

Government Action for our Urban Environment



PLACE is the Northern Ireland Architecture & Built Environment Centre. We have promoted understanding, debate and awareness of landscape, townscape, architecture, planning, participation and the broad range of built environment issues since 2004. PLACE is part of an international network of architecture centres and is the first of its kind on the island of Ireland. This paper has been prepared by a collegiate group of professionals from various backgrounds that share a passion for the urban and rural environment of NI. These professionals are key members of organisations as diverse as the Northern Ireland Government's Ministerial Advisory Group for Architecture and the Built Environment (MAG), PLACE and the Academy of Urbanism, however the views expressed in this document are their individual thoughts and not necessarily the policy of their organisations.

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Northern Ireland has fantastic urban and rural assets. These are necessary to help deliver a dynamic economy and vibrant society. There is a pronounced need to understand what makes our place special, how to capture its essence to nurture it to thrive for future generations to enjoy. To accomplish this, we need joined up thinking and commitment at a strategic, governmental level which links policies and programmes to deliver leadership for successful places. This paper argues that we must work together to protect and enhance this special place. These are concrete deliverable ways in which the new Assembly can help sustain and create high quality places for the people of Northern Ireland.

Our environment is affected by all of the Government Departments as set out below:

DOE	Planning, Heritage, Natural Environment
DRD	Regional Planning, Roads and Infrastructure
DSD	Regeneration, Housing
DCAL	Arts, Culture and Leisure provision; MAG
DARD	Rural and agricultural environment
DENI	Education at all levels
DHPSS	Well being and healthy lifestyles
DFP	Land and property services, valuations, legal titles, mapping etc
Local Councils	Building Control, Environmental Health, RPA powers etc.

There are a wide range of Government Departments in NI: public agencies, private companies and NGOs that have roles in looking after, creating and shaping the environment. We have a fragmented government. Until recently, agencies acted in isolation to deliver only their own component of the city: housing (NI Housing Executive); roads (Department for Regional Development); urban regeneration (Department for Social Development); and planning (Department of Environment). Northern Ireland politicians have now taken back control of decision-making, and by and large these politicians recognise the problems of disconnection among the competing agencies and disconnection within our society. We see the new Assembly as an opportunity to address the following key objectives, and we are seeking agreement from all of the different Departments to take a collegiate leadership approach in taking these forward.

The Government's Architecture and Built Environment Policy published by DCAL in 2006 sets out agreed Guiding Principles and Objectives:

- Guiding Principle 1 - Creativity and Innovation
- Guiding Principle 2 - Heritage
- Guiding Principle 3- Sustainable Development
- Objective 1 - Delivery of Good Design
- Objective 2 - Planning Policies
- Objective 3 - Knowledge and Skills
- Objective 4 - Awareness
- Objective 5 - Integration of Art

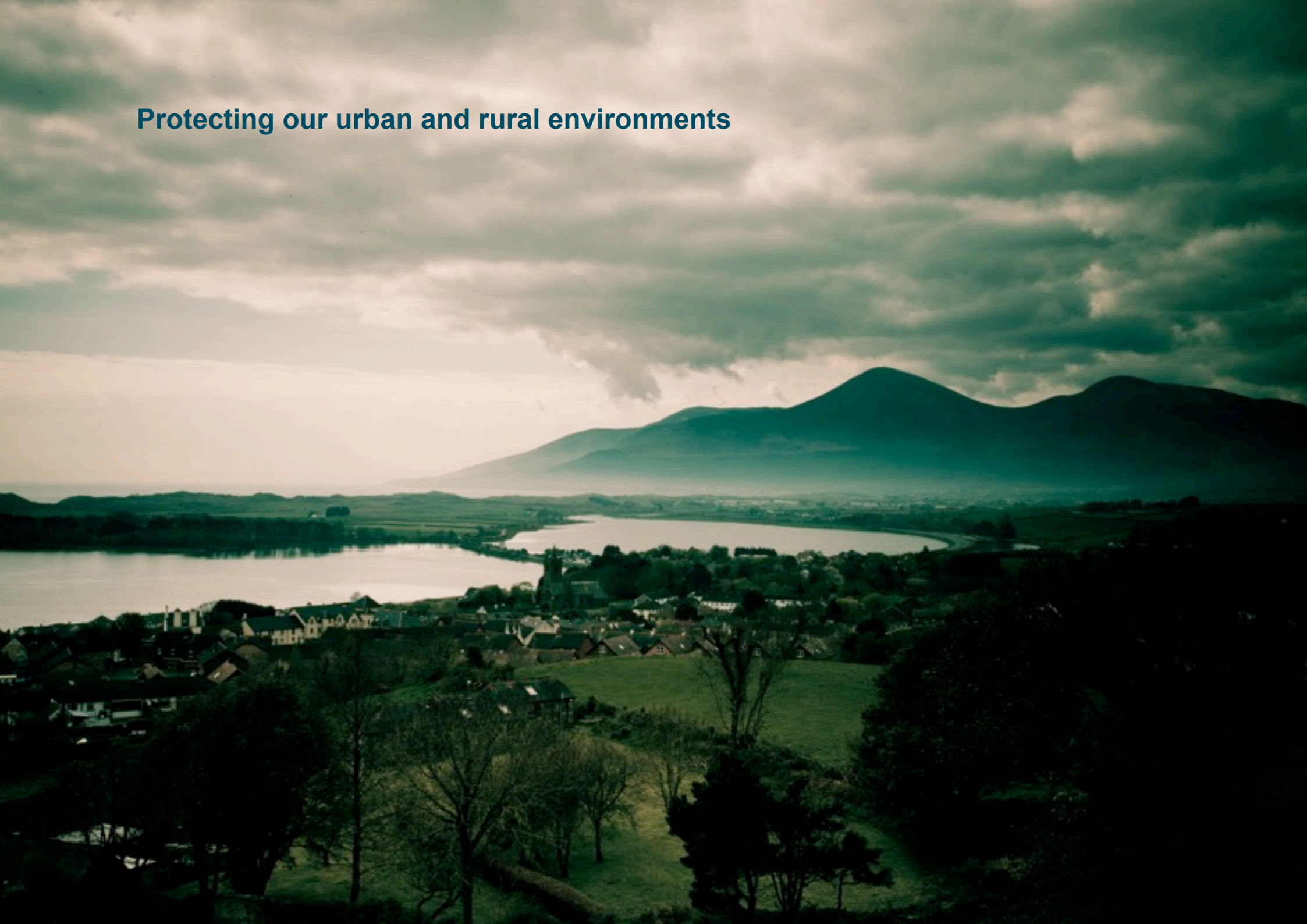
These are necessary to help deliver a dynamic economy and vibrant society for Northern Ireland and need action now to ensure that these are more than aspirational. The actions are somewhat inter-connected and require joined-up work by government. We have set out a series of proposed action points that can start now to help deliver the Principles and Objectives set out in the above government policy:

Action Point 1 Protect our urban and rural environments

Action Point 2 Enhance the quality of our cities, towns and villages

Action Point 3 Improve the knowledge of our places

Protecting our urban and rural environments



Action Point 1 Protect our urban and rural environments

It is widely recognised that we must create sustainable cities, towns and villages in which to live, work and enjoy and protect for future generations. Creating safe, attractive urban places relieves development pressure on the natural environment, central to our cultural heritage and agricultural economy. What is needed are actions and priorities to address and reflect the critical balance required to protect urban and rural environments for future generations. This includes actions and policies to:

- Strengthen city and town centres as safe attractive urban places to live, work, shop and socialise. This needs all agencies and neighbouring local authorities to work together for the common good, rather than sectoral or parochial interests.
- Create shared uses that encourage a shared future and promote community cohesion. Shared futures are not simply restricted to bridging the historical Northern Ireland cultural divide but include all aspects of life such as good quality, accessible and safe public spaces.
- Ensure land use and transport planning are fully integrated with mixed use neighbourhoods. Zoning is an outmoded and discredited planning approach that oversimplifies how society operates and causes social disconnection. The new 'spatial' planning being introduced by legislation and supportive policy should help facilitate a more integrated approach to urban design and regeneration that is already evident and successful in England and elsewhere.
- Provide more meaningful incentives to promote the use of public transport and discourage the use of private vehicles. Make public transport a more attractive option using fare structures and other means. Make transport connections more simple and legible including public transport from our airports to city centres by rail or otherwise. In tandem increase priority for public transport and discourage private vehicles.
- Promote "meanwhile" uses for surface car parks and underutilised areas in our city and town centres. Such initiatives can contribute to diversity and vibrancy of places. Some pilot work is being done on this in terms of skateparks and academic research. It is now time to make this work more widespread.
- Nurture incremental change within a wider strategic vision for a place rather than stagnating areas that are awaiting wholesale change. Comprehensive redevelopment is not always the right answer to problems of urban renewal. Comprehensive regeneration is what we're all aspiring to achieve through various means.
- Discourage single houses in the countryside which further disperse our population putting additional pressure on our infrastructure and services. This could be done in parallel with encouraging rural growth in villages to support existing services such as education, health, sports and leisure facilities. Much work has been done on this already under PPS21 but a coordinated impact assessment should be considered to identify the full consequences of multiple septic tanks, long commuter journey times and the environmental and life quality implications.
- Encourage agricultural economy to create a sustainable region in terms of food and energy.
- Ensure that historic buildings, whether listed or in conservation areas, are fully utilised and maintained. Re-use of existing buildings is not only sustainable in itself but ensures the retention of local identity and landmarks, thereby creating an environment that is pleasant and stable to live in, as well as attracting tourism and incoming businesses.

Enhancing the quality of our cities, towns and villages



Action Point 2 Enhance the quality of our cities, towns and villages

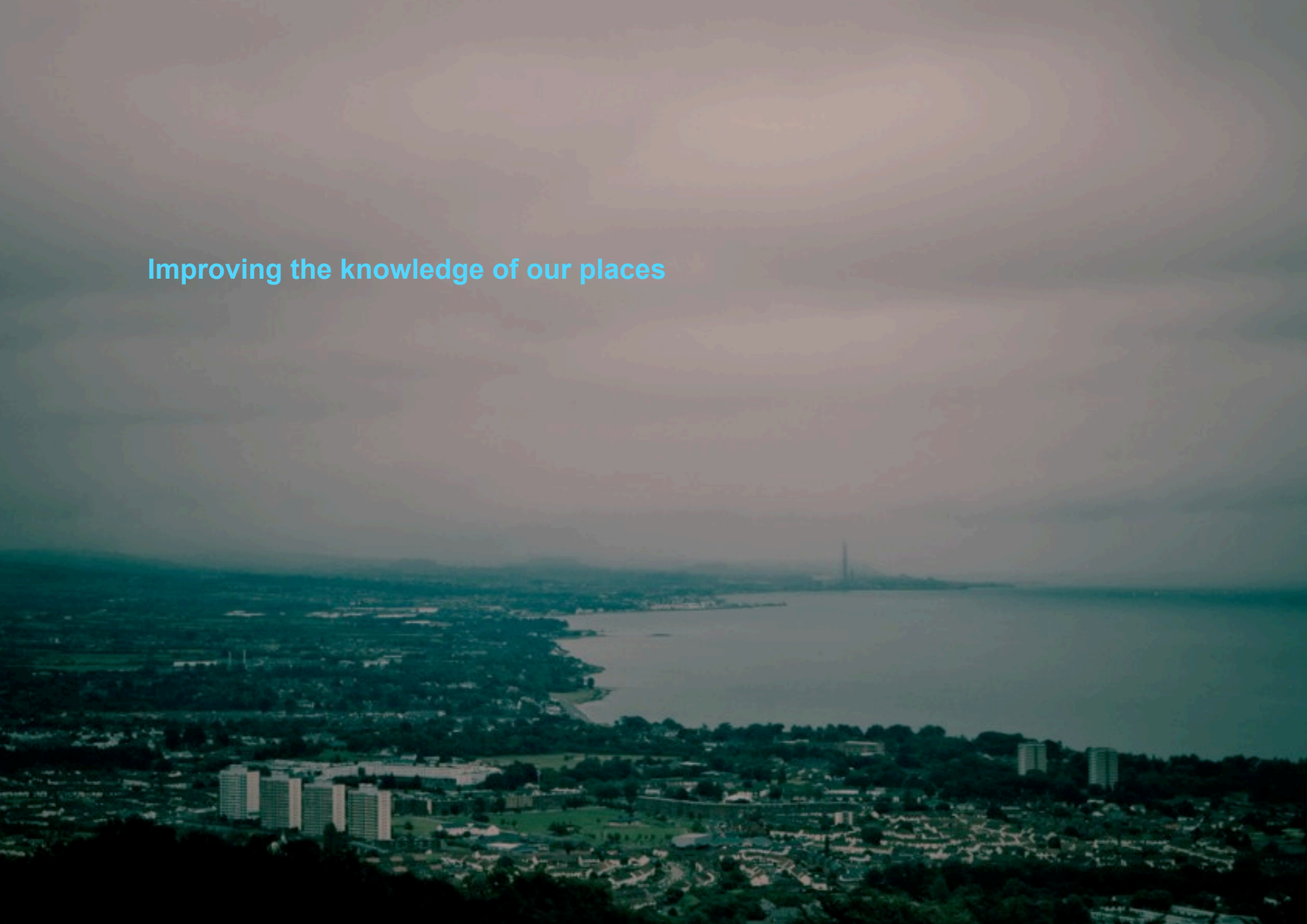
Delivering high quality design in urban environments is important for many reasons. Safe and vibrant places contribute to our quality of life in terms of health and well being. High quality city and town centres attract people and in turn investment which is critical to the growth of our economy. Indeed it is becoming increasingly important for economic investment purposes to have a well planned and designed environment that is attractive, distinctive and properly functional as a place. This is already the conclusion of a recent report for the Northwest Regional Development Agency entitled 'Places Matter! Economic Value of Good Design in a Recession' May 2009.

We currently have limited policies that relate to the quality of the built environment in Northern Ireland. QD1 of PPS7 and Creating Places were prepared by DoE to address the quality of residential development. These documents are relatively narrow focused specifically relating to housing schemes and require updating to reflect current best practice. The policy on Architecture and the Built Environment Policy for Northern Ireland published by DCAL in 2006 was endorsed by all government departments. MAG was established to advise DCAL and the Minister on the Architecture and Built Environment policy. This Ministerial advisory resource should perhaps be more widely utilised across Northern Ireland and across government departments.

All too frequently policies are being used as checklists rather than opportunities to achieve specific design solutions to address particular challenges. We need our professionals in the public and private sectors to work together to apply their professional judgements to significantly improve the quality of our environment and leapfrog to a higher standard. Quality design does not necessarily imply more expense and can actually increase development values, attract further investment and stimulate economic growth (see Places Matter referenced above). This includes actions and/or policies to:

- Introduce approaches that encourage multi-disciplinary discussions to agree bespoke design solutions for our streets, spaces and buildings that positively contribute to the distinctiveness of our places.
- Improve the quality of our streets and places by either adopting Manual for Streets and Manual for Streets 2 or reviewing and updating Creating Places to take account of best practice and expand to encompass all of the built environment and not just residential.
- Update QD1 and expand design policies to encompass the entire built environment and not just residential development.
- Increase influence of MAG in the development process in the same manner that CABE (Now merged with the Design Council) engaged in England.
- Ensure that all public buildings are designed to the highest standard. Not just in terms of materials and sustainability but more importantly in relations to the key urban design principles which create vibrant, safe attractive places.
- The professional design community of planners, architects, urban designers, landscape architects and engineers are ready to play their part in consolidating a better future for Northern Ireland.

Improving the knowledge of our places



Action Point 3 Improve the knowledge of our places

To enable us to improve our places we need a meaningful understanding of how they work on physical, social and economic levels. This covers all sectors of the community and all Departments. The benefits would be far reaching and long lasting. There are many different ways to analyse places and we believe that a lot of the information is available through the different Departments, other organisations and the Universities but not in a form that can be disseminated and mapped. Working in a more collegiate manner as advocated by Professor Greg Lloyd in his Planning Reform paper we could make widely available the various layers including health, education, provision of facilities, deprivation and economic activity.

When the Reform of the Planning System and /or the Reform of Public Administration come into effect the local councils will be more responsible for their own environments. We need to collectively expand the knowledge and understanding of what makes and sustains successful places to enable councils and communities to address the huge challenges that they will be faced with. This can be as simple as a capacity building exercise and should not require additional resources outside those available across existing government departments or local councils. This includes actions and/or policies to:

- Promote community engagement processes for all major works that can guide and inform the formulation of a design brief for any site through proper community participation at each stage. This will help engender a sense of local ownership and assist in the long-term viability of what is created. It will help demonstrate the government's commitment towards the creation of sustainable communities, the underlying principle being the recognition that local people may have knowledge of what needs to be done to promote the sustainability of their area in terms of improving the social, economic and environmental wellbeing. The Department for Social Development has recognised this and with PLACE has provided a channel for local people to be actively involved in the development process surrounding the redevelopment of sites from the earliest stages. The NIHE's Housing Community Network and Supporting Communities NI offer a region-wide network of local groups that could also assist. Other government agencies and departments can learn from these models.
- The new spatial planning legislation together with community planning offers the opportunity to work with local communities to identify the specific and distinctive quality of our cities, towns and villages. This should be the starting point for new local planning which can move beyond the rather limited land use regulation system that has ignored the importance of place.
- Build the capacity through training and guidance of our communities and councils in advance of the Reform of the Planning System and Public Administration. PLACE, MAG and the Academy of Urbanism can assist in this capacity building.
- Establish City X-Rays pilot projects. This is a recognised AoU programme that aims to capture, test and share a range of place-making techniques to better understand our surroundings. Promote UniverCities partnerships between Universities and Councils to work with practitioners and the public.
- Support and increase the role of PLACE to expand their programmes in schools, colleges and the community. This would increase peoples understanding of our environment and the how the choices we make affect this.
- Integrate the built environment & related aspects in terms of well-being sustainability, quality design and safety into the curriculum.
- Ensure that the history and physical heritage of our towns and villages are understood by planners, councils and the community. To this end the resources of NIEA's Second Survey and the DoE's conservation area documents should be more generally utilised, and publications on local buildings such as those published by the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society should be widely available.



Encouraging ambition and raising expectations

Conclusions

Northern Ireland now has a fantastic opportunity to turn our urban and rural assets into drivers of economic growth and social cohesion. Our cities and towns are specific to here and are among the best models of urban design in Europe.

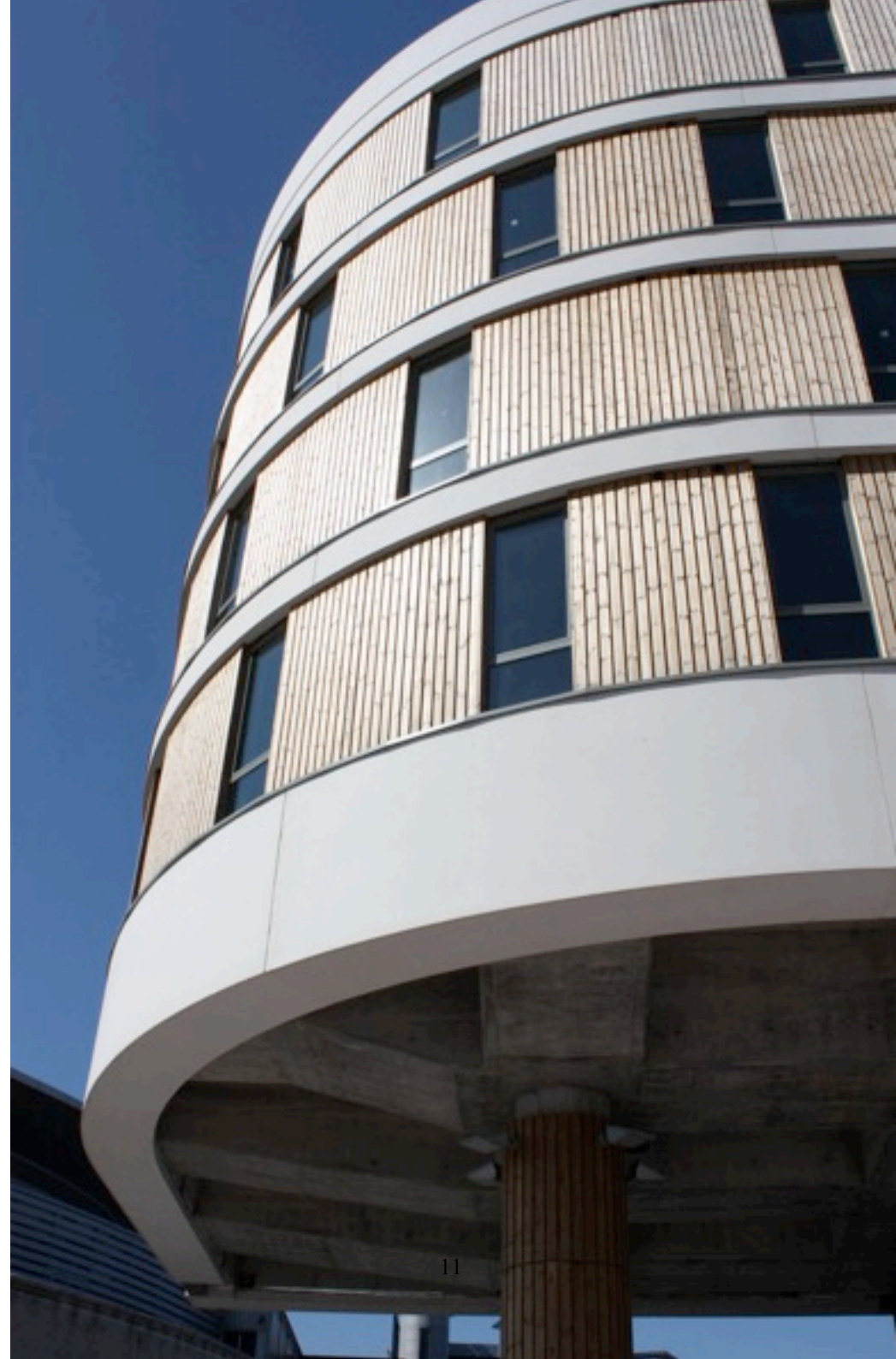
Belfast, Derry-Londonderry, Armagh, Newry and Lisburn all have richness that can be the basis for economic transformation. Smaller towns and villages including Ballymoney, Enniskillen, Coleraine, Bangor, Sion Mills, Caledon, Hillsborough, Rostrevor, Belleek and lots of others others have unique and specific characteristics that can form building blocks for tourism development and the creation of high quality places to live and work. To accomplish this, we need joined up thinking and commitment at a strategic, governmental level which links policies and programmes to deliver leadership for successful places.

Moreover, we have to acknowledge that many of our cities, towns and villages have suffered from both population decline and poor planning. Belfast has seen a population decline of 35% in the last 35 years while surrounding towns such as Dromore and Ballyclare have grown but with huge damage to their distinctive sense of place.

This paper argues that we must take action and work together to protect and enhance this special place. These are concrete deliverable ways in which the new Assembly can help sustain and create high quality places for the people of Northern Ireland. These are necessary to help deliver a dynamic economy and vibrant society. The actions are somewhat inter-connected and require joined-up work by government to protect our urban and rural environments; enhance the quality of our cities, towns and villages; and improve the knowledge of our places. We are prepared to play our part in this process and ready to meet, work and move matters forward.

“Raising standards in design quality requires strong leadership. Drawing the best out of construction projects means challenging clients – public and private – to raise expectations.”

Nelson McCausland MLA, Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure





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