

A STATEMENT BY MARK H DURKAN MLA

MINISTER OF THE ENVIRONMENT

TO THE ASSEMBLY

PUBLICATION OF DRAFT STRATEGIC PLANNING

POLICY STATEMENT FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

4TH FEBRUARY 2014

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a Statement to inform Members that today, I am launching a 12-week public consultation on the draft Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) for Northern Ireland.

We all know this is an exciting and challenging time for planning. In just 15 months, 11 new councils will be responsible for drawing up their own local development plans, making the majority of planning decisions and shaping how their areas will grow and develop in a way that responds to the needs and aspirations of the communities they serve.

The benefits of this approach are wide ranging: from improved service delivery to gaining community buy-in; from supporting the creation of a shared society to delivering sustainable development. This new approach to planning provides a real opportunity to transform the look and feel of local areas and create places that reflect local culture and the environment.

The return of planning powers to local councils on 1 April 2015 will mean that Northern Ireland will follow a two-tier approach to planning that will enhance local democratic accountability. Through transferring powers to councils, communities will have greater opportunity to engage with their elected representatives and have a say in how their area will change and develop. In this way, our planning system will be more responsive to the priorities and needs of our local people; it will be more open, more accountable and more inclusive.

Through working together, the planning system can be used to bring about positive change, economic recovery and a more sustainable future for all.

It is my job to ensure that the transfer of planning to local councils happens as seamlessly as possible. And to deliver a new system that is ready for providing these benefits.

In October, I affirmed to this Assembly my commitment to driving forward planning and local government reform. Last week, I laid a written statement before this Assembly in which I announced 5 key actions that I will be implementing over coming months. These actions will lay the foundations for introducing an improved planning system. I am pleased to be able to bring forward the first of these actions today by launching for consultation the draft Strategic Planning Policy Statement.

My aim is to create a planning system that is fast, fair and fit for purpose. A system which is less complex, more effective, more efficient and more customer focussed.

This Strategic Planning Policy Statement will ensure we have a shorter, simpler, strategic policy framework that provides clarity and certainty for all users of the reformed planning system. It consolidates some 20 separate pieces of planning policy to a single statement; reducing 800 pages of policy to less than 100.

The SPPS signals a new approach to the preparation of regional planning policy in the North. It outlines the reformed two tier planning system and sets out a new purpose of planning and a new set of overarching planning principles. It explains the new Local Development Plan and Development Management systems; consolidates existing PPSs; and includes new town centre and retailing planning policy.

Whilst the SPPS is largely a consolidation of existing planning policy provisions, there is also an emphasis on improving it. As such, I will outline some of the new elements it contains.

Firstly, eight new core planning principles which will underpin delivery of the planning reforms set out in the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

In undertaking their planning functions, planning authorities have to balance and integrate a variety of complex economic, social, environmental and other matters of public interest. The core planning principles will assist with this process and reflect my expectations for delivery of the reformed planning system. This includes furthering sustainable development; improving health and well being; supporting good design, positive place-making and urban and rural stewardship. Other core principles focus on creating shared space; delivering spatial planning; following a plan-led system; enhancing stakeholder engagement and local accountability.

Secondly, the SPPS explains the new Development Plan and Development Management system.

The Planning Act transfers responsibility for producing local development plans from the Department to councils and ensures they are at the core of planning decisions. Councils must prepare **a plan strategy** to set out their strategic vision for the future development and use of land in the plan area. **A local polices plan** must then also be prepared. This will set out the council's local polices to support the plan strategy. The SPPS explains how the new local development plan system will promote greater efficiency, transparency, soundness, sustainability and accountability.

Key elements of the new development management system are detailed in the SPPS, including:

- a development hierarchy and schemes of delegation to streamline planning decisions;
- pre-application discussions to facilitate high quality and timely applications, and;
- pre-application consultations which allow applicants to inform and discuss proposals with communities.

A third feature introduced by the SPPS is a new strategic policy in relation to Town Centres and Retailing. This policy promotes a town centre first approach for the location of future retail and other town centre land uses and is consistent with the Regional Development Strategy. It seeks to protect and enhance the vitality and viability of town centres and foster a more sustainable approach to future retail provision.

Finally, the SPPS describes proposed transitional arrangements. Transitional arrangements are considered necessary in the short to medium term to ensure continuity of planning decisions whilst councils finalise new plans for their own areas. During this interim phase, councils will apply retained operational policies.

The draft SPPS has been subjected to a number of impact assessments, including a **Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)**. This assessment, which considers its impact on Northern Ireland's environment, has been carried out independently by specialist SEA consultants acting on the Department's behalf. An Environmental Report, published with the draft SPPS, makes a range of recommendations for mitigating and enhancing the SPPS so as to improve overall environmental impact.

As part of the process of preparing the draft SPPS my officials carried out a series of early stakeholder engagement events that were independently facilitated by the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI). These included meeting with key stakeholders such as the business and local government sectors. My officials also sought comments from internal stakeholders.

To sum up, the SPPS supports my vision to create a better environment and a stronger economy. To bring forward a planning system that delivers for business, with timely decisions that encourage investment, facilitate employment and aid economic recovery.

My new planning system will realise that the environment and the economy should not, and cannot be at loggerheads. We need a system that protects the environment and fully recognises that a vibrant, sustainable environment can be a driver of prosperity and job creation. Similarly a strong economy and a prosperous society can be good for the environment.

The SPPS will support and guide local plan-making, the design and delivery of individual development proposals and the determination of planning applications and appeals. It will also influence how these functions are carried out.

This is the start of 12 weeks of consultation. I want everyone involved in the planning process be it developers, planners, councils, communities, environmental groups and professional bodies, to work together to shape and influence this planning policy and the future planning system.

I am keen that the final SPPS document reflects all stakeholders' views. Therefore, during this 12 week period of public consultation, my officials will conduct a further round of stakeholder engagement events. These events will provide an opportunity to find out more about the SPPS and to ask questions.

Meaningful engagement with stakeholders is a vital part of the policy development. In support of the need for continuous improvement in how the Department serves its citizens I am pleased to inform Members that the SPPS is being published as an online interactive digital consultation document. This aims to make it easier for stakeholders and provide a better customer experience. This will be the first time the Department has undertaken a digital first approach.

I encourage everyone with an interest to give us your views by using the digital consultation document. It is only through working together that we can ensure we achieve an efficient and fit for purpose planning system which delivers for all.