

Docklands planning model produced the goods



[The development of Dublin's docklands is testament to how an integrated social, economic and physical development agency with planning scheme capacity works. Photograph: Bryan O'Brien](#)

The approach to planning in Dublin's docklands is not flawed but the DDDA would have benefited from a performance review, writes **BILL NOWLAN**

IT'S HARD TO see how the Dublin Docklands Development Authority (DDDA) can recover from its predicament.

It has finished up in a very bad place with potentially huge liabilities and not even enough cash to keep up the maintenance of the place. Perhaps it is about to pass away and be forgotten?

However, its immense legacy – and of the Custom House Docks Development Authority before it – cannot be ignored. Anyone who visited Sheriff Street, the North Wall or the Dublin Gas Works on Sir John Rogerson's Quay in the mid-1990s will tell you how much and how quickly the place has changed.

From being a post-industrial economic wasteland it is now an ultra-modern mixed-use extension to the central business district of Dublin. Some argue that it is the new central business zone with such a concentration of banking, financial services and almost all the main legal firms based there.

Since the DDDA was set up in 1997 there must have been over 929,030sq m (10 million sq ft) of development along the river. The population of the area is up by 6,000 and the number of jobs has increased by 20,000.

The physical legacy of the docklands initiative also includes the riverside campshires, the conversion of the contaminated gas site into Grand Canal Square, the National College of Ireland campus, the soon-to-open National Conference Centre, the O2 arena, the Grand Canal Theatre, the Seán O'Casey Bridge, the Samuel Beckett Bridge, the restored Spencer Dock and the docklands Luas extension.

The DDDA has invested huge resources in educational and other social development programmes and, by the operation of the Docklands Council, kept a close relationship with community and other stakeholders while all this was happening.

The DDDA didn't do all of this itself: there was a development strategy it managed against a masterplan vision which made the various elements viable.

It may be that you wouldn't need a DDDA-type of organisation for every large scale regeneration project but the value of having the DDDA is that the vision of the original 1997 masterplan is substantially achieved and, up until the disaster of the Glass Bottle site, the DDDA hadn't cost the taxpayer a cent.

I've read reports that the planning system in the docklands was unfair because it didn't allow third party appeal. That is a misunderstanding of the planning process. The point of docklands planning was to plan an entire area in a transparent and predictable way. The DDDA had to work up its planning schemes and go through all the advertising, consultation and public meeting processes, including close liaison with Dublin City Council.

After that, the council of the DDDA had to be satisfied that the planning scheme was appropriate in its social, economic and physical proposal before it was put to the minister for approval. That was, in effect, the planning application.

The subsequent Section 25s were only notes to confirm that a building design conformed to the planning scheme and there was no need to waste time going back through all the consultation processes a second time. The quick turnaround of these Section 25s was the key to the rapid development of the docklands. Without it we would only have half a docklands and it may even have been too slow a process to give the level of confidence to achieve even that.

When mistakes are made recriminations will follow. But, even if the DDDA lost its way and blew everything on a high-risk land deal, we should not rush to conclude that the concept of an integrated social, economic and physical development agency with planning scheme capacity – as laid down in the DDDA Act of 1997 – is flawed. It is not, and the output of the docklands project is testament to that.

Perhaps, before 12 years of operations expired, the DDDA might have benefited from a performance review. But let's not suggest that the model must be wrong because we waited until the engine blew up before checking the oil.

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