

# Written Ministerial Statement

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## Environment

### STRATEGIC PLANNING POLICY STATEMENT FOR NORTHERN IRELAND: 'PLANNING FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT'

*Published at 12.00 noon on Monday 28 September 2015*

**Mr Durkan (Minister of the Environment):** I am announcing today the publication of the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) for Northern Ireland following Executive Committee agreement by urgent decision on 22 September 2015. The SPPS is a new strategic planning policy framework for the reformed planning system that was introduced on 1 April when the vast majority of planning powers transferred from the Department to the eleven new councils. It sets out the planning matters that should be addressed across the Region and reflects both my Department's and the Executive's expectations for the delivery of important planning functions, such as the preparation of new Local Development Plans, the determination of individual planning applications, and planning enforcement. The provisions of the SPPS apply to the whole of Northern Ireland. They must be taken into account in the preparation of Local Development Plans and are material to all decisions on individual planning applications and appeals. The SPPS is in general conformity with the Regional Development Strategy 2035.

Consultation on the draft SPPS took place over 12 weeks in the early part of last year. There was tremendous interest in this exercise and a lively and constructive debate on the appropriate planning policy context for the reformed two-tier planning system took place. My Department received well over 700 responses.

In finalising the SPPS my Department has taken into account all the responses received. A Synopsis Report on the outcome of the consultation exercise is being published alongside the SPPS.

My Department has also taken into account the iterative Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) process which has been integrated into the preparation of the SPPS. I can advise that the specialist SEA consultants who led the SEA process have concluded that the final SPPS is much better environmentally than its draft and that there are no significant adverse environmental or transboundary impacts.

The SPPS is a shorter, simpler, strategic planning policy framework that provides clarity and certainty for councils, planners, communities, developers, investors and other stakeholders. It consolidates some twenty separate pieces of planning policy into a single statement. The SPPS is an enabling document that, under the new two-tier planning system, gives councils flexibility to bring forward detailed operational planning policies through their Local Development Plans, tailored to local circumstances.

The SPPS sets out a new purpose of planning and clarifies that furthering sustainable development is at the heart of the planning system – supported by new overarching core planning principles that give expression to it. The SPPS emphasises that the planning system operates in the public interest of local communities and the region as a whole, and encompasses the present as well as long term future needs of society.

Core Planning Principles on Improving Health and Well-being; Creating and Enhancing Shared Space; Supporting Good Design and Positive Place-making, have also been retained and improved in finalising the SPPS.

There are two new Core Planning Principles included in the SPPS. These are 'Supporting Sustainable Economic Growth, and 'Preserving and Improving the Built and Natural Environment'. These additions give emphasis to planning matters set out elsewhere in the SPPS and help to ensure an appropriate balance in relation to social, economic and environmental considerations.

Four core planning principles from the draft SPPS which were more process orientated are now reflected in a new section in the SPPS titled "The Planning Process: Implementation".

In finalising the SPPS my Department has restructured how the Subject Policies are presented. Subject Policies are now set out with reference to Regional Strategic Objectives; Regional Strategic Policy; and Implementation. This is designed to make the Department's strategic policy approach clearer. Further general revisions to subject policies include necessary updates and improvements such as setting out the wider policy context, and where appropriate highlighting the role and contribution of the specific subject policy.

There are a number of subject policies that are likely to be of particular interest to Assembly Members.

The first of these is Renewable Energy. Having taken into account all the comments received on the draft SPPS and following additional engagement with the Committee and others in relation to this particular policy area, the SPPS has been revised and improved.

There is a greater acknowledgement of the contribution the renewable energy industry makes towards achieving sustainable development, as a provider of jobs and investment across the region, and an acknowledgement of wider government policy support for the use of renewable energy sources. This includes reference to DETI's Strategic Energy Framework.

Furthermore, the SPPS seeks to more closely reflect PPS 18 by making it clearer that development that generates energy from renewable resources will be permitted where the proposal and any associated buildings and infrastructure, will not result in unacceptable adverse impacts on interests of acknowledged importance.

In relation to how the wider environmental, economic and social benefits are to be assessed the SPPS clarifies that planning authorities will give such considerations 'appropriate' weight in determining whether planning permission should be granted.

It is also considered appropriate that a cautious approach in designated landscapes, as per the current best practice guidance, is reflected in strategic policy and therefore this approach has been carried forward in the SPPS.

Where appropriate, the SPPS also takes into account the recommendations of the Report of the Environment Committee's Wind Energy Inquiry.

In relation to Development in the Countryside, the SPPS has been revised and improved to better reflect, in a strategic way, the policy approach contained in PPS21. It provides additional clarity on the range of development types considered, in principle, to be acceptable in the countryside, including infill opportunities, replacement dwellings and farm dwellings.

The SPPS retains the general current policy approach which provides significant opportunities for farming and non-farming rural dwellers wishing to live in the countryside. Furthermore, in the context of the two-tier planning system and the revisions within the finalised SPPS, a considerable degree of flexibility exists for councils to reflect differences within the region. The SPPS enables councils to bring forward bespoke local policies for the development of the rural parts of their own plan areas through their Local Development Plans which will address their specific economic, social and environmental circumstances. Such policies can reflect the provisions of the SPPS and may involve

recognising areas that are particularly sensitive to change and areas which have lower sensitivities and thus provide opportunities to accommodate sustainable development.

Subject to some minor revisions the SPPS retains the overall town centres first approach for the location of future retail and other main town centre uses proposed in the draft SPPS which was broadly supported.

In addition, the SPPS also reaffirms my position that there should be a presumption against the exploitation of unconventional hydrocarbon extraction until there is sufficient and robust evidence on all environmental impacts. I believe this is a sensible and reasonable approach.

The primary focus of the SPPS has been a consolidation of the Department's existing planning policy rather than a fundamental review of all planning policy. However, I acknowledge that significant issues have been raised particularly in relation to strategic planning policy for renewable energy and strategic planning policy for development in the countryside. These issues require full and comprehensive policy review, incorporating an updated evidential context and extensive engagement with key stakeholders.

I therefore now intend to commence these reviews of strategic policy on development in the countryside and strategic policy on renewable energy.

Planning is fundamentally about creating places where communities flourish and enjoy a sense of belonging, both now and into the future. Publishing the SPPS in final form provides clarity and certainty in terms of the policy context for unlocking development potential, supporting job creation, and aiding economic recovery, but not at the expense of compromising on environmental standards. This key document will help ensure that the planning system delivers for all now and for future generations. I am confident that the SPPS and the return of planning functions to councils will help achieve this.

My Executive colleagues have agreed the SPPS. I now commend it to you.

Copies of this written statement have been placed in Assembly Member's pigeon holes. A copy of the SPPS and supporting documents will be available to view or download from the Departmental website [www.planningni.gov.uk/SPPS](http://www.planningni.gov.uk/SPPS) from 1pm on 28 September 2015.