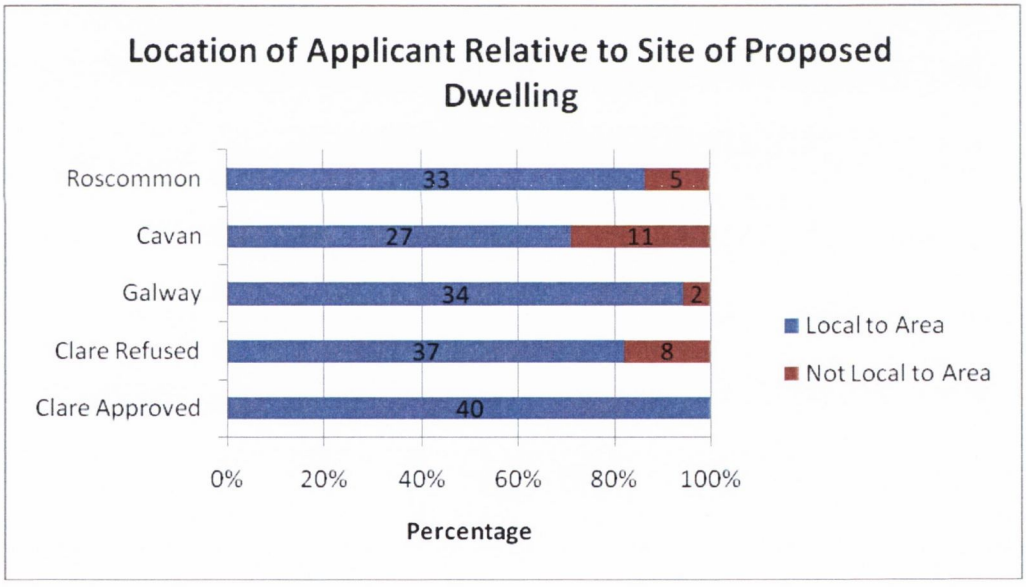


Figure A7.8

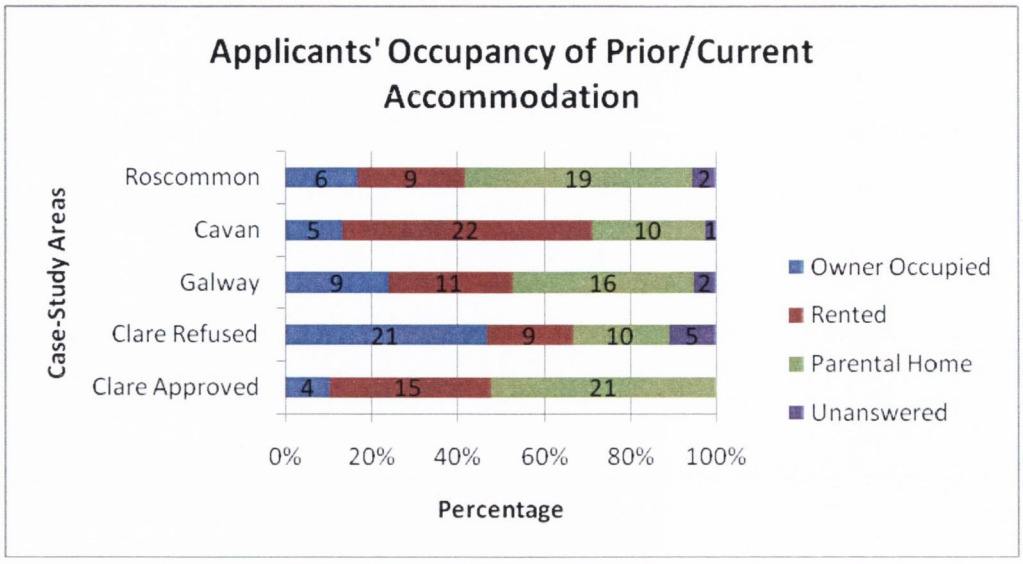


Figure A7.9

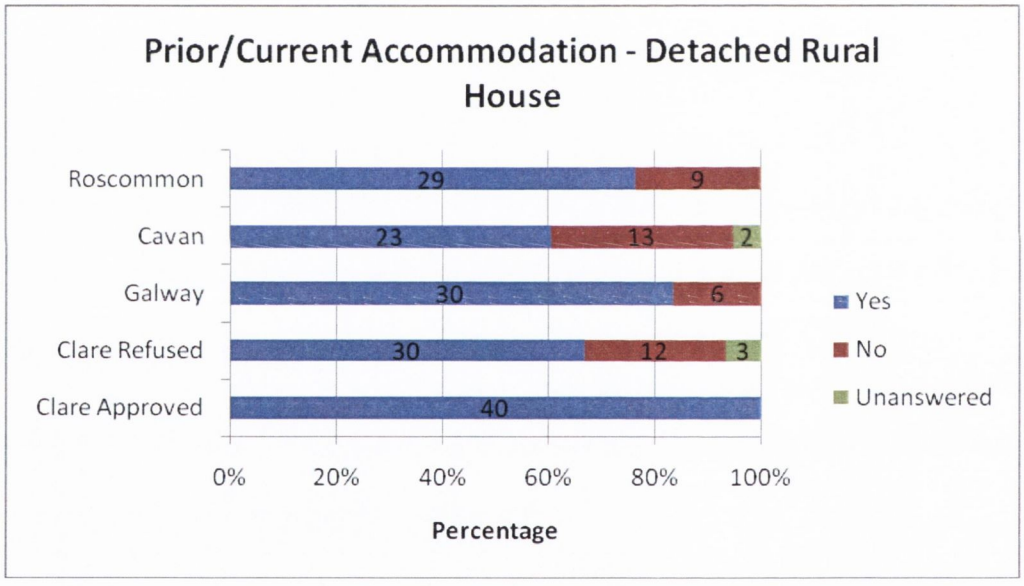


Figure A7.10

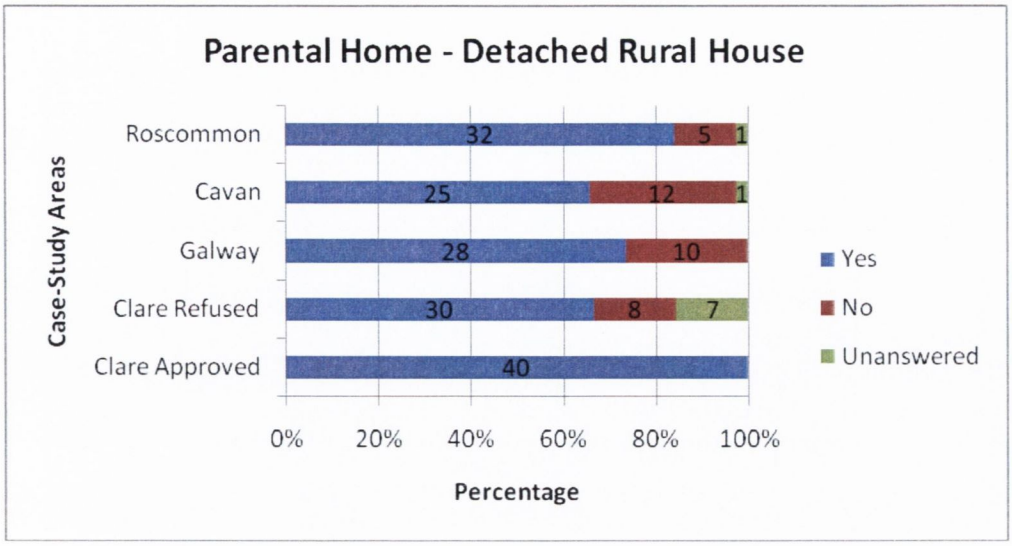


Figure A7.11

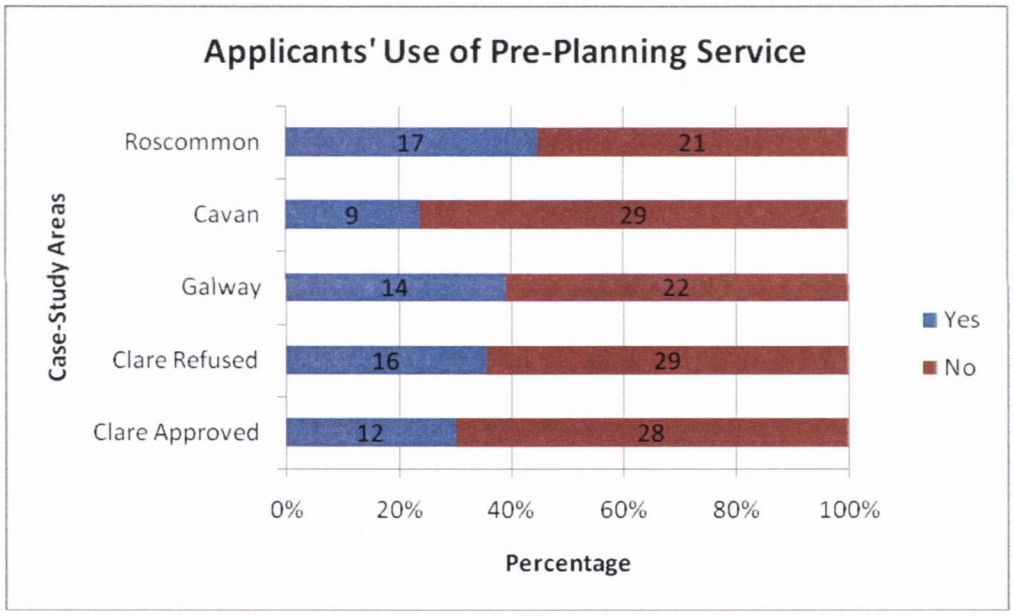


Figure A7.12

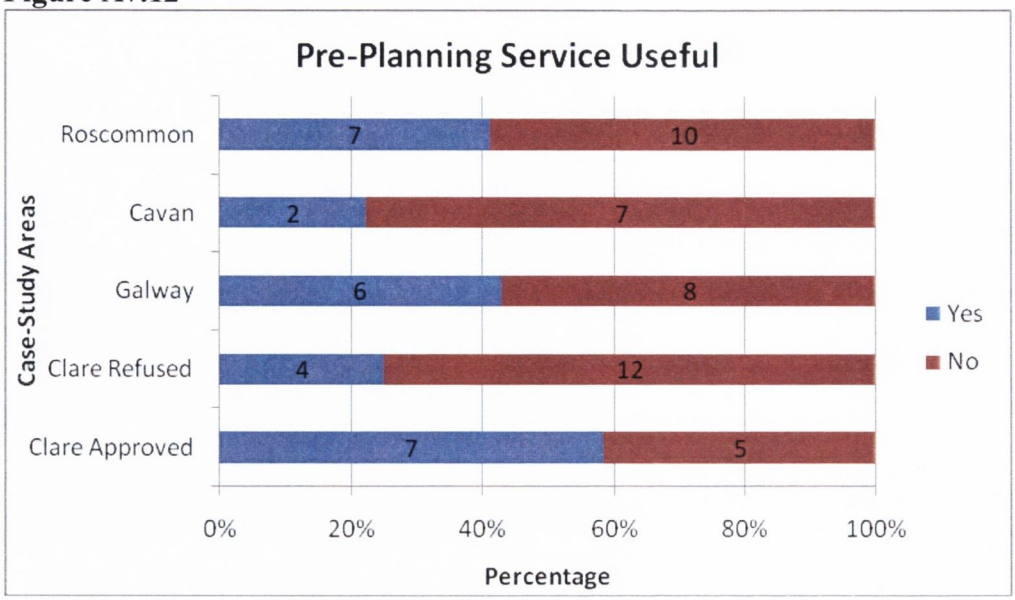


Figure A7.13

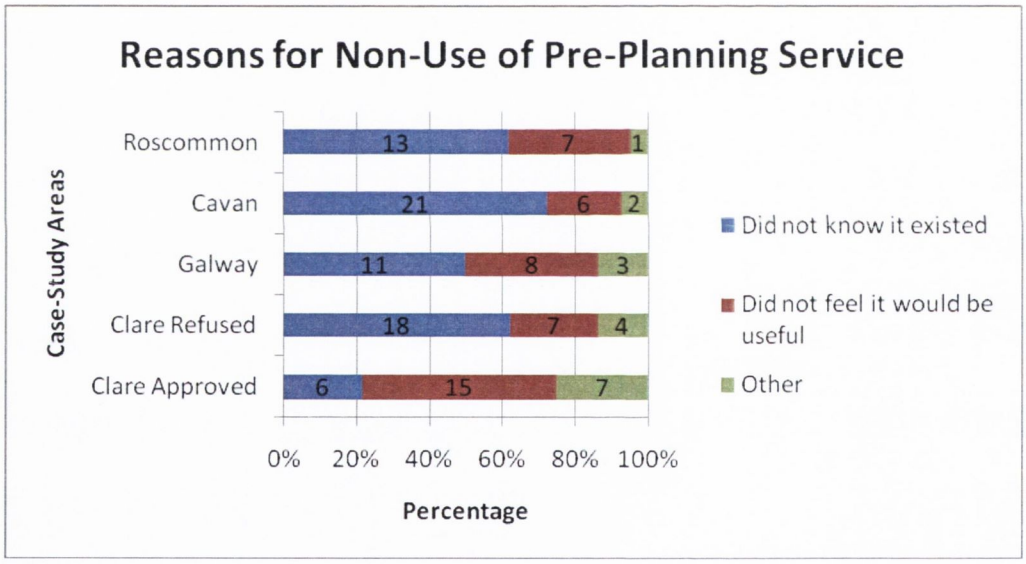


Figure A7.14

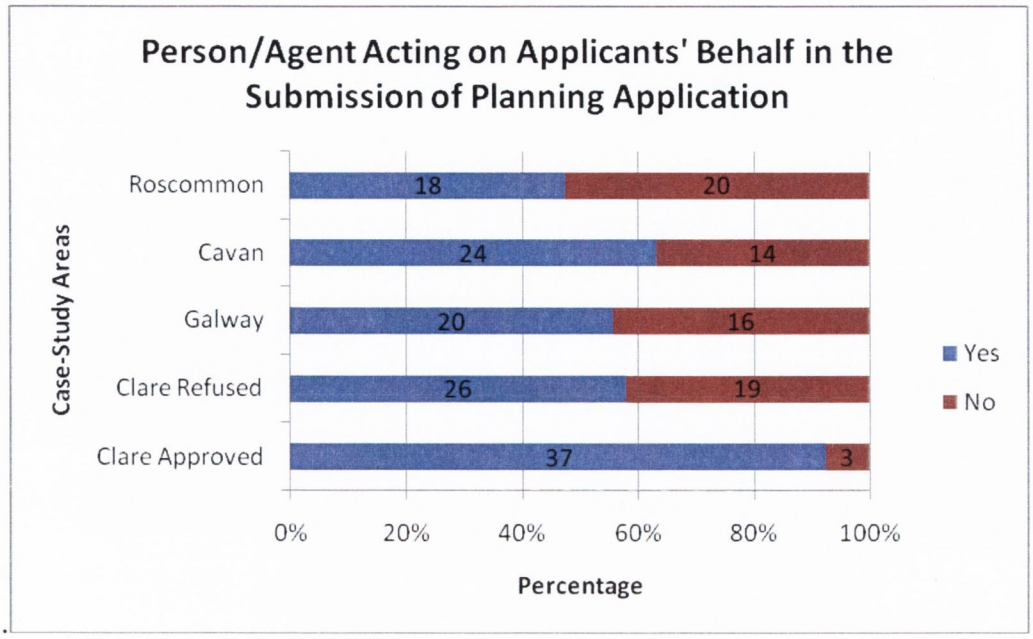


Figure A7.15

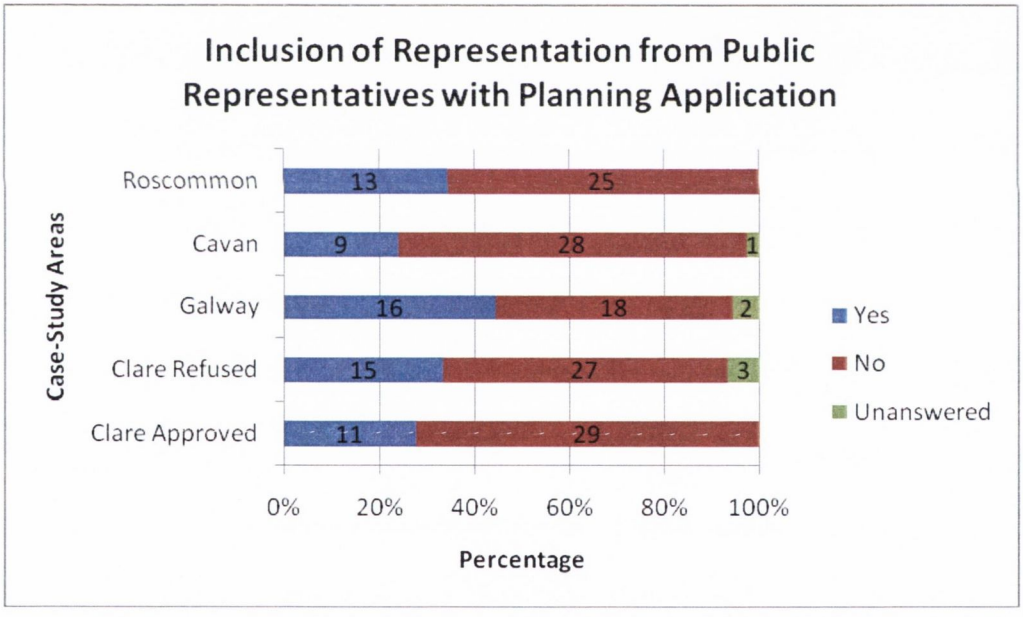


Figure A7.16

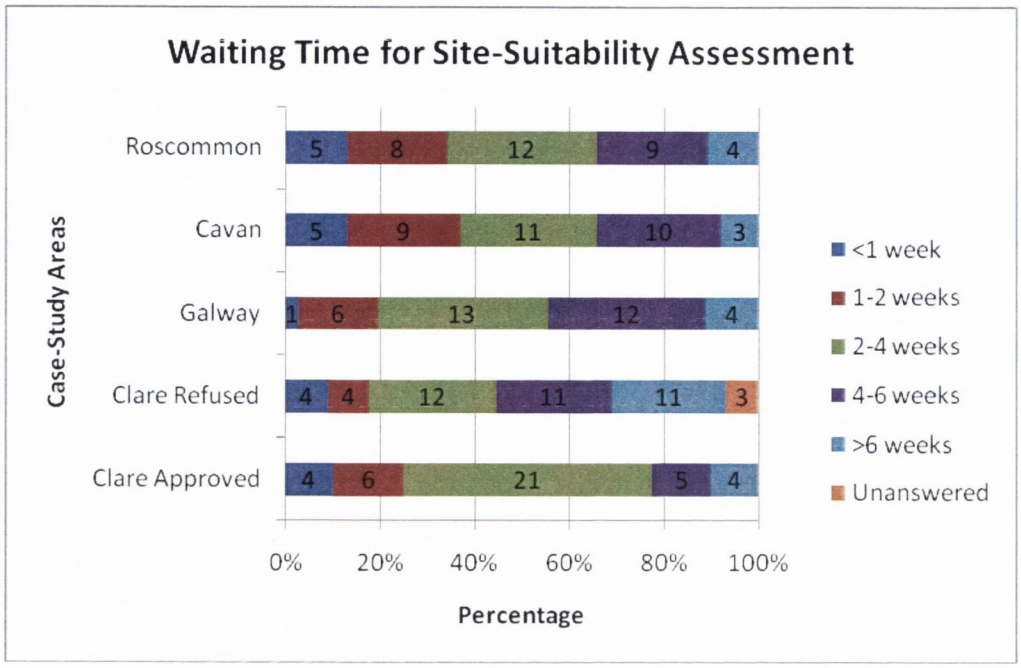


Figure A7.17

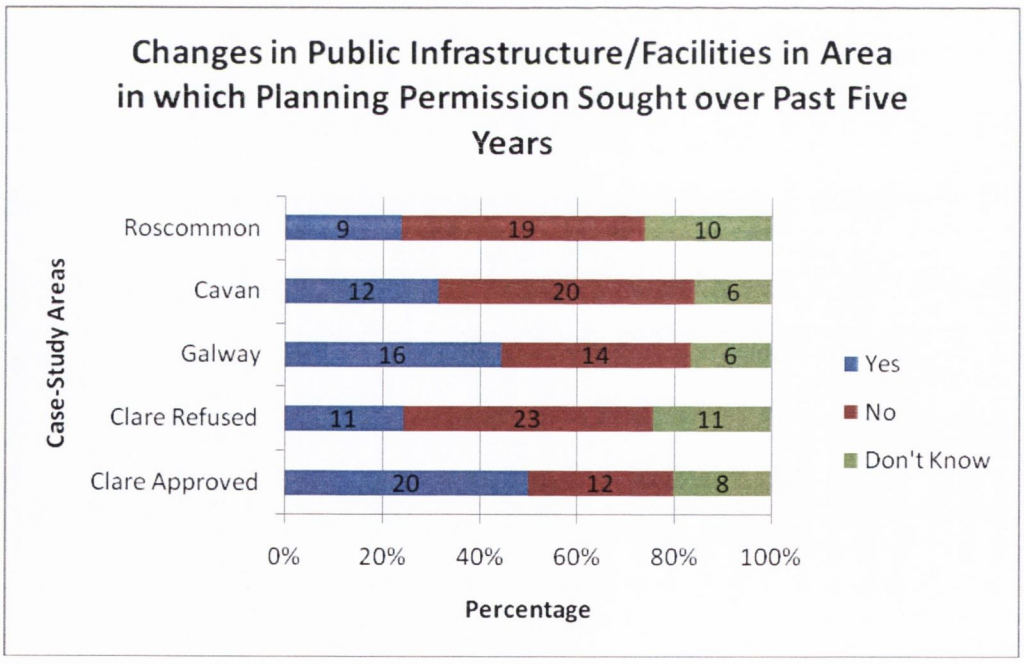


Figure A7.18

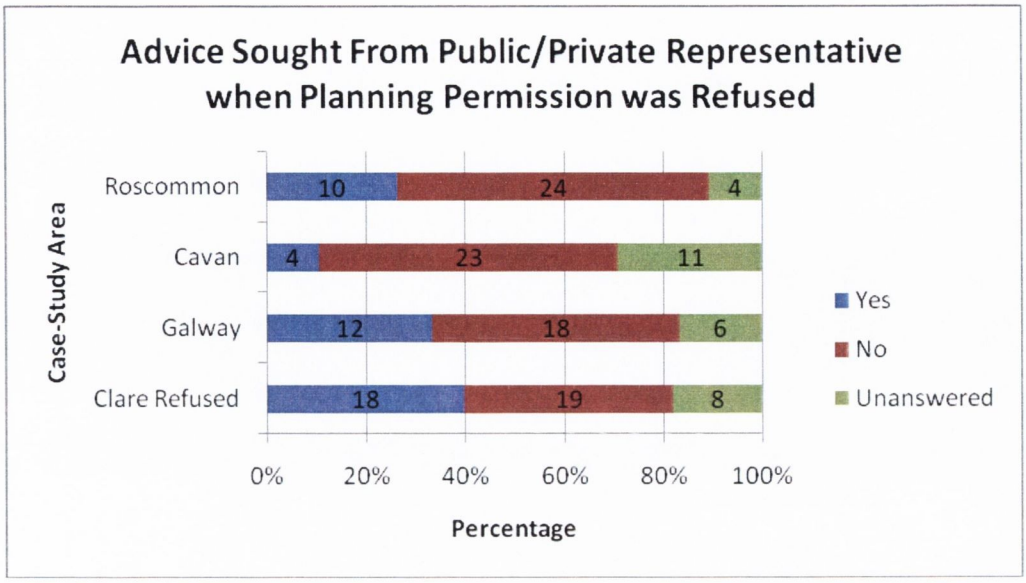


Figure A7.19

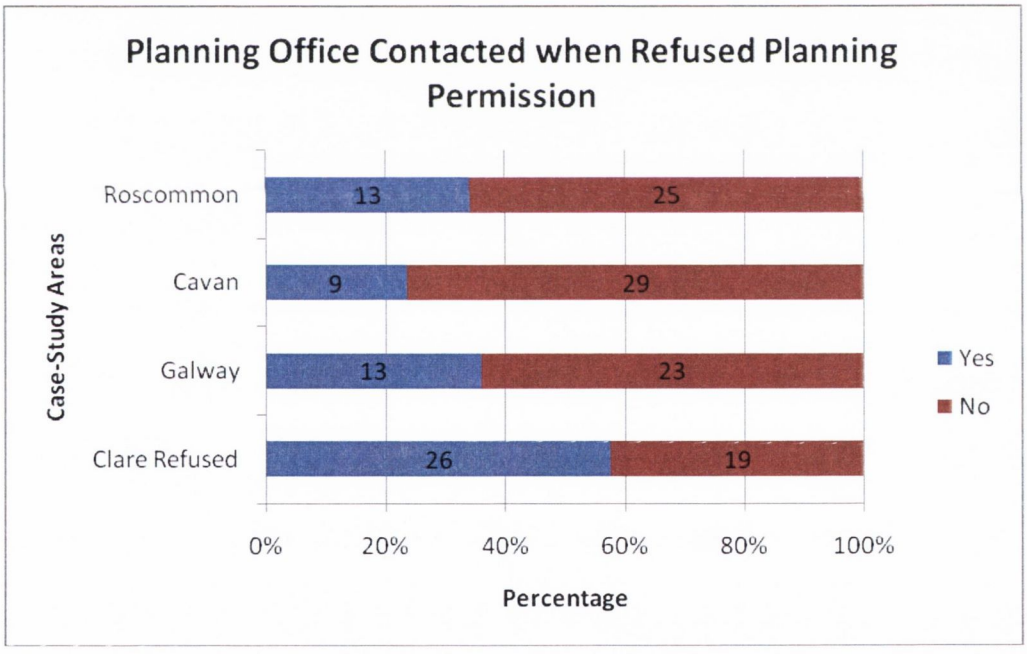
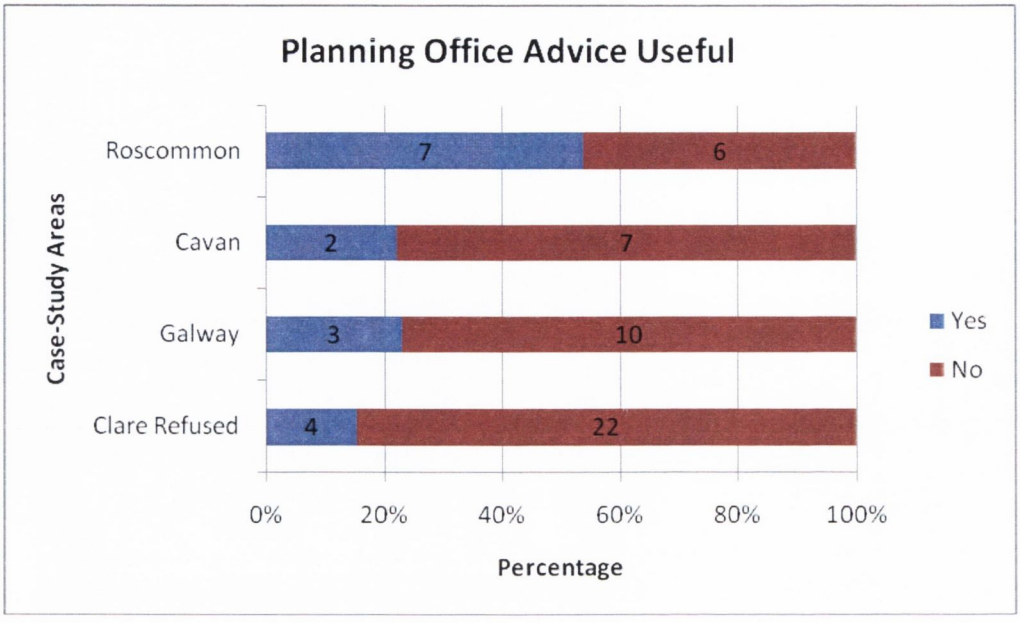


Figure A7.20


Planning Office Advice Useful
Roscommon
Cavan
Galway
Clare Refused
7
6
2
7
3
10
4
22
Case-Study Areas
0%
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%
Percentage
Yes
No