

Regional Planning Governance & Legislation



Department for
Infrastructure

An Roinn

Bonneagair

Department for

Infrastructure

www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk

To:

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Our Ref: Regional Report

21 July 2026

Dear Colleagues

DRAFT REGIONAL REPORT ON THE NI PLANNING SYSTEM

Following previous discussions at the Strategic Planning Group and the Planning Improvement Programme Project Board in relation to a collaborative regional report on the planning system in Northern Ireland, we have engaged with SOLACE which has confirmed its support for the report. Minister Kimmins has also confirmed her support for an approach to the report which is balanced and demonstrates the tangible progress and outcomes that have, and are collectively being achieved, through the regional two-tier planning system.

As discussed, it is the intention for the report to present a balanced overview of system performance, to shine a light on key successes and outcomes, identify areas for improvement, and to demonstrate the broader value that effective planning and the planning profession brings to our communities, environment and economy. It should provide a foundation for a future shared regional performance and improvement framework (as well as council's own individual performance plans and reports), which will be developed through the Planning Improvement Programme (PIP).

We are therefore now inviting all councils to provide inputs to the draft document which best reflect, in their view, key planning achievements and outcomes at their local level. It is a matter for each local planning authority to provide examples as they see fit, provided they are planning related and demonstrate how successful planning has supported economic growth / regeneration, community benefit, environmental enhancement / protection, or other public interest outcomes.

E-mail: planning@infrastructure-ni.gov.uk

Website: www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/topics/planning

Examples could include:

- Important developments or infrastructure delivered as a result of a successful planning applications process, including developments that align with strategic objectives, enhance local communities, support economic growth, and contribute to environmental sustainability;
- How local planning has contributed to wider regional investment programmes, regeneration, tourism or public realm initiatives, such as the City Deals;
- Local planning improvement initiatives and / or recognition of the work of local planning teams, for example, RTPi Awards recognising local authorities or specific council-led schemes that exemplify effective and high-quality planning practice; or
- Progress made in developing and delivering Local Development Plans that reflect strategic planning goals and community needs.

Examples provided may vary widely, but in the interests of a consistent format for the report please limit the word count to 300 – 400 words per example (plus a maximum of two high resolution pictures / graphics per example); and no more than three examples per council.

DfI has yet to determine its own input to the report, but I have attached draft examples at Annex A purely for illustrative purposes at this stage.

We are hoping to reach the draft report stage for consideration and endorsement by the Minister and SOLACE by the end of October 2026 (with agreement by the PIP Project Board on 14 October). I would therefore be grateful if you could submit your draft contributions to [REDACTED] by **30 September 2026**.

Yours sincerely

[REDACTED]

ROSEMARY DALY
Chief Planner & Director

Encl

Cc: Chief Executive (Councils)

ANNEX A

1. Strengthening Environmental Planning Across Northern Ireland

The Department has made significant progress in strengthening environmental planning across Northern Ireland, ensuring development is sustainable, well-informed and better aligned with environmental responsibilities.

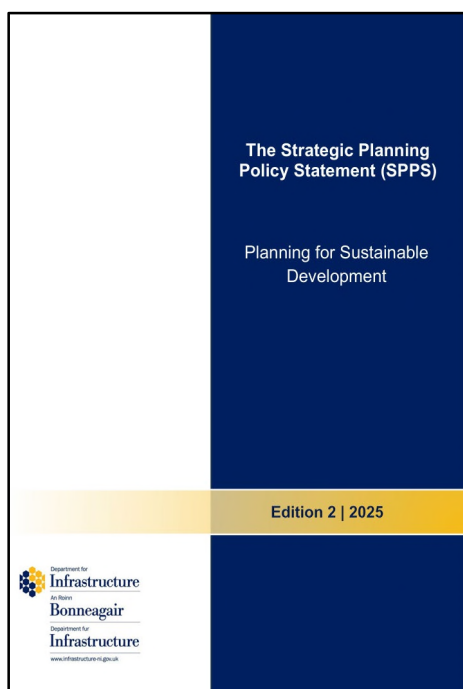
Through its Environmental Governance Work Programme, a strong focus has been placed on building skills and capacity across the planning system. Over 300 planning staff and statutory consultees have now completed accredited training in environmental impact assessment. Delivered at both core and advanced levels, this training has strengthened expertise across councils and key organisations including NIEA, DfI Roads and Rivers, and the Geological Survey. As a result, those involved in planning decisions are better equipped to assess environmental impacts with confidence and consistency.

Alongside this, the Department has introduced clear and practical guidance through a series of Development Management Practice Notes. These provide planners with the tools needed to carry out environmental assessments effectively, covering areas such as screening and unauthorised development, with further guidance on scoping to follow. This is helping to ensure a more standardised and transparent approach across all councils.

Together, these actions are delivering real and measurable improvements. They are supporting faster, more consistent decision-making, raising professional standards, and strengthening environmental protection across everyday planning.



2. The Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) Edition 2



The Department for Infrastructure published new regional strategic planning policy for renewable and low carbon energy development on 11 December 2025, following public consultation and Executive Committee agreement to it.

The new policy in the SPPS, Edition 2 includes provisions to support proposals to re-power, expand and extend solar and wind farms, unless impacts are unacceptable; provides greater flexibility in relation to separation distances for wind farms; and provides improved support for emerging technologies.

The revised planning policy framework is designed to help support the wider ambitions of the Executive by enabling appropriate development that can make a positive

contribution towards reducing emissions and decarbonising energy use across the region in the long-term public interest.

The policy also seeks to ensure that the importance of our climate change commitments and protection of valued natural landscapes and the built environment are carefully balanced alongside the protection of communities.

It is a key measure necessary to support The Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, and the Energy Strategy.

The SPPS Edition 2 must be taken into account by councils in the preparation of Local Development Plans and is also material to all decisions on individual planning applications and appeals.

The SPPS, Edition 2 can be found at:

<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/strategic-planning-policy-statement>

3. From Planning to Pipeline: Unlocking Energy for Western Northern Ireland

The Gas to the West initiative marks a major success in expanding Northern Ireland's energy infrastructure. Approved in April 2017, it extended the natural gas network into the west, bringing a cleaner and more efficient energy source to towns including Dungannon, Coalisland, Cookstown, Magherafelt, Omagh, Enniskillen and Derrylin.

The project was delivered through an efficient and well-managed planning process. Extensive pre-application engagement between February and August 2016 allowed early review of environmental information and mitigation measures, ensuring the application was supported by strong, high-quality evidence from the outset. As a result, no further information was required, and the application was processed in just 23 weeks, meeting the target timeframe for regionally significant developments.

Backed by up to £32.5 million in Executive funding, the scheme has delivered clear economic and environmental benefits. It has the potential to connect up to 40,000 homes and businesses, helping reduce greenhouse gas emissions while offering a more efficient fuel option.

Now fully constructed, Gas to the West is strengthening regional infrastructure and supporting more balanced development across Northern Ireland. It stands as a clear example of how early engagement, detailed preparation and collaborative working can lead to successful delivery.

4. Belfast Grand Central Station: Transforming Transport Connectivity

The Department granted planning permission in March 2019 for Belfast Grand Central Station, a major new integrated transport hub designed to modernise and expand public transport in the city. The development replaces the former Europa and Great Victoria Street bus and rail stations, significantly increasing capacity and improving connectivity. The new station includes 26 bus stands, 8 railway platforms, and enhanced infrastructure for walking and cycling, helping to create stronger links across the wider public transport network.

The application was carefully considered following its call-in by the Department in 2017. This included detailed assessment of environmental information, consultation with key stakeholders, and examination of the design and surrounding infrastructure. The project was approved on the basis that its long-term benefits—particularly in supporting sustainable transport, improving connectivity, and driving urban regeneration—would outweigh any impacts, which could be effectively managed during construction.

Construction began in early 2022, following completion of enabling works, and the station opened in September 2024, with final phases ongoing. As a £340 million flagship project, Belfast Grand Central Station is now the largest transport hub in Ireland, capable of supporting up to 20 million passenger journeys each year while promoting more sustainable and efficient travel.



5. Local Development Planning: A Milestone for Northern Ireland's Councils

Councils across Northern Ireland are making real progress in shaping how their areas grow and develop. Local Development Plans are setting the direction for housing, infrastructure, the environment and the economy, helping create clearer and more consistent decisions for communities and investors.

Six councils have now adopted their strategies, including Belfast, Fermanagh and Omagh, Lisburn and Castlereagh, Mid and East Antrim, Antrim and Newtownabbey, and Derry City and Strabane. This marks a major milestone. It is already delivering benefits such as a stronger plan led system, greater certainty for development, and better alignment between local needs and regional priorities.

Work is progressing with some councils now moving into the next phase, preparing more detailed plans, while public consultation is underway in Newry, Mourne and Down, and Ards and North Down. This is giving communities a direct say in shaping their future.

The Department continues to support councils to make the process clearer, faster and more transparent, while keeping communities at the heart of planning and helping turn these plans into real and positive change on the ground.

6. Belfast Harbour's New Multi-Purpose Quay and Cruise Facility (D3)

In July 2019, full planning permission was granted by the Department for Infrastructure for the development of a new multi-purpose quay facility at D3 Quay within the Belfast Harbour Estate. The project will transform the site into a modern facility capable of supporting a range of port activities, including the berthing of cruise ships. Outside the cruise season, the quay will also be used for the temporary storage and handling of project cargo, break bulk and dry bulk materials.

Belfast Harbour is NI's only multi-nodal port, handling approximately 70% of NI's and 20% of the entire island's seaborne trade. In terms of tourism the harbour has seen a steady growth in cruise ship numbers since 1996 with Belfast increasingly becoming a popular destination.

The multi-purpose quay facility will accommodate some of the world's largest cruise vessels, enabling further growth in cruise tourism to the regional economy estimated between £20-25m per year. It will also increase the economic activity and competitive potential within Belfast Harbour, expanding the port's capacity for offshore wind turbine assembly and installation.

The project also supports the former Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government objective of promoting a strong, competitive and regionally balanced economy.

The successful delivery of the project was the combined result of an informed Pre-Application Discussion (PAD) process with focused meetings with key statutory consultees, a high quality planning application submission from RPS and early and on-going engagement facilitated by Departmental officials.

Works to deliver the new cruise terminal, in line with the approved planning permission were commenced in June 2024 and are expected to be completed by the summer of 2027.