

# **Report to the Earth Council**

## **Assessment of Progress on Agenda 21**

**Comhar**

**the National Sustainable Development  
Partnership**

**Ireland**

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## ***Introduction***

*The following report was prepared by Comhar, Ireland's National Sustainable Development Partnership, as an input to the National Councils for Sustainable Development Assessment of Progress on Agenda 21 being co-ordinated by the Earth Council. This in turn forms part of the global preparations for the World Summit on Sustainable Development to be held in Johannesburg in September 2002. The report to the Earth Council follows a specified framework, is restricted to 15 pages in length, and must be completed before the end of August 2001. It therefore represents a summary overview of the situation at the current time. Comhar intends to build on and develop this report as a contribution to Ireland's national preparations for the 2002 Summit.*

*A few points should be made in terms of Ireland's economic, social and environmental context. Largely because of a historical lack of heavy industry, Ireland maintained a relatively pristine environment until well into the 20th century. However, environmental quality has deteriorated over the last 25 to 30 years, and continues to face pressure under the impact of strong economic growth and changing population and settlement patterns. While progress has been made in decoupling energy and materials intensity from economic growth, and in reducing emissions from industry, absolute pressures on the environment have continued to increase. Significant environmental challenges remain in the areas of water and air quality and ensuring protection of habitats and species. In addition, Ireland is experiencing growing problems associated with changes in consumption pattern linked to recent increases in per capita incomes, notably waste generation, transport and urban sprawl.*

*Despite a buoyant economy, and relatively low levels of unemployment, there is still significant poverty, as indicated by Ireland's low UNDP index. Levels of homelessness, social exclusion and inequality are also increasing, notwithstanding the high levels of economic growth.*

*In both the environmental and social areas, there have been significant developments in recent years in terms of improving both policy and inter-institutional connections. Local participation has increased in many areas, and improved consultation processes are being developed and implemented at national and local levels. Much of this is due to the ongoing local government reform process, which is bringing about a re-orientation and change in the system.*

***Describe your country's national strategy for sustainable development.***

*Sustainable Development: A Strategy for Ireland*, published in April 1997, was prepared under the direction of a Cabinet Committee and constitutes Government policy. It aims at providing a comprehensive analysis and framework to allow sustainable development to be taken forward in a more systematic manner, and includes:

- a summary of the overall strategic programme,
- a strategic framework of priorities,
- strategic sectors (agriculture, forestry, marine resources, energy, industry, transport, tourism and trade),
- supporting sectors (environmental quality, spatial planning and land use, the built environment, public action and awareness, and Ireland's international role), and
- implementation and monitoring.

The overall aim of the Strategy is “to ensure that economy and society in Ireland can develop to their full potential within a well-protected environment, without compromising the quality of that environment, and with responsibility towards present and future generations and the wider international community”.

***Diagnose strengths and weaknesses in implementation of the national strategy or planning process, focusing on organisational and management system, institutional capacity, resourcing, political support and legislative support***

The National Sustainable Development Strategy (NSDS) is primarily focused on policy areas that affect the environment; this provided a rebalancing of the previous situation where environment was not generally integrated into national policy. Many economic and social policy elements, as well as cross-sectoral fora such as the National Economic and Social Council and the National Economic and Social Forum, were already in place prior to the Strategy and have been further developed in parallel. The Strategy focus on integrating environment into the various policy sectors was very important giving a new priority to environment. Its weakness was that it did not have many quantified objectives in the economic policy areas which undermine the environment. The challenge now is to advance integration of the three elements.

Many of the sectoral measures outlined in the Strategy have since been implemented or initiated in the form of further policies. These include, among others, the National Climate Change Strategy, the White Paper on Rural Development, the Strategic Planning Guidelines for the Greater Dublin Area and the Residential Density Guidelines. The Strategy has greatly influenced thinking with regard to transport. The National Spatial Strategy, which is currently being prepared, is also influenced by the principles of sustainable development set out in the NSDS. The Strategy has also been one of the informing processes behind the continuing programme of local government reform. It provides the background for the Local Agenda 21 process to establish a partnership approach between local authorities and the wider community based on the principles of sustainable development.

The Strategy has resulted in an overall shift in government thinking on sustainability issues and has been a catalyst for many policy changes within government departments, state agencies and the local authorities as well as among business groups and the social

partners. The value of the Strategy was that it outlined the strategic sectors for sustainable development, highlighting, without getting overly involved in detailed issues, how sustainability may be promoted. It may be viewed as the start of a process towards sustainability.

Although considerable resources for the implementation of the Strategy measures have been made available through the National Development Plan, 2000-2006 and the programmes of the various government departments and agencies, at a more fundamental level, the National Development Plan (NDP) does not fully reflect the NSDS. As a result, there is a need to reinforce the Strategy objectives and measures and ensure that they are more closely adhered to in the implementation of the NDP. Several Strategy measures, particularly in relation to transport and energy, have been overtaken by economic growth. A fully implemented Sustainable Development Strategy, at the centre of national policy, would ensure that sustainability was not compromised by such pressures. While important progress has been made in environment proofing under the current NDP, there is still considerable work to be done in improving the environment, rural and poverty-proofing of the Operational Programmes which will implement the Plan.

There is no specific legislation concerning sustainable development. However, the concept was incorporated into new planning legislation (Planning and Development Act, 2000) by the replacement of the phrase 'proper planning and development' with *proper planning and sustainable development* throughout the Act. While no definition is given in the Act, this has the benefit of not legally constraining or limiting the dynamic process of sustainable development. Over time, this change in the legislation should make a real difference in placing sustainable development at the core of planning and development.

While to some extent the Strategy has initiated wider debate on the issues of sustainability, public perception of sustainable development is generally weak. The lack of understanding has had an impact both on political acceptance and the resources devoted to implementing Agenda 21. No vision has been put forward of what a sustainable Ireland might be like and what its advantages might be for people generally. Difficulties include the language used to promote sustainable development as well as how to translate the concept into practical measures. Comhar is conscious of the importance of raising public awareness, and aims at improving the situation throughout its work.

A general lack of linkage of environmental, economic and social issues has to some extent diminished the interest of the public and politicians alike, and has led to sustainable development being identified primarily with environmental issues. A further difficulty is that, even in terms of environmental awareness, there is a gap between public concerns and environmentally-sustainable behaviour. An attitudes survey published in April 2000 showed that, while Irish people are quite concerned about environmental quality and issues, this does not necessarily translate into environmentally-friendly behaviour. Although the survey showed general support for increasing taxes on environmentally-harmful items, and for stricter environmental laws, less than 20% of people were willing to pay higher taxes or prices or make cuts in their

standard of living. If Irish people generally do not make the link between their own personal behaviour and their concern for the environment, this has implications for acceptance of sustainable development.

Implementation of the Strategy is primarily a matter for individual government departments, agencies and local authorities within their respective areas of responsibility. Some monitoring of progress is undertaken by the Department of the Environment and Local Government, by the Environmental Network of Government Departments and by the parliamentary sub-committee on sustainable development (which is currently finalising a report). However, with the exception of Comhar (see below), cross-sectoral structures to deliver on the Strategy and to monitor and evaluate its implementation are limited. There is no specific secretariat to monitor progress on implementing the Strategy, nor is there any explicit requirement for sustainability proofing of policies. There is also a lack of clear indicators to measure progress (although a headline set of indicators of sustainable development, developed under the direction of an interdepartmental steering group, is due to be published shortly, while environmental indicators have been developed by the Environmental Protection Agency).

***Comment on the impacts of the national strategy in terms of changes in policymaking, decision-making, financing for sustainable development (particularly changes in the national budget), decentralisation and local empowerment. In each of these areas, consider the impacts on different stakeholders, including those that have benefited and those that have been negatively affected.***

The Strategy has been a seminal document that has led government thinking on sustainable development and changed the approach of government departments on a wide range of issues. A range of further strategies, policies and programmes in the relevant areas (such as the 1999 Green Paper on Sustainable Energy) has followed it. The principles of sustainable development set out in the Strategy are integral to the ongoing process of local government reform. Through the Environmental Awareness Campaign and the Environmental Partnership Fund, the Strategy has enabled a wide range of on-the-ground projects to be established with communities through the Local Agenda 21 approach. There has also been much recent progress in attracting and focusing public interest, particularly through the Environmental Awareness Campaign and ENFO activities.

While many Strategy measures have since been completed, or are nearing completion, many were also general in nature and few were quantified. Some measures were already in train, but other substantially new measures were negotiated between government departments, particularly in relation to agriculture, energy and tourism. Many, especially those relating to energy and transport, have been overtaken by the current economic boom and are now not seen to be strong enough to achieve progress towards sustainability.

Many issues have moved on since the Rio Summit in 1992 and many government policies are more advanced than the Summit's recommendations. One example is the National Children's Strategy (NCS) launched in November 2000 as a response to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The NCS is linked to a number of important initiatives including local government reform, the Social Inclusion Initiative, the

National Anti-Poverty Strategy and the National Development Plan. The NCS was developed following intensive cross-departmental work, supported by advisory panels and an extensive consultation process, including a targeted response from children.

There is no specific funding for sustainable development identified in the national budget (other than relatively minor amounts in the Department of Environment and Local Government budget to fund the National Sustainable Development Partnership and some awareness raising through ENFO – the Environmental Information Service). Specific implementation of the Strategy at local authority level has been poorly resourced, with no dedicated funding identified, which has limited the uptake of sustainable development projects and ideas, even though overall local government funding has increased by over 60% since 1997.

It is difficult to quantify the extent to which the Strategy, as opposed, for example, to the processes of the Strategic Management Initiative and local government reform (both of which began before it), has brought about specific changes. However, the local government reform process is based on principles of inclusion, participation, thematic and area based approaches, integration and value for money, which derive largely from sustainable development principles. While the Strategy has strongly influenced the policy background of new local authority structures, it is not a central part of their brief, and in some areas this has made it difficult to have sustainability issues adequately represented. Nevertheless, it has clearly highlighted the importance of sustainable development as a principle of forward planning.

The transfer of the social partnership model to county level is also compatible with sustainability principles. The creation of new structures under the local government reform process has led to a variety of new initiatives and has enabled key public bodies to get good stakeholder participation in relevant initiatives. However, local empowerment is not fully realised, with some groups still excluded from decision-making processes despite the new structures and processes. This is particularly due to the lack of resourcing of communities to participate, which effectively excludes some groups. While not directly a reflection on the Strategy, this does show the need for further development of the current processes and new structures to reflect the real participation intended under Agenda 21, and also to ensure that participation leads to greater policy integration. On a positive note, the new local government structures do offer an opportunity to take forward elements of the Strategy.

***Recommend the next steps that should be taken to improve the national strategy and its implementation. In particular, formulate specific sustainable development targets that are achievable in the next 5-10 years, and which could make a significant difference in your country's progress towards sustainable development.***

Ireland's National Sustainable Development Strategy needs review and updating, both in respect of some elements and measures and of implementation structures. While some acceptance of principle and integration has been achieved, much of this is still more formal and formulaic than practical or acted upon. Work also needs to be done on further developing a view of a sustainable Ireland; Comhar is working on a set of principles which can support this goal.

Improved integration with other policies, particularly in relation to economic development, is needed, for example, in the context of the National Development Plan. The Strategy objectives need to be fully taken into account, and taken forward, in all other policies and strategies, reflecting the breadth of sustainable development. Responsibility for implementation and monitoring needs to be clarified, and better co-ordination is required to ensure that the Strategy is effective and is not countered by other policy developments, increased pressures on the environment or social inequalities. Structures for implementing the Strategy need to be more strongly defined and supported.

Areas where more specific targets and actions are particularly needed in a strengthened Strategy include energy and transport, which will be critical to meeting Ireland's Kyoto commitments. The targets identified in the National Climate Change Strategy (2000) should be reinforced under the Strategy to ensure an integrated approach across the different policy areas and government departments which are responsible for their implementation.

There is a need to clarify a vision that will bring together the Strategy and other policies and ensure that all are moving towards sustainability. This will also have to engage the various stakeholders and ensure that all are willing and able to play their part in realising sustainable development. As fundamental changes in society may be involved, it will be important that there is full consultation and participation so that it is clearly understood and accepted. To attract public interest, the debate should focus on 'quality of life' issues, integrating disparate environmental, social and economic factors to help people make the connections between these issues. A useful support in this regard may be Comhar's current work on preparing a set of sustainable development principles to stimulate debate around the subject. These principles could also be used as a benchmark against which policy could be proofed. This work will be completed by the end of 2001.

***Assess the extent to which national sustainable development strategies, plans, and programs demonstrate an integrated approach. Provide concrete examples of policies that resulted in integration between social, economic and ecological dimensions.***

Integration across policy areas at government level has developed under the Strategy, but has not yet been fully achieved. The Environmental Network of Government Departments, which operates at senior level across departments, is an important mechanism for taking forward the environmental and sustainability agenda in other sectors. In recent times it has addressed specific issues such as eco-auditing of policies, programmes and plans, as well as the National Climate Change Strategy and the EU Sustainable Development Strategy.

A number of government departments adopted strategic sectoral policy documents either in anticipation of or in response to the Strategy. The sectors involved were tourism (1994), forestry (1996), integrated coastal management (1997), health, heritage, agriculture, energy and marine and natural resources (all 1998). At programme level, examples of policy integration include the Alternative Energy programme, dealing with renewable energy, which addresses environmental concerns and also has social and economic aspects such as rural diversification. In the agricultural sector, the Rural Environment Protection Scheme has dual environmental and rural community

preservation objectives. In the industry sector, the cleaner production programme for SMEs integrates environmental protection, materials efficiency and economic performance. However, it is recognised that in other areas, more needs to be done.

***Assess the extent to which national strategies, plans, and programs enable continued, broad-based participation in sustainable development policymaking and implementation. Assess the extent to which different sectors and different levels of decision-making have participated in sustainable development policymaking and implementation. Provide concrete examples of public-private-civil society partnership in the implementation of sustainable development in your country.***

The Agenda 21 process of participation, extensive consultation with interest groups and inter-departmental working has permeated much of current government procedure, as evidenced by the National Anti-Poverty Strategy and the National Children's Strategy. This has further developed the consultation process which was undertaken in the preparation of the NSDS. A major consultative process was involved in determining the structure and terms of reference of Comhar (see below), whose establishment as a partnership of stakeholders across sectors at national level is a further development in relation to advising on national policy and its implementation. However, broader participation and consultation could still be developed in some major areas of policy and decision-making. For example, despite the implications of the National Development Plan for sustainable development, Comhar, then newly established, was not consulted in its preparation.

A similar participative approach underlines the local government reform process. New structures established under the reform process are helping to further develop local public participation. The local authorities' Strategic Policy Committees, for example, comprise local councillors and representatives of sectoral interests; while the City/County Development Boards involve representatives of local government, local development, State agencies and the social partners. Local participation is also encouraged through the establishment in each county of a Community Forum (a network of voluntary and community organisations), whose local area public meetings provide opportunities for debate on the broad range of needs facing urban and rural communities. However, there is still room for improvement in ensuring that all groups are enabled to participate, especially in terms of providing the necessary resources for this.

While examples of partnership in local sustainable development projects could be given, most of these projects tend to operate on an *ad hoc* basis depending on local enthusiasm and local champions (as well as, in some cases, EU funding). A major issue of concern is how these projects can be mainstreamed, to ensure wide promotion of the lessons learned and make the knowledge gained from these local projects available to others in the field or to the wider public.

***Assess national policy barriers to effective local Agenda 21 implementation***

Formal adoption of the Local Agenda 21 (LA21) process has been considerably delayed by the ongoing process of local government reform. However, while the label may be absent, much is happening at local level that is, in effect, LA21 under another name. This includes progress in integrating sustainable development into all areas of local authority operations, overcoming an early concern that LA21 was an additional, separate



task rather than a key influence on their activities, policies and programmes. Many local authorities have concentrated, as a first step, on addressing this internal aspect of LA21. Further work needs to be done in respect of integrating LA21 into local policy development, both within the local authorities and the new structures established under the reform process. New guidelines designed to revitalise the LA21 process, developed by the Department of the Environment and Local Government with the LA21 officers network, are due to be published shortly.

As already noted, much of the work on public participation has taken place under the local government reform process rather than under Local Agenda 21. With the exception of a small number of counties which have very active LA21 programmes, little progress has been made specifically on LA21 participation. The process is very time-consuming, and the LA21 officers appointed by each of the major local authorities are not assigned full-time to this work. Traditionally, the whole area of participation, as distinct from consultation, has not been part of the local authority culture, but progress is being made. Support from senior management has been variable, with many LA21 officers not sufficiently senior in the hierarchy to have a major influence. To overcome these difficulties, greater resources need to be provided for Local Agenda 21, both within the local authorities (including the assignment of responsibility to senior officers on a full-time basis and the provision of further training) and to ensure the active participation of community organisations.

***Describe your country's coordinating mechanism (e.g. a National Council for Sustainable Development or similar) for stakeholder participation in sustainable development planning and implementation. Indicate which sectors participate in this mechanism.***

Comhar, the National Sustainable Development Partnership, was established in 1999 to provide a forum for national consultation and dialogue on all issues surrounding Ireland's pursuit of sustainable development. Its terms of reference are to advance the national agenda for sustainable development, to evaluate progress in this regard, to assist in devising suitable mechanisms and advising on their implementation, and to contribute to the formation of a national consensus in these regards.

Comhar's membership includes both State and non-governmental representation, and reflects the three distinct aspects of sustainable development - environmental, economic and social interests. Its 25 members are drawn from five nominating panels, comprising fifty-nine relevant national organisations from: (i) the State sector, (ii) economic sectors, (iii) environmental NGOs, (iv) social/community NGOs and (v) the professional/academic sector. In addition, the Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Environment and Local Government is an *ex-officio* member of Comhar.

Comhar's terms of reference allow it to address issues and make recommendations either on its own initiative or at the request of any government Minister. It may address its recommendations to any Minister, sector or the general public. Ongoing and recurring work includes

- monitoring overall progress under the National Sustainable Development Strategy, and progress towards sustainable development in general;
- reviewing the implementation of Agenda 21 and the other Rio agreements;
- generally reviewing relevant policy proposals and developments as they arise; and

- awareness raising on sustainable development.

In addition, the current three-year work programme identifies four major work areas, where working groups have begun the task of addressing issues relating to:

- National Policy and Mechanisms/Instruments
- Spatial Planning
- Waste Prevention and Management, and
- Local Sustainability, Public Participation and Education.

While Comhar is the main mechanism for stakeholder participation, it is charged primarily with building consensus and providing policy advice, rather than sustainable development planning and implementation. Planning and implementation are primarily the responsibility of government departments and agencies, with local authorities also having a role at local level.

Other stakeholder mechanisms not specifically related to sustainable development include the social partnership process under successive National Agreements; the National Economic and Social Forum (which operates primarily in the social policy area); and the National Economic and Social Council. While the latter has no environmental membership, it has recently been involved in work on an approach to national progress indicators for sustainable economic, social and environmental development. The recent government White Paper on the Community and Voluntary Sector is also expected to be influential on stakeholder participation, with particular reference to social aspects.

***Diagnose strengths and weaknesses of the coordinating mechanism that you described in the previous question.***

The major stakeholder forum directly concerned with sustainable development, Comhar, is currently in the process of undertaking a review of its progress, building on the experience of its first two years. This review will be completed in autumn 2001, and it is intended that it will include recommendations to improve and strengthen the partnership for its second term.

As noted above, there is no single co-ordinating mechanism for the planning and implementation of sustainable development in Ireland. This might be seen as a weakness, in that lack of clarity about overall responsibility could mean that action on sustainability would not be adequately directed, resourced or monitored. However, effective co-operation between different mechanisms could overcome any such difficulties.

***Recommend steps to be taken to strengthen the coordinating mechanism.***

Comhar's self-review will address this in relation to Comhar itself. In terms of the other mechanisms, there is a need for greater co-ordination and integration between the bodies operating in the separate economic, social and environmental areas.

**NATIONAL CRITICAL ISSUE 1 - ENERGY**

The energy sector was one of the key target sectors in the National Sustainable Development Strategy. The Strategy's sustainable energy policy objectives are to ensure

security of supply in support of socio-economic development while protecting the environment, to maximise efficiency of generation and emphasise the use of renewable resources, promote energy conservation and minimise greenhouse gases and other pollutant emissions.

The following are among the most prominent measures established to implement these objectives:

- The Alternative Energy Requirement programme aimed at doubling the capacity of renewable energy electricity plants to 10% of total capacity by the year 2000; 6% was achieved by this date through an investment of £160 million (a mixture of grant aid and price support).
- Under the Energy Efficiency Investment Support Scheme, approximately £8 million in grants was allocated between 1994 and 1999. In addition, around £18 million was spent by grant recipients in co-funding of projects.
- Under the Energy Audit Grant Support Scheme, launched in 1994 to encourage industry and the commercial sectors to identify energy saving opportunities, a total of £900,000 was allocated in grants up to 1998 and around £1.35 million was spent by the recipients.
- Expenditure on awareness programmes by the Irish Energy Centre is approximately £600,000 per year.
- Revised Building Regulations were introduced in 1998 requiring energy saving in the space heating of buildings to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.
- Under the National Development Plan 2000-2006, approximately £146 million has been allocated to:
  1. promote energy efficiency through education and information programmes
  2. promote research and development in energy efficiency and CO<sub>2</sub> abatement
  3. promote renewable energy
  4. improve the energy of the pre-1980 housing stock and government and local authority buildings.

The Irish Energy Centre (IEC) was established in 1994 and the Renewable Energy Information Office (REIO) was set up to promote the development of a sustainable natural energy economy. They offer practical information and advice on energy efficiency in the home, office, industry and to municipalities with priority advice for local authority planners, as well as advice on sources of funding for renewable energy. The REIO is also involved with working groups and interdisciplinary panels at a national and international level. The IEC runs the Self-Audit and Statement of Energy Accounts Scheme and the Energy Efficient Investment Support Scheme. Over the period 1994-1999, these voluntary programmes produced approximately a one per cent reduction in national CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

The Green Paper on Sustainable Energy (1999) restated the objectives of sustainable energy policy already set out in the NSDS and established a new framework for energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy sources. It highlighted necessary measures to promote energy efficiency among targeted consumers, and combined the announcement of decisions by Government in areas such as funding for energy related CO<sub>2</sub> abatement with a discussion of the issues where further refinement of policies and their

implementation were necessary. The Green Paper indicated how Ireland would progress towards meeting its energy requirements in an environmentally and economically sustainable way having regard to forecast economic growth and security of supply objectives. It concentrated on one of the environmental issues that form part of energy's contribution to sustainable development, i.e. Ireland's policy for limiting energy related CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

Most of the measures in the NSDS have been completed but their positive effects have been overtaken by the economic boom. Between 1990 and 1998, total final energy consumption increased by 29%, largely due to increased motor vehicle use and electricity consumption; *per capita* energy consumption also increased over this period. Transport has become both the largest and the fastest growing user of energy in Ireland and accounts for one-third of total demand. While the energy intensity of industry fell due to both improved efficiency and structural changes, the energy intensity of transport has remained relatively constant, with advances in efficiency being negated by the trend towards more powerful cars. Residential use of fuels for space and water heating per household has fallen since 1991, but electricity use per household has risen sharply. Overall electricity demand in Ireland has grown in excess of 5% per annum over the last ten years, a very high rate by international standards. Greenhouse gas emissions from the energy sector continue to rise.

The need remains further to decouple economic growth and energy demand. Without stronger and quantifiable measures, especially in the areas of building regulations and energy conservation and in transport and settlement planning, significant progress will not be achieved in the energy sector. Energy conservation and the development of renewables require continuing investment. Research is needed on the size and nature of this investment, which should also look at the total energy budget of proposals. Some of the challenges facing the energy sector have been addressed in the National Climate Change Strategy (NCCS), published in 2000. The need for low-energy and fuel-efficient housing is also referred to in the NCCS. One possible answer to lack of awareness is to develop in Ireland a centre for energy efficient building, where techniques and materials can be seen and their use demonstrated. Consideration should also be given to electricity tariffs that would encourage the generation and sale of green energy from smaller installations and sites so that communities and farm co-operatives may derive some benefit from producing their own power.

## **NATIONAL CRITICAL ISSUE 2 - TRANSPORT**

Transport is a major issue for sustainability which was identified in the NSDS. The sustainable transport objectives in the Strategy are to:

- reduce environmental impacts by maximising transport efficiency
- preserve the natural environment by minimising emissions
- managing transport waste
- address infrastructure impacts by careful landuse planning
- enhance social well-being and reduce health risks and noise

Measures taken in this regard include:

- the incorporation of the minimisation of potential growth in transport demand as a leading consideration in land use planning;
- the provision of £430 million under the NDP for the construction of a light rail network in Dublin, with £500 million available for a long-term rail development programme;
- significant investment in more sustainable alternatives to private car transport, including £356 million between 1994 and 1999 for the Dublin Transportation Initiative and public transport;
- a vehicle registration tax differential was introduced in 1999 to favour the purchase of smaller cars, which are generally more fuel efficient.

However, the measures in the Strategy have been overtaken by events, and many of them are not expected to compensate for the increase in vehicle numbers. While the growing economy has increased transport of goods, it is also leading to increased car ownership; the total number of vehicles increased by 54% between 1988 and 1998, with private cars accounting for most of the increase. The modal pattern of travel has also changed, with numbers commuting by private vehicles increasing by 44% while those travelling by public transport or on foot declined by 6%. Increased energy use and greenhouse gas production by the sector is a major emerging issue.

Fundamental changes are needed in transport management if Ireland is to meet its commitment under the Kyoto Protocol, quite apart from reducing traffic congestion and providing an acceptable public transport service. More effort is needed to provide alternative methods of transport simultaneously with discouraging car trips, especially in urban and suburban areas. Demand management and integrated planning are essential to the realisation of this goal. Recent guidelines favour the minimisation of the potential growth in transport through the planning system and aim at bringing benefits in terms of the economic use of existing infrastructure, sustainable community patterns and reduced need for investments in new infrastructure.

Much of the problem has been caused by planning policies which led to the proliferation of unsustainable, sprawling low density suburbs. Such low density development makes bus services uneconomic to operate. The situation has been compounded by decades of under-investment in public transport and increased housing demand and costs. The Strategic Planning Guidelines, the Residential Density Guidelines and the forthcoming National Spatial Strategy aim at introducing a more sustainable settlement pattern which in turn should have a positive impact on transport. A recent consultation paper (April 2001) proposes a new Authority for the Greater Dublin area, which would prepare land use and transportation strategies and implementation plans and promote an integrated public transport system. However, it is not yet clear how effective these measures will be in redressing current problems.

On a more positive note, problems such as congestion have generated a public debate on transport issues. There is now a greater commitment to investment in public transport, as well as a more general openness to sustainable transport and the radical changes which will be necessary on the part of the motoring/travelling public.

### **NATIONAL CRITICAL ISSUE 3 - BIODIVERSITY**

The National Sustainable Development Strategy noted that a National Biodiversity Plan, to reflect the requirements of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity and to draw together all the existing policies and programmes which already contributed to its objectives, was due to be published in 1997. New legislation to update the Wildlife Act was also in preparation, and it was intended also to provide statutory recognition for national parks, national historic parks and national gardens.

However, the National Biodiversity Plan has been significantly delayed, bringing into question the level of commitment to biodiversity conservation. Natural environment issues and some relating to biodiversity conservation are briefly mentioned in the National Development Plan, and there is little sense of the issues being embraced seriously by policy makers. Nature conservation has never received a high political priority, although more is now being spent by the Heritage Service (Dúchas) than ever before, mainly due to the need to comply with EU Habitats and Birds Directives. A large proportion of this expenditure is allocated to compensation for landowners affected by restrictions imposed by EU designations.

Currently, due to the economic boom, the natural environment is under severe pressure from development. Even with the extra resources allocated, sites in private ownership are continuing to be lost at an alarming rate. The current rate of attrition of some of Ireland's most important habitats is unsustainable. While some sites are designated under legislation, this has not always resulted in their full protection; some have become so degraded as to no longer warrant designation. For those areas outside the designated areas system, protection is in practice virtually non-existent.

Integration of conservation into agricultural policy has been slow. However, the voluntary Rural Environment Protection Scheme (REPS), put in place in 1994, has as one of its objectives the conservation of wildlife habitats and includes incentives for organic farming. This radical departure from existing farm policies has been widely accepted by many less intensive farmers. The scheme includes incentives for the conservation of the most important habitats on farms. The REPS has been highly successful as a farm income scheme, but it has not yet been proven to be capable of conserving species and habitats. There has been much less integration in the intensive farming sector, which remains a serious threat to aquatic biodiversity and water quality.

Some projects have been initiated to promote the recovery of threatened and endangered species, e.g. the Natterjack Toad, Golden Eagle and some rare arable weeds. Restoration projects have been initiated for a small number of peatlands and woodlands. However, much more rehabilitation and restoration work needs to be undertaken.

The National Heritage Plan (currently in preparation) will deal with nature conservation policy within the overall framework of general heritage management. The Environmental Protection Agency has initiated a pilot project on the feasibility of establishing ecological networks. This is to support the aims of biodiversity conservation within the context of the forthcoming National Spatial Strategy.

The Government's vision of biodiversity conservation should be articulated in the forthcoming Biodiversity and Heritage Plans. Many more nature reserves need to be established and national parks extended. Sites in private ownership need to be protected more vigorously by interventions in the planning system, and by refining the REPS in the light of experience gained. Incentives which lead to habitat degradation need to be phased out and incentives which encourage their protection need to be further developed. This is particularly important in relation to EU and national grants for agriculture and forestry. Tax incentives could also be explored as a means to encourage landowners to preserve sites. Local authorities need to employ more ecological expertise in making county development plans, in making decisions on planning applications and when undertaking their own projects. Sites that are not designated and species not listed also need protection. This could possibly be achieved through the ecological network concept as mentioned above.

### **EMERGING CRITICAL ISSUE - CLIMATE CHANGE**

The National Climate Change Strategy, published in October 2000, provides a framework for achieving greenhouse gas emissions in the most efficient manner possible. It recognises that action needs to be taken in all sectors and as early as possible. The guiding principles behind the strategy include the need to promote sustainable development, improving economic efficiency, sectoral equity with reductions across the economy, protection of economic development and competitiveness through market-based instruments, and generating an impetus for early action. Reduction of emissions will be achieved through an integrated approach using a range of policy options including

- using economic instruments, including taxation and emissions trading with broad cross-sectoral application
- a range of policies and measures tailored to specific sectors
- the pursuit of co-ordinated policies and measures implemented at EU and international level
- participation in international emissions trading.

In addition to measures for cross-sectoral market-based instruments, including the introduction from 2002 of a framework for tax measures prioritising CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, key measures of the Strategy for the different sectors include:

- in the energy sector, fuel switching towards less carbon intensive fuels, including ceasing the use of coal at Ireland's largest electricity generating station; an expansion of renewable energy; maximisation of CHP, supported by the allocation of £4 million in the NDP to encourage high efficiency CHP; and an enhanced demand side management programme under the IEC.
- in the transport sector, fuel efficiency measures (including rebalancing of vehicle taxes to favour more fuel efficient vehicles, and fuel switching and efficiency for public transport and state vehicles); increased use of public transport, including improvement of existing suburban bus and rail facilities and the development of new facilities; and demand management (including setting fuel taxes at levels to limit the rate of increase in consumption; development of integrated traffic management; and high residential densities and restrictions on out-of-town retail centres.

- in the business sector, examining investment support from the perspective greenhouse gas emissions; expansion of the IEC programmes; specific measures to tackle industrial gases; negotiated agreements with industry with the option for complying firms to reduce their tax burden.
- in the agriculture sector, a reduction in methane from the national herd; development of short-rotation biomass and anaerobic digestion of animal wastes for energy generation; reduction in use of nitrogenous fertiliser and other measures to reduce N<sub>2</sub>O emissions from soils.
- in the forestry sector, measures to enhance carbon sinks will be supported by a research programme to maximise the sequestration potential of forestry.
- in the built environment and residential sector, improved spatial and energy use planning; new building regulations to reduce energy use in new housing by up to 20% in 2002 with further reductions in 2005; adjustment of the New House Grant to support more sustainable building; promoting domestic energy efficiency; energy rating for pre-1991 building stock.

A cross-departmental Climate Change Team has been established to ensure early implementation of the strategy. Demonstrable progress has to be shown by 2005. The team has prepared a schedule showing the agreed measures under the NCCS, the responsible departments and agencies and the timeframe for implementation. The NCCS is very comprehensive in its approach and has a convincing mechanism for implementation. However, the difficulties in reaching Ireland's targets under the Kyoto Protocol, emphasised in the OECD 2000 review of Ireland's environmental performance, are not to be underestimated.

Research on the appropriate structure and magnitude of a carbon/energy tax is lacking. This leaves the field open to special interest groups, to voice their opposition to such taxes. The Irish construction industry relies heavily on high embodied energy material, particularly cement and concrete, the production of which releases significant amounts of CO<sub>2</sub>, and this will need to be addressed.

### **GLOBAL CRITICAL ISSUE: EDUCATION, TRAINING AND PUBLIC AWARENESS**

*Describe how education, training and public awareness are integrated into your country's national sustainable development strategy or planning process.*

Public awareness and education is covered in Chapter 16 of the National Sustainable Development Strategy. Among the areas discussed are consumer interactions with the environment, energy consumption, water, waste and transport, supporting consumer responsibility for the environment, the role of community and environmental groups, environmental awareness and education.

ENFO – the Environmental Information Service, established in 1990 under the Department of the Environment and Local Government, provides easy access to wide-ranging and authoritative information on the environment, including sustainable development. Its aim is to foster increased environmental awareness and thereby facilitate a broad partnership in efforts to promote sustainable development. ENFO services include a 'drop-in' reception centre with information leaflets, video viewing,



computer based CD ROMs and an exhibition centre, a library for public and specialist enquiries on the environment (including publications from the European Environment Agency and the US EPA) and access to the INFOTERRA network. Outreach services include touring exhibitions and a video and resource pack lending service to schools and community groups. ENFO is now being promoted by UNEP as a model public access service, with potential for replication in developing countries.

***Diagnose the key implementation problems in terms of meeting the commitments of Chapter 36 of Agenda 21.***

The main need is for improved public awareness on sustainable development. Public awareness of Agenda 21 is almost non-existent and this has to be addressed through the national environmental awareness campaign. In particular, as shown by the findings of the 2000 Attitudes survey already referred to, there is a need to raise awareness of how individual behaviour impacts on environment and sustainable development. A sustained, high profile campaign - such as the energy conservation drive which has made considerable impact in that specific area - is necessary to make an impact.

***Describe the accomplishments that have been achieved to reorient your country's education system (formal and non-formal) for sustainable development. Give examples of best practices and lessons learnt***

Environmental education is now an essential aspect of the schools curriculum both at primary and second level, both as a subject in its own right within science and geography and integrated into other subjects (including examination subjects). There is a wealth of teaching aids, packs and videos available to teachers to support environmental education projects; some of these have been developed jointly by ENFO and Regional Education Centres, others by a range of other organisations, including NGOs. There are several environmental education programmes available for schools for use in Transition Year (the fourth year of second-level school). The Department of Education and Science is now a member of the Environmental Network of Government Departments.

The Green Schools programme, part of a European Network of about 500,000 students throughout Europe, has been especially successful in Ireland. Nearly one fifth of all schools in Ireland are now registered in the programme. Of these, 77% are primary schools, and 23% are secondary schools. 32 of 34 local authorities are partners in the Scheme. The Green Flag has now been awarded to 48 schools.

Third level courses in environmental design and management are run in a number of universities and colleges throughout Ireland. Master's courses and post-graduate research are carried out in a number of third-level institutions, and a Master's course in Sustainable Development is provided in one Institute.

***Comment on any measures already taken or planned to overcome these implementation problems. Identify other creative solutions to respond to these problems, and link these solutions to capacity-building needs.***

The Strategy emphasised that Governments alone cannot guarantee the achievement of sustainable development, but need the support of all sections of society, including individual citizens. Consistent with this, the Minister for the Environment and Local Government launched a major new Environmental Awareness Campaign in December

1999. Under the theme of “*The Environment: It’s Easy to Make a Difference*”, the overall aim is to encourage people to identify and pursue more environmentally sustainable behaviour. The campaign is addressing key environmental themes including waste reduction and recycling, water quality and conservation, air quality and climate change. It is supported by leaflets and booklets developed and promoted by ENFO, aimed at making environmentally sustainable behaviour relevant and meaningful; these include the “Shopping and Investment Guide for Sustainable Living” and the “better place to live in” booklet on homes and the environment. The national campaign also links with local authorities’ Environmental Awareness Officers, who focus on waste management issues and work closely with Local Agenda 21 Officers, and with the Environment Partnership Fund. This Fund was introduced in 1997 to promote sustainable development by assisting environment awareness projects which involve partnership arrangements between local authorities and NGOs or local community groups.

The 2000 Attitudes survey, already referred to, concluded that there was a need to focus on key areas of opportunity where environmentally-sustainable behaviour could be encouraged. It stressed the need to create logical links between peoples’ concern for the environment and their individual behaviour. It proposed a focus on simple steps which could be taken in everyday life, related to issues such as water conservation, regular recycling, and more environmentally-friendly shopping practices. Accordingly, the current awareness campaign includes emphasis on the “Ten Steps” approach, which encourages people to make a difference by taking simple actions in areas such as shopping, transport and household practices including water and energy conservation.

***Make recommendations to improve institutional effectiveness to provide education for sustainable development. In particular, consider the potential for inter-institutional alliances.*** Inter-institutional alliances - such as those forged through the Universities Research Group on the Environment, which has carried out much useful work over the years, including a series of regional seminars, conducted jointly with An Taisce - the National Trust for Ireland, on “Learning Sustainability by Doing” in autumn 1997 - should be taken further. Links between ENFO and the Regional Education Centres should be further developed to provide greater emphasis on sustainable development in educational courses and resources. Outside of the formal education system, more emphasis needs to be placed on sustainable development as an integral part of life-long learning.

***Integrate the analyses and recommendations above into a vision for your country’s future.*** Ireland’s current Sustainable Development Strategy is designed to ensure that economy and society can develop to their full potential within a well protected environment, without compromising the quality of that environment, and with responsibility towards present and future generations and the wider international community. It recognises that economic growth and social development cannot be to the detriment of environmental quality and must be within the limits set by nature, and that this must involve changes in production and consumption patterns. It also acknowledges that environmentally sustainable development requires, and can only succeed with, the participation of the whole of society.

Comhar is conscious, as indicated in this report, that the language of sustainable development is difficult to communicate. It is further developing the principles and concepts so that the vision encapsulated in the Strategy can be made more concrete and meaningful for people. It recognises that participation and involvement are essential if a vision of sustainable development is to be widely shared, and that accordingly a broad contribution to defining and elaborating this vision is needed. An increased focus on sustainability at local level will also help to ensure greater involvement of all citizens, with emphasis on partnership between State agencies, sectors and communities.

A challenge for our society is for the disparate interest groups to play their part in sustainable development. The Ireland of the future will need a fundamental rebalance in production and consumption patterns together with a far broader understanding of the importance of cumulative individual actions. We will also need to be part of a global rebalancing of the economic system to ensure that development is within the limits set by nature.