

Chief Planner Update December 2025

Chief Planner's Newsletter 01

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Dear Colleague,

Update from Chief Planner

I am pleased to write to you in my new role and to introduce the Chief Planner's Newsletter. It is my intention to issue these newsletters, as and when required, sharing updates on key aspects of the planning system that may be of interest to you.


Over the past year there has been a wide range of engagement with councils and many other stakeholders across the planning system, establishing a consensus on the need to continue to work collaboratively to make the planning system more effective, improve performance and promote a better, more positive culture for all users.

I am particularly pleased to report that, following Executive Committee agreement, the Minister for Infrastructure has now published revised regional strategic planning policy on renewable and low carbon energy, and further information on the revised policy is provided in the newsletter.

I hope you find this newsletter informative and encourage you to share it with your council colleagues. This newsletter, and future editions, will be available on the Department's website at the following link:- www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/topics/chief-planners-newsletters

As we approach the festive season, I would like to thank you for your support over the past year and to wish you and your colleagues a peaceful Christmas and New Year.

Yours faithfully

 Rosemary

Rosemary Daly
DfI Chief Planner



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Recent Appointments

There have been a number of changes to senior management within the Department's Planning Directorates. In June 2024, I joined the Department as Director of Regional Planning Governance and Legislation. I am now delighted to also serve as Chief Planner and I remain committed to growing and strengthening the planning profession across the region.

I am also pleased to advise that Dr Kathryn McFerran was appointed Director of Regional Planning Policy and Casework in February 2025. Kathryn succeeds Alistair Beggs, who has taken up a position at the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, within the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

Planning Improvement

The Department continues to work in partnership with local government and key stakeholders to advance the Planning Improvement agenda, with a clear focus on enhancing the effectiveness, resilience, and long-term sustainability of the planning system in the North. Current efforts are focused around three strategic areas: strengthening shared understanding of operational challenges; investing in workforce capacity and capability; and addressing broader legislative and system improvements.

This is a process of continuous improvement, and by working together, and recognising our shared responsibility, we can improve, adapt to change, and meet future needs with confidence.

Independent Inspectors Project

In March 2025, the Minister of Finance announced that the Department had successfully secured £3 million in ring-fenced funding for the Independent Inspectors Project, as part of the Transforming Planning proposal. This funding was awarded through the Public Sector Transformation Board and forms part of a wider £235 million transformation package provided by the UK Government to support public sector reform in the North.

The Project aims to establish robust arrangements that allow the Department to appoint persons under the provisions of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. This will offer an alternative route to progress 'hear and report' work for local development plans and regionally significant or 'called in' planning applications more efficiently and will strengthen public and investor confidence in the planning system by ensuring timely and effective planning processes.

Trainee Planner Programme

Supporting the planning workforce is a key priority, in recognition of the critical importance of a well-resourced planning system. In response to sector-wide challenges in recruitment and retention, the Department, in partnership with four councils and Belfast Metropolitan College, has launched a bespoke Trainee Planner Programme which commences in January 2026. The key focus of the programme is to attract new people into the system and support the succession of public sector planning.

Engagement Events

Engagement with councils

Over the past year the Department undertook individual engagements with each of the 11 council planning authorities, meeting with the planning teams as well as elected members. This was a great opportunity to gain an insight into the challenges and opportunities around planning performance at the local level. This has been invaluable in providing focus and direction for the improvement agenda. The Department is very grateful for the welcome it received from local government colleagues, and for the open and honest discussions; and there was agreement on the importance of building on this engagement and collaboration going forward to find further opportunities for support, shared learning and best practice.

Planning Roundtable Event

In April 2025, the Department hosted its first Planning roundtable event: "Plan to Improve – Pathway to Progress", bringing together around 120 stakeholders from across sectors including local and central government, business, education, the environment, and the legal profession. A link to the event can be found below:-

- [Planning plays a pivotal role in building the foundations for a better future](#)

The event provided a valuable platform for a diverse range of voices to engage in open dialogue regarding the challenges and opportunities facing the regional planning system. Discussions centred on key themes from the Planning Improvement agenda, including what defines a high-performing planning authority, the future of plan-making, climate change, the role of artificial intelligence, and workforce sustainability. These conversations helped surface practical ideas and shared priorities for improvement. We would like to continue to build on this wider engagement going forward.

Strengthening Connections Through Knowledge Sharing: A Two-Day Study Visit

The Department welcomed representatives from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in the South, on a two-day study visit in October 2025. The visit focused on the importance and value of sharing knowledge and expertise, in driving innovation and building more resilient planning systems across jurisdictions.

A presentation with students from Ulster University on the second day explored the respective planning systems, and this academic engagement helped highlight the importance of collaboration in shaping the next generation of planners. The visit concluded with a presentation by a planning consultant involved in numerous regeneration projects across Belfast, who shared the approach taken to deliver three landmark Belfast projects: Victoria Square, Ulster University, and Grand Central Station, demonstrating how the planning system can deliver transformative regeneration and create lasting social value for communities.

Planning Legislation

Validation Checklists

Legislation has been enacted, through the Planning (General Development Procedure) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 (No.176), to amend the Planning (General Development Procedure) Order (NI) 2015 (No.72) enabling local councils to produce planning application validation checklists. The objective is to enhance the quality of planning applications entering the system, front-loading the application process with the right information, with the aim of speeding up processing times and making the statutory consultation process more efficient.

To support this, the Department has published Development Management Practice Note (DMPN) 8: 'Planning Application Validation Checklists' to assist councils in developing their local checklists. This DMPN can be viewed using the following link:-

- [Development Management Practice Note 8 - Planning Application Validation Checklists - February 2025.pdf](#)

Review of the Development Management Regulations

The Department continues to progress the review of the Planning (Development Management) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 ("the Development Management Regulations") as part of the wider Planning Improvement agenda.

The review is being progressed in two phases. Phase 1 focused on enhancing public engagement and streamlining decision-making. Key changes included introducing online engagement into the pre-application community consultation process and making pre-determination hearings discretionary for councils. These changes have now been implemented through the Planning (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.

Updated versions of DMPN 10: 'Pre-Application Community Consultation (and Pre-Application Discussions)'; and DMPN 17: 'Pre-Determination Hearings', in support of the changes have been published. These can be viewed using the following links:-

- [Development Management Practice Note 10 Pre-Application Community Consultation \(and Pre-Application Discussions\) \(Version 3 July 2025\).pdf](#)
- [Development Management Practice Note 17 Pre-Determination Hearings Version 5 August 2025.pdf](#)

Phase 2 is currently underway and concentrates on reviewing the Schedule of development classes and thresholds of development for local, major and regionally significant development. The objective is to ensure the Development Management Regulations remain fit for purpose, robust, and take account of advancing technologies; as well as being adequately considered in terms of climate change and future development needs.

Workshops took place with the parties who participated in the public consultation for the Development Management Regulations in September and October 2025, gathering operational and technical insights from stakeholders. These insights will help shape the Department's final policy recommendations.

Planning Fees

In April 2025 an inflationary uplift of approximately 2.1% was introduced across current planning fees. This marks the third inflationary planning fee uplift over the past three years.

A public consultation launched in October 2025 on short-term proposals in relation to charging for statutory planning functions which currently do not attract a fee/charge. The consultation seeks views on proposals in relation to introducing new planning application fees for:

- Non-material changes; and
- Discharge of conditions

The consultation also invites feedback on a broader range of planning fee-related issues to help inform the longer-term review of planning fees. This includes exploring potential new fee categories, adjustments to existing charges, and the overall structure and fairness of the current system. The consultation, which closes on 23 December 2025, can be viewed at the following link:-

- [Public Consultation - Review of Planning Fees | Department for Infrastructure](#)

Model Licence Conditions

Under the Caravans Act (Northern Ireland) 1963 ("1963 Act") the development of caravan sites and their physical standards are controlled through planning permission granted for the use of land as a caravan site and the 1963 Act's site licensing system. The 1963 Act can be viewed at the following link:

- [Caravans Act \(Northern Ireland\) 1963](#) 

The licensing system is administered by councils who are responsible for issuing and enforcing site licences. The Department has a role in providing:

- "Exemption certificates" from the requirement to hold a site licence e.g. to touring caravan organisations; and
- Model Licence Conditions regulating the layout and provision of facilities, services and equipment for caravan sites including water supply, electricity and fire points.

In drawing up the conditions which will attach to any licence, councils must have regard to the Model Licence Conditions. Updated Model Licence Conditions were published on 1st July 2025 and can be viewed at the following link:-

- [Model Licence Conditions 2025 \(Documents\) | Department for Infrastructure](#)

The updated licensing conditions represent what would normally be expected as a matter of good practice on all caravan sites and should be applied with due regard to the particular circumstances of each case, including the physical character of the site, any facilities or services that may already be available within convenient reach, and other local conditions. Explanatory Notes have been included to add further clarity by offering guidance on the application and enforcement of the conditions for councils.

Statutory requirement to notify the Department of certain applications

Councils are reminded of their ongoing statutory responsibility to notify the Department, as required by Legislative Directions, on applications such as certain major and council own applications. The notification directions, referred to above, can be viewed at the following link:

- [Planning Legislative Directions](#)

In terms of consent applications, including Conservation Area Consent and Listed Building Consent applications, notification responsibilities are set out in the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

Notifications can be sent by email to the Department at planning@infrastructure-ni.gov.uk.

Regional Planning Policy

Review of Regional Strategic Planning Policy on Renewable and Low Carbon Energy

On the 11th December 2025, the Minister for Infrastructure published a policy revision to the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS), marking the conclusion of a focused review of the former SPPS (2015) on the subject of renewable and low carbon energy.

The new policy, agreed by the Executive Committee, is contained in the SPPS, Edition 2, and set out at pages 86 - 91. Consequently, the former subject policy titled "Renewable Energy" ceases to have effect from the date of this publication and the SPPS (2015) is hereby revoked. All other policy provisions within the former SPPS are unchanged, except for some technical changes, such as amendments to the contents page, paragraph numbers, and factual clarifications, where relevant.

Planning Policy Statement 18 (PPS 18) - Renewable Energy (August 2009) is now cancelled. Its provisions shall cease to have effect and shall not be considered material from the date of this publication. However, the guidance contained in Best Practice Guidance to PPS 18 - Renewable Energy will continue to have effect (where relevant) unless and until such guidance is updated, revised or replaced by new Departmental guidance on this planning issue.

The provisions of the SPPS, Edition 2, take immediate effect and must be taken into account in the preparation of Local Development Plans and are also a material consideration to all decisions on individual planning applications and appeals.

The SPPS, Edition 2, can be accessed at the following link:

- [The Strategic Planning Policy Statement, Edition 2](#)

Potential focused review of the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) in relation to Climate Change

In January 2024, the Department issued a Call for Evidence on a potential focused review of the SPPS in relation to climate change in the context of the Department's priorities regarding transport, water and planning. The information received has been analysed, and work is ongoing to prepare an options paper to inform the way forward, including the consideration of the scope for such a review.

Local Development Plan Programme

The Department welcomes and acknowledges the adoption of council Plan Strategies to date and the ongoing work to deliver local development plans across the region.

By way of update, the following six councils now have adopted Plan Strategies in place:- Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, Belfast City Council, Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council, Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council and Derry City & Strabane District Council. These councils are currently working towards the publication of their Local Policies Plans. Newry, Mourne and Down District Council has recently published its draft Plan Strategy.

Other Updates

Training and Guidance - Fraud in the Planning System

In April 2025, the Department in collaboration with the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), delivered a training and awareness event to all 11 councils and key stakeholders highlighting areas of potential fraud in planning. This event followed on from a recent NIAO report on falsified soil sample reports submitted in support of applications for environmental permits and licences as well as planning applications.

The half-day event was well attended, with key presentations from NIAO on the general issues of fraud and specific issues considered by NIAO in relation to falsified soil sample reports. In addition, NIEA officials delivered a presentation on how the issue was discovered and subsequently managed in relation to environmental permits and licences.

NIAO guidance can be found at the following link:-

- [Planning Fraud Risks | Northern Ireland Audit Office](#) 

Department for Communities (Historic Environment Division) Register of Historic Parks, Gardens & Demesnes

The Department for Communities (Historic Environment Division) has revised the Register of Historic Parks, Gardens & Demesnes, which merges the previous Register and its associated list of supplementary sites into a single Register document. The Register and accompanying guidance can be viewed at the following link:-

- [Historic Parks, Gardens and Demesnes](#) 