



Developing a planning research agenda for Ireland

This briefing summarises research conducted for the RTPI by the Centre for Planning, Education and Research, University College Cork. The full report sets out a framework for developing a research agenda for planning in Ireland with a focus on the kind of research in planning which helps planners and policymakers to develop and revitalise Ireland's towns, cities and rural areas.

Who should read this?

Policy-makers, decision-makers and practitioners in planning in Ireland, the UK and internationally, especially researchers and commentators interested in planning and related issues.

Key messages for policy and practice

Right across the planning profession there is a very strong appetite for research and for developing a strong evidence base for planning work. Planners in general place a high value on commercial research and locally-derived ad hoc research as well as on scholarly research to support their work.

However, there are a number of barriers to practitioners using research more in their work. These include problems with poor dissemination of research outputs, lack of co-ordination and fragmentation of research efforts, poor validation and archiving of evidence and data and, for practitioners, a lack of access to academic planning journals.

The primary goal of a future planning research agenda should be to ensure that sufficient and appropriate evidence and data is available to support the work of planners in the pursuit of proper planning and sustainable development in Ireland.

The planning research agenda should recognise that academic, applied and commercial research in planning are all crucial components of evidence-led planning in Ireland. Academic research in planning should be more closely aligned to the needs of practice and its outputs should be more easily available to the practitioner community. At the same time, the exploratory, critical and 'blue-sky' research that the planning academy excels in should be encouraged and supported as a component of the research effort within our discipline.

Priority should be given to research that addresses the core concerns of planning itself and especially planning practice. These include: transparency and accountability in planning decisions in the post-Mahon era; the relationships between planning, market behaviour and employment-led development, the integration of spatial planning with national and regional priorities; and the crucial contribution that planning must make to strategic decisions about infrastructure, water and waste, energy and landscape.

Framing the on-going priorities for the planning research agenda should be the joint responsibility of a number of agencies in the public, professional and academic sectors. These include the planning regulator, the regional assemblies, the planning schools, An Bord Pleanála and the professional planning institutes, and a specially formulated agency or forum to identify priorities, secure funding, co-ordinate dissemination and to raise the profile of planning research among government departments, funding agencies and other organisations.



About the research

This research and the resulting research agenda has been informed by: a review of national and international policy documents on priorities for planning; a survey of the research needs of the planning profession in Ireland; current issues for planning in Ireland, based on post-Mahon reviews of planning, recent planning legislation and the on-going tasks facing the profession; and the research being undertaken by planning schools and other key research organisations, and published in academic planning journals, particularly on day-to-day planning practice.

Main findings

The importance of planning research to practitioners

Based on this work, right across the planning profession there is a very strong appetite for research and for developing a strong evidence base for planning work. Planners in general place a high value on commercial research and locally-derived ad hoc research as well as on scholarly research to support their work.

However, there are a number of barriers to practitioners using research more in their work. These include problems with poor dissemination of research outputs, lack of co-ordination and fragmentation of research efforts, poor validation and archiving of evidence and data and, for practitioners, a lack of access to academic planning journals.

Also, an analysis of international planning journals indicates that for various reasons planning practice is rarely a subject of scholarly enquiry and, even if practitioners had more easy access to planning journals, they would find little there to support their day to day professional work.

This said, the outputs of organisations such as the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Central Statistics Office (CSO) are seen as being useful on many levels, even though in spatial planning terms there would appear to be poor co-

ordination in the setting of research priorities among these bodies.

This is also a key issue for the funding of planning research generally and the research agenda should speak strongly to support agencies and a whole range of government departments.

Further, in reviewing the kind of planning research that is currently going on, while academic planning schools are active in pursuing research funding, it would appear that with greater opportunities in interdisciplinary research projects there is a dilution of research into core planning subject areas and issues.

The purposes of planning research

The primary goal of a planning research agenda should be to ensure that sufficient and appropriate evidence and data is available to support the work of planners in the pursuit of proper planning and sustainable development in Ireland.

In spite of various problems of misalignment, fragmentation and poor dissemination, the value of planning research is highly regarded right across the profession and this needs to be built upon in co-ordinated and creative ways. Informed by the key concerns of both the contextual needs of planning practice and the exploratory and theoretical concerns of the planning academy, such a planning research agenda would need to be promoted widely in the public sphere.

If Irish planning could, over the coming years, develop a demonstrable reputation for being evidence-led and researched backed, it would have developed attributes which would attract international research attention.

The characteristics of a future planning research agenda

Planning research of all kinds should be verifiable and robust, and all research funded by public agencies should be in the public domain. The impact of planning research becomes significant only when it is well disseminated among the main actors in the planning field.



The planning research agenda should recognise that academic, applied and commercial research in planning are all crucial components of evidence-led planning in Ireland.

It is clear that research is needed for both the substantive aspects of planning (the main subjects and issues that planning has to deal with), as well as the procedural ones (the ways in which planning carries out its tasks). For the substantive topics, whilst it might be tempting to give priority to the more recent and prominent issues of the day, the focus needs to be on the more long-term and enduring issues in Ireland that have to be addressed in planning.

A further balance needs to be struck between a research effort that explores the effectiveness of the current policy climate and one that provides an evidence base for influencing new policy directions. Indeed, there is scope for certain types of planning research – more scholarly research, perhaps – that can proceed at arm's length from day to day practice and be more open-ended, 'blue-sky' and critical.

Academic research in planning should be more closely aligned to the needs of practice and its outputs should be more easily available to the practitioner community. The longer-term value of applied, locally derived and ad-hoc research in all planning topics should also be recognised and – especially for publicly funded work – structures put in place to make this more accessible.

At the same time, the exploratory, critical and 'blue-sky' research that the planning academy excels in should be encouraged and supported as a component of the research effort within our discipline.

The content of the planning research agenda

Priority should be given to research that addresses the core concerns of planning itself and especially planning practice. Given the important spatial dimension of most investment dimensions and public policy in

Ireland, this in turn needs to be communicated widely among funding bodies, government departments and all relevant agencies.

Scoping and supporting research topics that are peculiarly important to Ireland should be national priority. Special attention should be given to assessing how appropriate the research evidence is to the Irish situation.

Whilst it is important to prioritise the research effort within planning itself, it is also important that planning practitioners and academics continue to engage with, influence and draw upon the research contributions of those other disciplines which also concern themselves with place-making and environmental decision-making for the common good.

This project explored a range of current issues and topics that might help frame a planning research agenda for the medium term. For example, there are very particular requirements for addressing transparency and accountability in planning decisions in the post-Mahon era, the role of politics and civil society in addressing spatial planning and environmental issues and the importance of evidence to underpin planning as a field of ethical action.

Another priority for research is to explore the relationships between planning, market behaviour and employment-led development, along with the efficacy and viability of plan-making and the viability of plans and planning strategies. There is a need for evidence-led decisions about land use generally and land availability as well as a range of research initiatives to support the work of the planning regulator.

Other key research areas include the integration of spatial planning with national and regional priorities, the co-ordination of spatial and economic policy, the challenges of changing urbanisation and settlement patterns and the crucial contribution that planning must make to strategic decisions about infrastructure, water and waste, energy and landscape.



Taking forward the planning research agenda

Framing the on-going priorities for the planning research agenda – and then promoting it – should be the joint responsibility of a number of agencies in the public, professional and academic sectors.

These include the planning regulator, the regional assemblies, the planning schools, An Bord Pleanála and the professional planning institutes, and a specially formulated agency or forum to identify priorities, secure funding, co-ordinate dissemination and to raise the profile of planning research among government departments, funding agencies and other organisations.

The office of the planning regulator, the regional assemblies, An Bord Pleanála, the planning schools, and the professional planning institutes – together with the Department of the Environment and other agencies – are in a good position to work jointly on framing the priorities for planning research. These bodies could come together initially as a loosely formulated Irish Planning Research Forum to identify priorities, co-ordinate dissemination and raise the profile of spatial planning research.

Producers of planning research of all kinds should aim to pool their outputs in a common repository. The proposed Irish Planning Research Forum could have a particular role in holding a repository of research outputs and projects as a focal point for researchers and users of planning research. This could include establishing formats and standards and intervening to require data gathered at the public expense to be consistent, shared, and available and quality controlled.

There is also clear demand for a peer-reviewed spatial planning journal for Ireland and steps should be taken in the short term to set-up the terms of reference for this. The planning schools and planning institutes have a particular role to play in this.

Planning practice offers also clear opportunities for evidence-based research. The development and deployment of an

appropriate form of random control testing of the implementation of policy should also be supported.

Planning schools should be encouraged to be champions of the planning research agenda. For those schools accredited by the RTPI, their relationship to the planning research agenda should form part of their reporting for annual partnership Boards.

A strong foundation of evidence and enquiry – such as that promoted by a planning research agenda – could enhance the important and authoritative voice of the planning profession in Irish public life.

At the same time, a research agenda for planning goes beyond the needs of planners. It could become a strategic initiative for tackling the key place-related challenges of the day; one that engenders confidence among communities, investors, politicians, members of other professions and all those who, along with planners, have a long-term interest in how places are managed, sustained and developed.

About the research

This briefing is based on research conducted for the RTPI by Brendan O’Sullivan, Jonathan Hall, William Brady and Eimear Murphy at the Centre for Planning, Education and Research, University College Cork.

The full report is available on the RTPI website at:
www.rtpi.org.uk/planningresearchireland

About the RTPI

The Royal Town Planning Institute holds a unique position in relation to planning as a professional membership body, a charity and a learned institute. We have a responsibility to promote the research needs of spatial planning in the UK, Ireland and internationally.

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