



RTPI Northern Ireland

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A Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland- early stakeholder engagement

Summary of Discussion Sessions

Background

The Royal Town Planning Institute Northern Ireland (RTPI NI) was invited by the Department of the Environment, Planning Policy Division (DOE PPD) to independently facilitate a series of informal stakeholder discussion sessions associated with the intended introduction of a new single Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland (SPPS). Five pre-draft stakeholder meetings took place during the week commencing 30th September 2013. The stakeholder meetings included representatives from a range of groups and individuals including: business and industry interests (stakeholder meeting No. 1); central Government interests (stakeholder meeting No. 2); environmental interests (stakeholder meeting No. 3) those with community interests (stakeholder meeting No. 4); and, local Government interests (stakeholder meeting No. 5). In total 49 of the 103 invitees attended throughout the week. A list of attendees is attached at Annex A.

A Discussion Paper, as well as a list of Key Questions for discussion at the meetings were provided to invitees in advance.

The aim of DOE's early stakeholder meetings is to provide a helpful 'sounding board' to assist PPD in bringing forward a well considered draft document for public consultation early next year.

Format of stakeholder meetings

Each session was opened by Mr Angus Kerr, Director, DOE Planning Policy Division with presentations provided by Mr Philip McGowan, Principal, DOE Planning Policy Division, and by ADAS Ltd - the consultants appointed by DOE to undertake a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) for the SPPS, there was an opportunity for attendees to ask questions and seek clarification from DOE officials on issues specific to or associated with the SPPS, with the discussion sessions generally taking place thereafter without further participation from Angus Kerr and Philip McGowan. These discussions were independently facilitated by Claire Williamson (RTPI NI Policy Officer). At these meetings attendees were advised that their comments were being recorded and would be summarised in this report, and to be made publically available.

This report provides a general overview of the views and opinions expressed at these events, in response to each of the DOE discussion questions, circulated in advance of each meeting (Annex B) . Where possible the report also incorporates clarity on some of the issues raised during the Question & Answers sessions (Q&A) within the various topic areas.

It is important to note that the main purpose of this document is to provide an overall flavour of the topics raised in the discussion groups, stimulated by the questions that had also been set in advance. It should not be considered to be a definitive and detailed statement of every issue that was discussed. Given the wide-ranging areas of expertise and interests discussed across the groups represented this report should be considered as identifying the variety of issues raised rather than a consensus across the five meetings.

The comments contained here are from the discussion groups and do not necessarily reflect either the DOE's or the RTPi's position.

General Observations

There is a mutual desire to work together to establish a planning system that is fit for purpose and it was made clear that the Department would welcome any submissions ahead of the publication of a draft SPPS. Despite this there are still some stakeholders who expressed their concerns regarding the entire process and feel that it is not appropriate for Northern Ireland, for various reasons including the need for a land use focus and the lack of established local councils, who has enough change and reform to contend with.

During these discussion sessions various themes emerged including concern over transition periods and expertise of staff. It was clear that there is a need for the Department to communicate its SPPS intentions as soon as possible to the wider planning community and beyond including the content of the new retail policy, and the consequences of delays through legal challenge or via the Executive. It was felt that wide communication now will assist in easing the sense of confusion that is likely to be experienced when the SPPS is introduced alongside so many other fundamental changes in the planning and local government structure in Northern Ireland.

There was some confusion around the debate given the lack of detail in the discussion document on what would be behind the core principles and subject policies and therefore some participants found it difficult to speculatively discuss the SPPS content.

Q1. What are your views on the proposed approach to preparing a Strategic Planning Policy Statement summarised in the DOE's Discussion Paper?

Models used elsewhere

Various groups discussed the benefits of learning more about the Scottish model, what works and what doesn't. It was suggested that it would be beneficial for the DOE or RTPi NI to facilitate a conference/ event that looks at the Scottish model, how it operates and what can be learnt.

The Department has studied the experiences of Scotland, England and Wales and concluded that the exercise to consolidate the existing policy is the most appropriate (the Scottish model).

Purpose for planning

- It is important to stakeholders that they are engaged in the writing of the purpose for planning that will form an important part of the SPPS.

Equality issues

- There should be the opportunity to address issues such as access and how to better facilitate access issues.

Electronic consultation and communication

- The groups felt that there needs to be more media coverage, perhaps fed into by a small group of practitioners.
- It was discussed that the DOE should be advertising now on the website and by other means to invite people to express their views.
- It is important that online consultations are not overly directive and that a response can take whatever forms the respondent wishes and that it has a balanced approach.
- In general the groups welcomed the opportunity to consult on line.
- There was a consensus that there is a need for a high profile media launch.
- It is important to remember that not all citizens have access to a computer and other means of communication remain important.

Issues of policy conflict

- SPPS needs to address any conflicts in existing policies in the current PPSs.
- This is a good opportunity to review the existing PPSs and to look closely at the existing titles.

Settling in periods

- The Department recognises that the introduction of a two tier planning system will take considerable time to bed in.

Role of RDS

- The Department noted that the SPPS is required to be in general conformity with the RDS.

Existing PPSs/ subject policy list

- There are concerns that PPSs will continue to function longer than planned.
- The order of the policy topics within the discussion document needs to be revisited and fitted together.
- It was suggested that major infrastructure and flooding should be given higher positions given their importance.
- There is an opportunity to give greater consideration to bigger issues such as fracking, soil erosion and landslides.
- Get rid of overlaps and bridge gaps, including PPS 3 and 13 and PPS 7 and 12.

Role of the Plan

The Department made the following comments:

- 6 preparatory plan teams are being set up to bring forward preparation work to work in shadow mode, this will include liaison with DSD.
- Each existing plan will remain in place until it has been replaced – the older the plan the less weight it will generally carry.
- Eventually the PAC will produce a report, signed off by the Minister that will provide a level of scrutiny, soundness, conformity and consistency that councils must comply with when producing their plans.

- It will depend on the council area to how they prioritise their plan development, it is estimated by the Department that it will be around 2 years before new plans start to emerge.
- How will competition/ tensions between councils be managed? There will be a number of mechanisms in place to ensure consistency and collaboration where appropriate.

Legal Challenge

- Concern was raised regarding what will happen in the event of a legal challenge to the SPPS.
- The Department noted that should this be the case the local council will continue to operate using the exiting plan and PPS structure.

Need for capacity building

- Several groups identified the need for training for elected members/ decision makers.

Q2: Do you agree that the proposed core planning principles are appropriate for the new two-tier and reformed planning system?

Given the diverse range of views from within the different sectors represented at the stakeholder meetings the responses to this question cover a broad range of reactions with concerns that the core planning principles are potentially incompatible.

- There is also a need for detailed explanations on issues such as ‘what is meaningful engagement’ and ‘what is promoting well-being’?
- The need to ensure that Northern Ireland is afforded the same level of protection as the rest of the UK and that there should be linkages between the subject policies.

OFMDFM

- There was concern that this will essentially be a three tier system.

Sustainable Development

- This should be given priority and should include natural environment and natural diversity.

Sustainable Economic Growth

- Not all growth is sustainable.
- While economic considerations are critical they should not be at the expense of the environment and this has some serious practical considerations.
- There was a concern from several groups that the principles showed too much bias towards the economy.

Community Planning

- The view was expressed that this was positive and goes further than has gone before and that expertise from outside should be brought in to develop this.
- The SPPS should provide details or signposting to guidance on community consultation.
- At a local authority level the debate on local planning is likely to come through community plans, it would be beneficial for the SPPS to express this statutory link.

- Community issues set out in PPS 1 should be updated and featured.

Spatial Planning

- A definition of spatial planning is required.

Transparency

- Transparency is critical and a code of conduct is required.

Shared Society

- This issue will be difficult to agree on, the notion of how planning can impact on this needs to be bedded into the core principles.

Development Contributions

- Should this be included and where would it sit? Potentially in local plans under local opportunity sites.

Other subjects suggested for inclusion within the core principles

- Review and Revision
- Equality
- Better design
- Regeneration
- Reference to marine plan
- Energy
- Segregation
- Social exclusion

Q3: What are your views on bringing forward new planning policy provisions for town centre retail?

- Several groups expressed concerns as to how this will be adopted, that it could be contentious and as to how the new retail policy will fit into the SEA. It was highlighted that Northern Ireland is a debt region and the retail policy should reflect this.
- Concerns were expressed over where the future of retail lies and that it should be linked with regeneration. What will the focus of the town centre be?
- Some attendees expressed concerns about a risk that the revised retail policy will overshadow the work of the SPPS and found it challenging to comment without knowing the content. There was speculation amongst the groups as to the content and direction of the new retail policy with an emphasis on a town centre focus.

Review of retail policy

- When will the retail policy within the SPPS be reviewed? Will it be a replication of PPS 5 and too prescriptive?
- The Department noted that should the introduction of a retail policy within the SPPS become too contentious, the SPPS may continue to develop without this element.

Conservation Areas

- There was a desire from some to see special protection around conservation areas and listed buildings in relation to retail.

Q4: How might the SPPS deal with the issues of how economic considerations are taken into account in planning policy, development plans and in making planning decisions? How should economic considerations be balanced with other planning considerations such as environmental protection, design, amenity etc?

- The views of the groups were varied on this subject. This included stating that economic considerations are outside the remit of planning; they should not be there and should not be given special considerations. This view was supported by many who also proposed that it was not a subject in its own right and could be considered under sustainable development.
- The SPPS will need to provide clear definitions on such subjects of sustainable development and economic considerations and submissions need to be backed up by clear evidence, not aspirations.
- Economic considerations should not outweigh other plan zonings, sustainable decisions made with environmental and social considerations.
- The question was asked if the proposed wording 'may take account of market conditions' was sufficient? It was also proposed that the SPPS should reinstate a presumption in favour of development.
- It was suggested that the SPPS should have something that will bind the document together – the example was given of a golden thread that focused on recovery. There should also be a link between the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) and route mapping economic considerations vs. other planning considerations and that both environmental and economic considerations should be mutually supportive.
- The issue was raised by some about economic considerations being subject to SEA.

Q5: What are your views on the level of detail to be provided in the SPPS as part of the process of consolidating extant planning policies?

Many of the issues associated with this question have been addressed by questions 1 and 2 relating to the approach of the SPPS preparation and the proposed core planning principles for the new two-tier and reformed planning system.

- There was discussion around the Scottish model and the benefits of learning how this operates in reality and the 15 pillars of Scottish policy. It is also important that the context of a policy is not lost in consolidation, the example given being Anaerobic Digestion (AD) guidance that contained valuable information.

Landscapes

- An important element in both the urban and rural environment is that one size does not fit all when considering European Designations.

Local Policy

- The Department noted that local councils will produce local policy which reflects the strategic direction in the SPPS. The level of prescription will vary from topic area to topic area, the location of the authority producing the policy and the potential political make up.

- Concern was raised that consultants would have to work within 11 different polices are what will essentially be the same issues.

Local v National Policy

- For instance tourism as a local policy and flooding as a national.
- Impact on agri-food sector.
- The SPPS needs to address strategic issues, such as fracking, that while they may impact on a single local area, a discussion made by politicians will be made in the interests of Northern Ireland.
- Major infrastructure was proposed as national.
- Good design / lifetime homes and sustainable homes
- Combating obesity programmes, such as policy on fast food outlets close to schools.
- Health.
- Design and Access Statements.

Q6: What are your views on transitional arrangements?

- There was a general concern running through the groups regarding the potential for confusion that will be taken advantage of and result in legal challenges. There are risks of hold ups at Executive level and pressure for councils to produce plans in unrealistic timeframes.
- The Department noted that the timing of transitional arrangements will depend upon the final SPPS being in place for 2015. Councils can commence preparatory work in preparing their draft plans ahead of 2015.
- It was suggested that a flow chart diagram explaining transitional arrangements, how these impact the SPPS and for production of development plans would be helpful.
- A member of the group proposed that there should be a statutory timeframe for local plan completion and a corporate strategic statement of intent to set scenes for new area plans.
- There was concern that councils will be under pressure to prepare area plans quicker and therefore be criticised.
- The discussion paper talks about operational policies being 'compatible' with the SPPS, there was some discussion around what the criteria for compatible was and what the legal obligations would be for a local authority not being 'compatible'.

Q7: Do you have any comments in relation to the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of the SPPS?

- It is important to consult with Department for Social Development (DSD) officials across the region as to how this will take into account the funding spent in disadvantaged areas.
- It was established that the SEA would be high level and would not be looking at local issues such as wind farms and renewable technologies – it will be for the local authorities to interpret locally, raising the question that will each local council require an SEA?

- It was noted that it was positive to see human links and health issues feature and that it looked encouraging and that there should be a balance between the natural and built environments.
- It was also questioned as to how 'economic considerations' and international agreements will be assessed for the SEA and the role of marine plans?

Other Issues outside of the set questions

Guidance

- It is important that people are aware that guidance is being developed, although it does not form part of the SPPS and was therefore not part of the discussion. The subject was raised on several occasions and it was noted that it is helpful to look towards Scotland who have a maturity in preparing guidance.
- Guidance will be considered in parallel to the SPPS but will be dealt with under a different work strand.
- Local authorities will have local accountability and will incorporate policies and guidance relevant to them.

Staffing

- Staff who currently carry out the planning functions will transfer to local councils.

Trans-boundary issues

- Large applications that cross council boundaries will be dealt with by Central Government DOE.

October 2013 **The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) is the largest professional institute for planners in Europe, representing some 23,000 spatial planners. RTPI NI represents the RTPI in Northern Ireland, with over 500 members. The Institute seeks to advance the science and art of spatial planning for the benefit of the public. As well as promoting spatial planning, the RTPI develops and shapes policy affecting the built environment, works to raise professional standards and supports members through continuous education, training and development.**

Annex A

Attendance List:

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| David Fry | CBI |
| Richard Kirk | ICE |
| Michael Gordon | Turley Associates |
| Nigel Lucas | CEF |
| Meabh Cormacain | NIRIG |
| Gordon Kyle | NIRIG/SSER |
| Jill Fitzgerald | DE |
| Catherine McEvoy | DRD Regional Planning Branch |
| Mark Hammond | DOE NIEA |
| Carol Ramsey | DSD BCCRD |
| Ian McClure | DHSSPS (HDPB) |
| Keith Miller | DHSSPS Health Estates |
| Gabriel Nelson | DOE – NIEA (Water) |
| David Porter | DARD – Rivers Agency |
| John Neely | DFP – Properties Division – Building Standards |
| Philip Rodgers | DETI – Economic Policy Unit |
| Helen Kirk | National Trust |
| Diane Ruddoch | National Trust / NI Environment Link |
| Paddy McAteer | Ulster Society for the Protection of the Countryside |
| John Quinn | ARC 21 / NILGA |
| Cllr. Shaun Gallagher | Derry City Council |
| Terence McCaw | Royal Society of Ulster Architects |
| Jonna Monaghan | Belfast Healthy Cities |
| Michelle Hill | RSPB |
| Jenifer Fulton | Ulster Wildlife |
| John Anderson | UAHS / FOLL / GBPT |
| Patrick Casement | CNCC |
| Anne Casement | UAHS |
| Colm Bradley | Community Places |
| Clare McGrath | Community Places |
| Peter Carr | Belfast Metropolitan Residents Group |
| Richard Bowman | Strategic Planning |
| Beverley Stevenson | Strategic Planning |
| Michael Corr | PLACE |

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|---------------------|----------------------------------|
| Gary Potter | PLACE |
| Orla McCann | Disability Action |
| Stephen McKay | Queen's University |
| Greg Lloyd | University of Ulster |
| Alison McCullagh | Omagh District Council |
| Alastair Law | Antrim Borough Council |
| Catherine McWhirter | Castlereagh Borough Council |
| Jim Dillon | NILGA |
| Karen Smyth | NILGA |
| Jonathan Hayes | Armagh City and District Council |
| Lewis Porter | Craigavon Borough Council |
| Trevor Kyle | Ballymena Borough Council |
| Mark Kelso | Cookstown District Council |
| Stephen McMaw | Coleraine Borough Council |
| Briege Coyle | Belfast City Council |

Annex B

Discussion Questions

Question 1:

What are your views on the proposed approach to preparing a Strategic Planning Policy Statement summarised in DOE's Discussion Paper?

Questions 2:

Do you agree that the proposed core planning principles are appropriate for the new two-tier and reformed planning system?

Question 3:

What are your views on bringing forward new planning policy provisions for town centres and retail?

Question 4:

How might the SPPS deal with the issue of how economic considerations are taken into account in planning policy, development plans and in making planning decisions? How should economic considerations be balanced with other planning considerations such as environmental protection, design, amenity etc?

Question 5:

What are your views on the level of detail to be provided in the SPPS as part of the process of consolidating extant planning policies?

Question 6:

What are your views on transitional arrangements?

Question 7:

Do you have any comments in relation to the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of the SPPS?