## A National Development Framework for Wales – a blueprint for sustainable land-use planning?

In lieu of the current Welsh Government consultation ([https://gov.wales/draft-national-development-framework](https://gov.wales/draft-national-development-framework)) on a draft National Development Framework (NDF) for Wales – billed as a framework that sets the direction for national planning and development policy in Wales for the next 20 years – what promise does it hold and what is it likely to mean for EIA practitioners?

Welsh Government’s intention for the NDF is to set the strategic development vision for Wales, specifically in respect of the core themes of economy, housing, energy, transport and the natural environment alongside spatial guidance on where nationally significant development projects should be located. As well as guidance on the main topic areas, the spatial plan focuses further guidance for future investment opportunities on Wales’ three regions – North Wales, Mid & South West Wales and South East Wales – with the intention to encourage a fairer distribution of wealth and opportunity across the nation. Strategic Development Plans (SDPs) are to be prepared for these regions, which will set the framework for regional development but also influence the emergence of future LDPs. Accordingly, the NDF will impact upon development planning at all levels in Wales. It will replace the existing Wales Spatial Plan, but unlike the Spatial Plan the NDF will have development plan status and will therefore have greater weight and significance in the planning process. The NDF will complement and is to be read alongside the existing Planning Policy Wales and any supplementary Technical Advice Notes. A final, adopted NDF is expected to be published in September 2020.

Thereafter, the NDF, a framework to be reviewed every 5 years and built upon by regional and local development plans, is expected to encourage and guide development in Wales for the next 20 years. In so doing, the NDF will reflect the provisions of the Well Being of Future Generations Act 2015, an Act that requires that development plans, new development and the use of land contribute wholly and in balance to the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales.

The principal themes and areas of proposed sustainable economic growth include:

- Employment and housing growth in three ‘National Growth Areas’: Cardiff, Newport and the Valleys; Swansea Bay and Llanelli; and Wrexham and Deeside;
- Urban growth to be supported by public transport and active walking / cycling networks;
- Delivery of 114,000 new homes by 2038;
- Strategic development regions with a focus on supporting rural communities;
- Better transport links within Wales and cross-border with England, including the north Wales, Swansea Bay and South Wales Metros, and more electric vehicle charging infrastructure;
- Creation of a strategic framework for biodiversity and ecosystem resilience;
- Identification of preferred areas for strategic wind and solar deployment;
- Greater support for District Heating Networks; and
– Evolution of further policies for strategic infrastructure at Port of Holyhead, Cardiff Airport, North West Wales Energy and the Haven Waterway in south Pembrokeshire.

Although there are many wider factors likely to affect meeting the aspirations for sustainable growth in Wales, the NDF at least seeks to establish a plan-led platform to which all stakeholders can work in a common direction, infused by the principles of sustainability. Of interest to the developer community, the NDF exhibits where strategic investment and growth is likely to happen, and what infrastructure and services are needed. The intended outcomes are new strategic infrastructure and regional development proposals in the areas of focus, thereby forging new opportunities for consultancies and EIA practices to get involved and influence the outcomes. Knowing where, when and how such opportunities may arise enables us to focus our efforts on not only securing work in the planned growth areas but also to influence the siting, evolution and design of new development in meeting the long-term objectives of Welsh Government. Under such circumstances, our capabilities in undertaking not just EIA but assessing cumulative, in-combination and trans-boundary effects, alongside our effective knowledge of offsetting effects on- and off-site, are highly likely to benefit the developer community in achieving regulatory compliance for any new strategic development proposals arising in the wake of an adopted NDF.

There is little doubt that Wales has, in recent years, introduced very progressive and ambitious legislation and policy for sustainable land use planning.

Whether the NDF will lead to the delivery of these ambitions will remain to be seen, but Welsh Government is at least leading the way in recognising and embedding the need for sustainable economic growth in forward planning, which one hopes will create tangible opportunities for EIA practitioners in the near future.