

Title of Report:	A Review of Shared Environmental Services (SES)
Committee Report Submitted To:	PLANNING COMMITTEE
Date of Meeting:	28th October 2026
For Decision or For Information	For Decision
To be discussed In Committee	NO

Linkage to Council Strategy (2026-31)	
Strategic Priority No.4	Sustainability and Managing Our Natural and Built Environment
Outcomes	- Designated sites, landscapes, and biodiversity which are protected, enhanced, and managed sustainably. - A Local Development Plan that balances growth, environmental protection, and community needs.
Strategic Priority No.5	Governance, Quality & Continuous Improvement
Outcomes	- Governance arrangements that ensure compliance, transparency, and effective decision-making. - Services that consistently meet or exceed standards achieved by the best-performing councils.
Lead Officer	Principal Planning Officer

Budgetary Considerations: Unknown at this stage. Await outcome of SES review	
Cost of Proposal	
Included in Current Year Estimates	
Capital/Revenue	
Code	
Staffing Costs	

Legal Considerations: Unknown at this stage. Await outcome of SES review			
Input of Legal Services Required			
Legal Opinion Obtained			
Screening Requirements	Required for new or revised Policies, Plans, Strategies or Service Delivery Proposals. Not applicable in this case.		
Section 75 Screening	Screening Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
	EQIA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date:

Rural Needs Assessment (RNA)	Screening Completed	Yes/No	Date:
	RNA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)	Screening Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
	DPIA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date:

1.0 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To provide an update on a Review of Shared Environmental Services (SES).

2.0 Background

- 2.1 At the 23rd September Planning Committee Meeting members requested an update on the review of SES, to include the Mid and East Antrim Borough Council (MEABC) Notice of Motion (NOM) passed on 27th July 2026.
- 2.2 The terms of the NOM are set out in the MEABC letter to all councils dated 6th October 2026 (see Appendix 1).

SES Remit

- 2.3 SES is a service shared between all eleven councils, set up in 2015 to support planning departments in carrying out Habitats Regulations Assessments (HRAs) which are legally required when determining certain planning applications. SES also carries out HRAs at each stage of the Local Development Plan (LDP) process for all eleven councils.
- 2.4 While it is acknowledged that the courts and the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) have long recognised the importance of the role played by SES, and councils are increasingly dependent on its expertise and advice, SES does not have decision-making powers. It is not a statutory consultee. Rather it acts as an internal consultee to each of the eleven local council planning departments, providing assessments to assist in the lawful determination of planning applications in accordance with the requirements the 'Habitats Regulations' and relevant caselaw.
- 2.5 There is no cost to councils for this core service.
- 2.6 At the time of transfer, SES was initially staffed from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and funded by the Department for Communities (DfC). NIEA staff transferred to MEABC under TUPE arrangements. SES salaries are funded DfC through the Transferred Functions Grant (TFG).
- 2.7 In its letter to the Council (see Appendix 1) MEABC highlights that the TFG does not permit the employment of sufficient staff to deal with the current workload, which it states *"has doubled since the function was transferred in 2015. This has caused a consultation backlog which has led to a public and*

political perception that planning applications are being unduly delayed by an under-resourced service.”

Consultancy Work relating to Local Development Plans

- 2.8 In addition to their core-funded HRA work, set out above, SES historically offered an additional (consultancy-based) service to all eleven councils. This work centred around SES undertaking the Sustainability Appraisal (including Strategic Environmental Assessment) of LDPs on behalf of councils. Eight of the eleven NI councils (including CC&G) engaged the services of SES for this purpose at draft Plan Strategy (dPS) stage.
- 2.9 SES has advised councils that it is no longer in a position to offer this additional consultancy-based service to councils. Given that CC&G has not yet published its dPS and given the intervening time period since SES first carried out the SA/SEA (almost four and half years) our evidence base, including the SA/SEA and its Scoping Report, must be updated. Going forward officials will therefore need to consider alternative options for this piece of work.

SES Review

- 2.10 The letter at Appendix 1 highlights that the review is anticipated to be completed within three to six months from the date of appointment of the Lead Reviewing Officer and formal approval of the draft Terms of Reference (see Appendix 2).
- 2.11 MEABC has set out that consultation with key stakeholders will form an integral part of the review process. A similar motion was passed by Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council on 16th September 2026.
- 2.12 MEABC is seeking formal support, in writing, from the Council, for the review to take place and welcomes suggested amendments or additions to the draft TOR.
- 2.13 A lead for the review has not yet been secured, however, work is ongoing to identify a suitably qualified and independent person to conduct the work and, once identified, MEABC will confirm this with councils.

3.0 Recommendation

- 3.1 **IT IS RECOMMENDED** that the Planning Committee note the content of this Report and agree to the Development Plan Manager writing to MEABC on behalf of the Council to advise that it supports a collective review of the role, remit, funding and operation of SES.

To All Council Chief Executive's

6th October 2026

Dear Chief Executive

Shared Environmental Services (SES)

SES is a shared service between all eleven councils, set up in 2015 to support planning departments in carrying out Habitats Regulations Assessments (HRA), a strict legal requirement when determining planning applications. SES also undertakes HRAs at each stage of the Local Development Plan (LDP) process for all eleven councils. The service is hosted by Mid and East Antrim Borough Council (MEABC) and day-to-day governance, and management currently rests with MEABC.

Existing SES staff salaries are funded through the Transferred Function Grant, however this grant does not permit the employment of sufficient staff to deal with current workload, which has doubled since the function was transferred in 2015. This has caused a consultation backlog which has led to a public and political perception that planning applications are being unduly delayed by an under-resourced service.

The functions of the SES remain critical to local authority planning applications.

Whilst I am aware that you have had an initial verbal brief and paper on the current issues at SOLACE on 4th September, I wanted to write to formally advise that on Monday 27th July 2026, Mid and East Antrim Borough Council passed a Notice of Motion in the following terms.

- “1. Undertake a review of the current provision of Shared Environmental Services, including its associated costs, staffing implications, governance arrangements, accountability, political oversight and scrutiny requirements, and the impact of current service delivery on planning outcomes and economic development.*
- 2. Reaffirm that advice and assessments provided by Shared Environmental Services are advisory in nature and are not determinative of Council planning decisions, which remain the responsibility of the relevant planning authority.*

Please reply to:

✓ **Head Office**
The Braid
1-29 Bridge Street
Ballymena BT43 5EJ

□ **Ballymena Office**
Ardeevin
80 Galgorm Road
Ballymena BT42 1AB

□ **Carrickfergus Office**
Museum & Civic Centre
11 Antrim Street
Carrickfergus BT38 7DG

□ **Larne Office**
Larne Market Yard
2 Station Road
Larne BT40 3AB

Interim Chief Executive
Valerie Watts

3. *Reaffirm, in circumstances where an advisory body, including SES, fails to respond to a planning consultation within a prescribed timeframe, the planning authority may proceed to determine an application utilising its own authoritative powers.*
4. *Write to the other ten local councils in Northern Ireland seeking their support for a collective review of the role, remit, funding and operation of Shared Environmental Services, with a view to restoring effective accountability and oversight, preventing unnecessary delays, and ensuring that sustainable economic development, particularly within the rural economy, is not unnecessarily hindered."*

A similar motion was passed by Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council on 16th September 2026. In accordance with 4, above, could you please therefore formally indicate your support in writing for the review to take place.

I attach a draft Terms of Reference for the review for your observations and any suggested amendments or additions. A lead for the review has not yet been secured, however, work is ongoing to identify a suitably qualified and independent person to conduct the work and once identified, I will confirm with you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Valerie Watts', with a horizontal line drawn underneath it.

Valerie Watts
Interim Chief Executive

Review of Shared Environmental Services (SES)

Terms of Reference

1. Purpose

To undertake an independent, evidence-based review of Shared Environmental Services (SES), examining its governance, funding, accountability, staffing arrangements and service delivery model. The review will assess the effectiveness of current arrangements and consider their impact on the preparation and delivery of Local Development Plans and planning performance and in turn, the impact on investment decisions, economic growth and rural development across participating councils.

2. Objectives

The review will:

- Examine the effectiveness of existing governance, oversight and accountability arrangements for SES.
- Review the current funding model, financial management arrangements and resource implications for Mid and East Antrim Borough Council (MEABC) in its role as host authority.
- Identify any funding gaps, resource pressures or financial sustainability issues affecting the service.
- Assess the effectiveness, efficiency and timeliness of SES service delivery, including an analysis of demand, capacity and workload.
- Evaluate the extent to which third-party processes, dependencies or statutory consultees may impact overall SES performance.
- Consider the impact of SES advice on regional planning performance, including implications for economic development, investment and the rural economy.
- Clarify the role, responsibilities and function of SES within the planning process and associated decision-making mechanisms.
- Identify opportunities to improve efficiency, effectiveness, value for money and service resilience.
- Assess options for a future operating model and recommend any necessary amendments to existing governance arrangements, Service Level Agreements and funding mechanisms.

3. Scope of the Review

The review will consider the following areas:

Governance and Accountability

- Governance structures and decision-making arrangements.
- Oversight, reporting and accountability mechanisms.
- Roles and responsibilities of participating councils and the host authority.

Financial and Resource Management

- Funding arrangements and cost allocation methodologies.
- Budget management and financial sustainability.
- Staffing structures, workforce capacity and resource requirements.

Service Delivery and Performance

- Service performance, response times and workload management.
- Demand analysis and forecasting.
- Customer, stakeholder and council satisfaction.
- Operational effectiveness and efficiency.

Planning and Economic Impacts

- The impact of SES processes and advice on planning application processing and determination and the

.

-Implications for Local Development Plan preparation and delivery.

-Impacts on economic growth, inward investment and rural development.

-Relationships with other statutory and non-statutory stakeholders.

Benchmarking and Best Practice

- Comparison with relevant shared-service arrangements across local government and the wider public sector.
- Identification of good practice and alternative delivery models where appro

4. Methodology

The review will be informed by a range of evidence sources, including:

- Analysis of governance, financial, operational and performance information.
- Review of relevant legal, policy and procedural frameworks.
- Benchmarking against comparable public and private sector service delivery models.
- Structured engagement with officers from participating councils, with particular focus on Planning Services, senior leadership teams and key decision-makers.
- Engagement with relevant external stakeholders, to be identified through a stakeholder mapping exercise.
- Consideration of views from service users and interested parties through an appropriate engagement and consultation process.
- Analysis of demand, capacity and performance trends.

5. Out of Scope

The review will not:

- Reassess, amend or challenge statutory environmental protections, environmental legislation or legal obligations.
- Review or reconsider individual planning applications, planning decisions or appeals.
- Challenge environmental designations, conservation objectives or applicable regulatory requirements.
- Consider matters that are the subject of ongoing legal proceedings.

6. Reporting and Implementation

The review is anticipated to be completed within three to six months from the date of appointment of the Lead Reviewing Officer and formal approval of these Terms of Reference.

Upon completion, a final report will be prepared setting out:

- Key findings and evidence.
- Conclusions.
- Assessment of options for future service delivery.
- Financial and operational implications.
- Recommendations for improvement and implementation.

The final report will be submitted to the Chief Executive of Mid and East Antrim Borough Council.

The Chief Executive, as sponsor of the review and representative of the host authority, will engage with the Chief Executives of the participating councils to consider the feasibility, viability and implementation requirements associated with the recommendations.

Following consideration by participating councils, a report will be presented to Mid and East Antrim Borough Council for consideration and determination of any matters requiring formal approval.

Subject to agreement, implementation of approved recommendations will be overseen through an appropriately constituted Task and Finish Group, involving relevant senior officers, including Heads of Planning from participating councils.

The final review report will be published in accordance with the Council's transparency and governance arrangements.

Appropriate consultation and engagement will be undertaken with any staff affected by approved recommendations.

7. Review Governance

Project Sponsor: Chief Executive, Mid and East Antrim Borough Council

Senior Responsible Officer: Director of Place, Mid and East Antrim Borough Council

Lead Reviewing Officer: To be appointed

Review Team: To be determined

Reporting Line: Chief Executive, Mid and East Antrim Borough Council

The Review Team will be responsible for undertaking the review in accordance with these Terms of Reference and ensuring that findings and recommendations are evidence-based, objective and proportionate.

8. Review Principles

The review will be conducted in accordance with the following principles:

- Independence and objectivity.
- Evidence-based decision making.
- Transparency and accountability.

- Meaningful stakeholder engagement.
- Proportionality and value for money.
- Focus on continuous improvement and service excellence.
- Recognition of statutory obligations and environmental responsibilities.