

## **Single Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland: A Report of Discussions held with Stakeholders for the Minister for the Environment**

Over the Spring and Summer of 2013, the Royal Town Planning Institute in Northern Ireland (RTPI NI) convened two Summits with a range of stakeholders, supported by follow-up statements, to discuss the principles of a Single Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) for Northern Ireland (the attendees are listed in Annex 1).

The Summit was set up with the endorsement of the former Environment Minister, with a commitment to report to the Minister and provide constructive feedback on the development of the single planning policy document and other planning policy and practice issues to the Minister and his Department.

The Summit aimed to bring together key interests and expertise in planning to:

- Discuss the vision and direction for planning in Northern Ireland, in particular exploring the concept of a regional single planning policy statement;
- Support the delivery of planning reform;
- Share information and activity to maximise joint working and minimise duplication.

### **Experience of a single planning policy approach from elsewhere in the UK**

Experience was drawn into the group from RTPI staff and contacts who have worked directly on the development of a single planning policy approach in Scotland, Wales and England.

- Proportionality in the need for and detail of policy is important. Policies need to be short but clear – clarity means that there is less to challenge. However, there should be caution on being too brief.
- An evidence base for any policy is essential.
- The status of the document needs to be clear.
- Experience has shown that the use of stakeholders in the development of policy and evidence to support it, adds to the value and quality of the policy.

A single policy approach “allows a holistic approach to policy in a way that subject based guidelines preclude.” (2006 Barker review of land use planning for England, commenting on the Welsh model).

### **Purpose of the SPPS**

It is important to define the purpose of the SPPS which is accessible to all. Its relationship with other relevant documents must also be explained, particularly the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) and the new Councils’ Local Development Plans. This has been effectively done in Scotland and Wales and lessons from these can be taken.

### **Content and Structure of the SPPS**

There are three types of policy which should be contained within such a document: cross-cutting themes which relate to all policies and underpin the approach in Northern Ireland; operational policies which set out the framework for applying the planning system across Northern Ireland; and topic based policies, which are focused on specific land use activities.

The strength of a single policy document is that cross-cutting themes can be embedded across all policies, which is far more difficult to achieve in separate subject based documents. Themes which lend themselves to this are ‘sustainable development’ and ‘community engagement’. Their principles can be embedded within

each policy area, creating a thread which reads across policies. Inclusive design and design quality is an area which is currently lacking in prominence in the PPSs, along with landscape character and the important role of green infrastructure. It is important for the planning system, through policy, to promote inclusive design and this could be considered as a cross cutting theme.

It is possible to arrive at a number of different combinations of topics within Chapters, however, the final set of Chapters should not necessarily follow the current PPS titles. This is an opportunity to refine the list to reflect the priorities for land use planning in Northern Ireland. For example it may be more appropriate to have a Chapter on 'Transport' which relates to all transport issues, currently in PPS 3 (Access, Movement and Parking) and PPS 13 (Transportation and Land Use) and combine 'conservation' into one Chapter. A Chapter covering 'Infrastructure' may also be appropriate incorporating policies on energy, telecommunications and waste.

Operational policies could be contained within a single Chapter, incorporating PPS 1 (General Principles), PPS 9 (Enforcement) and PPS 17 (Control of Outdoor Advertisements).

'Community engagement' has been raised as a particular aspect of the Northern Ireland system. Northern Ireland is the first part of the UK to clearly articulate a statutory link between community planning and spatial planning. If local government in Northern Ireland is to build capacity in general, but particularly for spatial and land use planning and community planning, then having specific guidance on the importance of community engagement in decision making processes, like planning, would be valuable. Scotland has undertaken exemplary work on setting National Standards for Community Engagement to establish best practice principles for local government, government agencies, and other public bodies and this would be a positive way forward in Northern Ireland also.

### **Consolidation and Updating**

Northern Ireland faces a challenging timetable to taking forward the Reform of Public Administration. However it is a positive move, particularly with the devolution of some planning responsibilities to the new local councils.

To support this devolution, it is important to have the SPPS in place, however a consolidation of current policy is the most prudent way forward; the nature of such activity is that at any point an aspect of policy will need updating or reviewing.

There are two areas currently under review / consultation: PPS 5 (Retailing, Town Centres and Commercial Leisure Developments) and PPS 15 (Planning and Flood Risk). It is important that these do not hold up the production of the first version of the SPPS.

The production format of the SPPS needs to be capable of updating once the first version is produced. The Welsh Government deliberated this issue and since 2012 now only has an electronic version, which can be easily updated with a clear reference on their website of the updates that have been made and extensive publicity when the changes are published. This has been working in practice and has been accepted by users.

### **Guidance**

Guidance is an essential supporting component of planning policy. The recent Taylor Review of Planning Practice and Guidance for England, of which the RTPI's Chief Executive Trudi Elliott was a member, reviewed 7,000 pages of guidance which support national policy and recommended (amongst others): that practice guidance

must be clear, coherent and free to all. It should be hosted on a single website and actively managed to keep it current.

Following the completion of the SPPS, it is important that there is a comprehensive review of guidance to support the policy. Whilst it is important that unnecessary and outmoded guidance is removed, it does need to be proportionately detailed to provide functionality.

Once the SPPS is in place the review of guidance must be given priority, as any lag could lead to poor decisions in the early terms of the local councils, and thus undermine the confidence of and in the new structure.

8<sup>th</sup> November 2013

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*The notes contained here are a summary of discussions held at the stakeholder Summit meetings held in April and June and comments made by participants following the meetings. They do not necessarily represent the views of RTPI NI.*

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- support policy development to improve approaches to planning for the benefit of the public
- maintain the professional standards of our members
- support our members, and therefore the majority of the planning workforce, to have the skills and knowledge they need to deliver planning effectively
- maintain high standards of planning education
- develop and promote new thinking, ideas and approaches which can improve planning
- support our membership to work with others who have a role in developing places in Wales
- improve the understanding of planning and the planning system to policy makers, politicians, practitioners and the general public.

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