

SundayTribune

Straight Talking, Bill Nowlan - The new housing agency could provide the missing planning link between land use and land supply

A HSCA run along the lines of its post-war equivalent in the UK would lead to much more efficient urban management



The new HSCA has been termed 'the Nama for local authorities'

We saw in the past few weeks that the new Housing and Sustainable Communities Agency (HSCA) is in a position to take over significant property assets (estimated to be 5,000 acres in 600 locations) belonging to 114 local authorities through the Land Aggregation Scheme, enabling them to discharge their debts recently accumulated in the acquirement of property/land. The government is funding the agency with up to €650m. Dublin City Council recently applied for €30m worth of land to be transferred to the agency.

The agency has been dubbed the 'Nama for local authorities'. A good description, because the councils are being bailed out of their property borrowings in return for transferring the assets to the new agency. There is also mention in the fine print of possible cooperation between the HSCA and Nama in relation to development lands that come into Nama's portfolio, to also include a joint land-mapping database between the two entities.

The HSCA was set up in May 2010 by the DOE. The agency's purpose is to 'assist' local authorities, voluntary housing organisations and the DOE in the delivery of housing, planning and related services. New legislation being drafted, however, may be some time away. If the agency is to work, it will require certain powers.

The agency has the potential to provide the missing link in the planning system between land-use planning and the land-management/ land-supply side of planning. If this happened, planning could move from being a wishful-thinking exercise with nicely coloured drawings to real planning focused on implementation. To date, land supply and development has been the sole preserve of the private sector – with a few small exceptions such as DDDA. Planners have not participated directly or as partners in the development process for fear of being accused of being judge, jury and executioner.

The law supports their caution. The boundary between planning, land ownership, development and investment has been a trick both legally and politically – as recently demonstrated by the case involving the Anglo HQ in the Dublin Docklands. The HSCA may be a way around this dilemma.

Imagine if we could get to a situation where the land required for new development – like schools, medical facilities and other social infrastructure – was controlled by the planning authority or its partner. Imagine that planning included the provision of serviced sites at the right locations, as the market or society needed them. The HSCA could provide up-front infrastructure and sell the land in 'digestible' lots providing coordinated development with greatly reduced planning risks. Nirvana in urban management terms, impractical in the eyes of the market. Could it work?

It can be done and has been done in other countries and cities (eg, Helsinki), but it requires joined-up thinking, funding and good decision making – something that the Irish public service has not been consistently good at in the property arena. Solely giving the planning authorities responsibility and control for providing the land required for urban expansion would, in my view, be dangerous with this track record. However, it could well be worth progressing with a gradual approach whereby a government-controlled land-supply agency such as the HSCA worked in parallel with traditional market forces.

In the UK, there is an important precedent for such an approach. Older readers will remember the New Town Commission which was responsible for developing new towns around London, such as Milton Keynes and Harlow, after the second world war. These new towns and the development authority behind them were the world exemplars for managing rapid urban growth. That agency morphed into an organisation called English Partnerships and in addition to finishing off the new towns it took on the role of providing expertise to planning authorities in the less well developed parts of the UK. In short, the central task of this agency is to:

- Support and accelerate the regeneration of underperforming cities, towns and neighbourhoods, working with local authorities
- Support the delivery of two million homes by 2016 and three million by 2020
- Secure the delivery of at least 180,000 new affordable homes over the next three years
- Ensure the above targets are met in a way that is economically, socially and environmentally sustainable.

That agency employs just under 1,000 people and has a budget of £0.5bn. Effectively, it is a government-owned property developer with a clear mandate.

If our new HSCA owns much of the land at the edge of our urban areas (acquired from Nama or local authorities) and is as dynamic as its UK lookalike, then we practitioners have a new player on the block of which we should take serious note.

Furthermore, if the government is really serious about linking land-use planning and land supply then the next step should be to put all unused/ underused government land (HSE, OPW, CIE, IDA, army, etc) under the management of the HSCA.

The HSCA is an acorn that could grow into an oak. Have we the political, administrative and technical balls to make it happen?

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