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| Subject: | Responses to Department of Environment's 'Call for Evidence' for Strategic Planning Policy on Development in the Countryside |
| Date: | 19 th April 2016 |
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| Is this report restricted? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| <i>Please see Note 1 in Part 3</i> | | |
| Is the decision eligible for Call-in? | Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <i>If 'No' please see Note 2 in Part 3</i> | | |

| 1.0 | Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues |
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| 1.1 | The Minister of the Environment committed to undertake a review of regional strategic planning policy for development in the countryside following the publication of Strategic Planning Statement (SPPS) 'Planning for Sustainable Development' in its final form in 2015. Members will be aware the SPPS consolidated some twenty separate policy publications into one document, setting out strategic planning policy in relation to a wide range of subject policies, including regional policy for Development in the Countryside. A copy of the SPPS Subject Policy 'Development in the Countryside' is attached at Appendix 3. |
| 1.2 | The aim of the SPPS with regard to the countryside is to manage development in a manner which strikes a balance between protection of the environment from inappropriate development, while supporting and sustaining rural communities consistent with the Regional Development Strategy 2035. |
| 1.3 | The current strategic policy approach is to cluster, consolidate and group new |

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| 1.4 | <p>development with existing established buildings and promote the re-use of previously used buildings. The SPPS identifies a range of development types (both residential and non-residential) which in principle are considered to be acceptable in the countryside and provides that other types of development will be considered as part of the development plan process in line with the other policies set out within the SPPS.</p> <p>The purpose of the report is to make members aware of the Calls for Evidence for Development of the Countryside and seek approval for the draft response outlined in paragraphs 3.2 and detailed in appendix 1.</p> |
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| 2.0 | Recommendations |
| 2.1 | Members are asked to consider and, if appropriate agree the draft response to the Call for Evidence: Development in the Countryside outlined in paragraph 3.2 and detailed in appendix 1. |
| 3.0 | Main report |
| 3.1 | <p>The Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to a ‘Call for Evidence’ for Development of the Countryside (see appendix 2). The ‘Call for Evidence’ process will improve the DoE’s understanding of the operation and impact of the existing strategic policy and provide up-to-date evidence on the social, environmental and economic impacts of development in the countryside. The DoE is particularly keen on views on how strategic planning policy should assist with achieving sustainable development to support vibrant rural communities, without compromising our natural and built environment, and other assets of acknowledged importance.</p> |
| 3.2 | <p>Key Issues</p> <p>The Council supports the broad aims of the SPPS with regard to Development in the Countryside to ‘manage development in a manner which strikes a balance between protection of the environment from inappropriate development, while supporting and sustaining rural communities.’ The following are the key issues from the draft Council response to DoE’s Call for Evidence – Development in the Countryside in Appendix 1. It is recommended that Council:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports the intention to maintain sustainable rural communities. • Recognises the value of Northern Ireland’s unique natural resource, its diverse ecosystems and biodiversity and the need to retain its sensitive landscape character of our rural resource for future generations. • Recommends a more proactive approach to managing land for development and |

to ensure planning policies are put in place to accommodate selective, modest growth based on rural settlements.

- Welcomes further detail on Special Countryside Areas i.e. how to define, manage and monitor the designation as well as its proposed implications to the planning system. As part of this work, the DoE should clarify:
 - If there scope to control pressures of urban sprawl and less sustainable development in rural areas immediately adjacent to towns and cities under the Special Countryside Areas;
 - if additional protection could be afforded to Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and the wider countryside
- Supports the protection of our natural and built environment and recognises that in formulation of the LDP all Council's are responsible for the protection of the wider environment as a sustainable asset for all future generations.
- Supports the precautionary principle as vital in plan making in particular when outlining proposed land use zonings, locations for development and settlement limits where it must take full account for implications on natural heritage features and landscape character. Through effective planning practices, the potential for adverse environmental impact can be minimised and enhancement features secured.
- Recognises the function of rural areas to the local and regional economy in providing services to the wider catchment population. Agriculture, farm diversification and forestry will continue to be important defining elements of rural life. Prime quality agricultural land should continue to be protected and should not be eroded in a piecemeal way but only used to meet strategic development objectives. The term 'active farm' should be defined in the SPPS along with additional guidance on farm diversification, agriculture and forestry development.
- Support design standards compliance with published guidance/advice using sustainable materials, where appropriate, and energy efficiency. Criteria should be consistently applied through planning policy and development management, consider sustainability along with greater weight should be attached to the provisions of the 'Building on Tradition' rural design guide.
- Across most rural areas innovative and flexible approaches should only be considered to deliver affordable houses in suitable numbers, with the focus on existing settlements rather than new clusters in the open countryside.
- Request clarification on monitoring arrangements to ensure any criteria to facilitate dwellings outside existing settlements seeks to achieve a suitable

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| | <p>balance rather than follow a trend that has resulted in high levels of approvals for single dwellings in the countryside.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeks assurances effects on natural and built heritage are considered and the suite of environmental protections in the countryside should be closely monitored to mitigate loss of our assets, natural habitats, ecosystems, biodiversity and indeed the amenity value and character of our unique rural countryside environments. |
| 3.3 | <p><u>Finance and Resource Implications</u></p> <p>There is no resource implications associated with this report.</p> |
| 3.4 | <p><u>Asset and Other Implications</u></p> <p>The evidence received by DoE following the ‘Calls for Evidence’ may have implications on the policy making process of the LDP.</p> |
| 3.5 | <p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications</u></p> <p>There are no relevant equality and good relations implications attached to this report.</p> |
| 4.0 | <p>Appendices – Documents Attached</p> |
| 4.1 | <p>Appendix 1: Proposed draft response to DoE on Calls for Evidence: Development in the Countryside</p> |
| 4.2 | <p>Appendix 2: DoE Call for Evidence: Development in the Countryside</p> |
| 4.3 | <p>Appendix 3: SPPS Subject Policy ‘Development in the Countryside’</p> |

Appendix 1: Belfast City Council draft response to Call for Evidence: Strategic Planning Policy for Development in the Countryside

The Council welcome the opportunity to comment on the strategic planning policy for development in the countryside; and how strategic planning policy should assist with achieving sustainable development to support a vibrant rural community, without compromising our natural and built environment, and other assets of acknowledged importance.

The Council would support in principle the intention is to have sustainable rural communities, ranging from small towns and villages. There is an appreciable goal of sustainably maintaining the viability of existing communities, services, infrastructure and bring new life to many places which have been in decline.

It should be recognised that Northern Ireland's rural area is a unique resource with significant long term potential as places to live and work. Its diverse ecosystems and biodiversity propound the need to retain the sensitive landscape character of our rural resource for future generations.

Whilst future lifestyle changes and technological development may increase the potential for living and working in rural areas, however, this needs to be carefully and sustainably managed and to consider the longer term potential impacts of incremental development

The DoE should ensure that all planning authorities are sensitive to the demand for new types of development in rural areas and adopt a proactive approach to addressing the management of development. The new LDP will be responsible for protecting the environment as a sustainable asset for future generations and the precautionary principle is vital when plan making in particular when outlining proposed land use policy and settlement limits. The DoE should ensure full account is taken of the implications for natural heritage features and landscape character. Only through careful planning practices can the potential for environmental adversity be minimised and enhancement features secured.

The Council considers the planning system should assist in ensuring a sustainable rural economy, with a stable population by adopting a more welcoming approach to sustainable development in rural areas including the further refinement of the approach to diversification. The aim should not be to see small settlements increase in size to the extent that they lose their identity, nor to suburbanise the countryside and erode the high quality of its environment. Rather, it is critical that planning policies are put in place to accommodate selective, modest and sustainable growth. Most development should be foreseen, agreed and programmed to reflect the local circumstances, in

the context of the need to address sustainability and these protections of the countryside environment.

The DoE should be clear on the role of planning in advancing the vision through which to enable and support opportunities for development in sustainable locations wherever appropriate e.g. where infrastructure capacity and good access exist, or can be provided at reasonable cost, or to meet justifiable social and economic objectives. Rural and urban areas are recognised as interdependent e.g. rural areas depend on urban areas for a range of services and jobs while providing quality recreational and leisure experiences for the urban population. Appropriate rural diversification should be embraced to support businesses, land managers and farmers expand or start new enterprises in appropriate circumstances and at an appropriate scale. Any new development must be carefully planned if the character and quality of the countryside is not to be undermined and substantially eroded.

In the more accessible and densely populated rural areas most new development will continue to be in, or adjacent to, existing settlements. The SPPS states

*“Some areas of the countryside exhibit exceptional landscapes...wherein the quality of the landscape and unique amenity value is such that development should only be permitted in exceptional circumstances. Where appropriate, these areas should be designated as **Special Countryside Areas** in LDPs, and appropriate policies brought forward to ensure their protection from unnecessary and inappropriate development.”*

The would welcome further guidance on Special Countryside Areas i.e. how to define/designate, manage and monitor the designation as well as its proposed implications for the planning system. It should be clarified if there is proposed to be scope for their use to control pressures of urban sprawl in rural areas immediately adjacent to towns and cities. In addition, further clarity is sought in relation to whether if additional protection could be afforded to Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

The DoE should be aware that there is considerable evidence of urban sprawl happening around the Belfast urban area. The Council would seek assurances that any proposals to release land for development should be part of a longer term strategic settlement policy and set out in development plans.

The natural and historic environment also has to be protected through development plans and identify opportunities, appropriate in scale, kind and location. In the more densely populated areas

there may be potential to accommodate small-scale housing development and businesses may be able to diversify further into new activities as part of a broader strategy that provides the context for any growth.

The DoE should ensure the protection of our natural and built environment by recognising the LDP will be the vehicle to protect the environment as a sustainable asset for future generations.

Recognition of the precautionary principle should be vital when plan making in particular when outlining proposed land uses, locations for development and settlement limits all of which must take full account of the policy implications on natural heritage features and landscape character. In accordance with the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) 2035, careful planning practices should, through the DoE, ensure the potential for environmental adversity can be minimised and enhancement secured.

The key aim of rural policy should be to improve the quality of new developments irrespective of size, both within settlements and elsewhere in the countryside.

The DoE should seek to consider an approach that ensures small towns are sustainable and able to maintain their function in the local/regional economy. They have a key role in providing services to the wider catchment population. Agriculture (and forestry) will continue to be important defining elements of rural life as part of the settlement hierarchy. Prime quality agricultural land should continue to be protected and should not be eroded in a piecemeal way but only used to meet strategic development objectives. The term 'active farm' should be defined in the SPPS along with additional clear guidance on farm diversification, agriculture, forestry development, and monitoring of such proposals.

The DoE need to consider the scope for enabling planning policy in respect of small scale rural housing developments including clusters and groups in close proximity to settlements as a means of supporting their sustainability and potential. Any proposals for more housing developments of this nature should be expressed in development plans in the context of broader policy objectives and sustainability. In many rural areas there may be small sites which cease to be required for their original purpose where conversion to residential use would bring about a net environmental benefit.

Development plans should allocate sufficient land to meet housing requirements including affordable housing and identify where innovative and flexible approaches may be required to deliver affordable houses in suitable numbers, with the focus on existing settlements rather than new clusters in the open countryside.

The monitoring of development will be critical and the DoE should consider the approach to this through development plans. The amount and location of housing that can be developed in rural areas is determined by a number of factors. These include: proximity to services e.g. schools, shops (ideally within walking or cycling distance); ease of access (from an existing road and footpath and to a rail station or bus route); drainage and sewerage capacity (e.g. from combined septic tanks or potential link to public systems). Fit in the landscape and design will also be important planning considerations. The impact of badly designed and sited houses is often particularly important in rural areas because of their visibility over large distances. Design standards should comply with published advice, use sustainable materials where appropriate and be energy efficient. These criteria should be monitored consistently applied in planning policy and development control with greater weight should be attached to the provisions of the 'Building on Tradition' rural design guide.

Belfast City Council seeks assurances that clarification on monitoring arrangements to ensure the criteria to allow dwellings outside existing settlements is robust and it has addressed the trend for high levels of approvals for single dwellings in the countryside. The effects of natural and built heritage including the suite of environmental protections in the countryside should be closely monitored to mitigate loss of our natural habitats, ecosystems, biodiversity and indeed the amenity value and character of our unique rural countryside.

Appendix 2: DoE Call for Evidence: Development in the Countryside (See below)

Appendix 3: SPPS Subject Policy ‘Development in the Countryside’

Development in the Countryside

The countryside is recognised as one of our greatest assets, with its highly valued landscapes, an outstanding coastline, a complex variety of wildlife, rich built and cultural heritage, for the ecosystem services it provides, and for its sense of place and history. In addition to its role and function as a recreational and tourist asset the countryside also supports our important agricultural industry, offers potential opportunities for sustainable growth in new sectors, and is home to a considerable rural population. For the purpose of this document the countryside is defined as land lying outside of settlement limits as identified in Local Development Plans (LDPs).

To maintain and enhance the attractiveness of the countryside as a place to invest, live and work, the countryside requires a sustainable approach to new development, consistent with the Regional Development Strategy 2035 (RDS).

The RDS recognises that to sustain rural communities, new development and employment opportunities are required which respect local, social and environmental circumstances. Facilitating development in appropriate locations is considered necessary to ensure proposals are integrated appropriately within rural settlements or in the case of countryside locations, within the rural landscape.

Government policy also recognises that there are wide variations across Northern Ireland in terms of the economic, social and environmental characteristics of rural areas. Policy approaches to new development should therefore reflect differences within the region, be sensitive to local needs and be sensitive to environmental issues including the ability of settlements and landscapes to absorb development. This may involve recognising areas that are particularly sensitive to change and areas which have lower sensitivities and thus provide opportunities to accommodate sustainable development. It is also important to take into account the role and function of rural settlements and accessibility to existing services and infrastructure. Such approaches should also reflect and complement the SPPS.

The aim of the SPPS with regard to the countryside is to manage development in a manner which strikes a balance between protection of the environment from inappropriate development, while supporting and sustaining rural communities consistent with the RDS.

Regional Strategic Objectives

The policy objectives for development in the countryside are to:

- manage growth to achieve appropriate and sustainable patterns of development which supports a vibrant rural community;
- conserve the landscape and natural resources of the rural area and to protect it from excessive, inappropriate or obtrusive development and from the actual or potential effects of pollution;
- facilitate development which contributes to a sustainable rural economy; and
- promote high standards in the design, siting and landscaping of development.

Planning and other environmental policies must therefore play their part in facilitating sustainable development in the countryside but not at the expense of the region’s rich natural assets and not at the expense of the natural and built environment.

Regional Strategic Policy

In preparing LDPs councils shall bring forward a strategy for sustainable development in the countryside, together with appropriate policies and proposals that must reflect the aims, objectives and policy approach of the SPPS, tailored to the specific circumstances of the plan area.

The policy approach must be to cluster, consolidate, and group new development with existing established buildings, and promote the re-use of previously used buildings. This sustainable approach facilitates essential new development, which can benefit from the utilisation of existing services such as access and drainage, whilst simultaneously mitigating the potential adverse impacts upon rural amenity and scenic landscapes arising from the cumulative effect of one-off, sporadic development upon rural amenity and landscape character.

All development in the countryside must integrate into its setting, respect rural character, and be appropriately designed.

Development in the countryside must not mar the distinction between a settlement and the surrounding countryside, or result in urban sprawl.

The policy approach for development in the countryside will also reflect and complement the overall approach to housing growth across a plan area.

The following strategic policy for residential and non-residential development in the countryside should also be taken into account in the preparation of LDPs and determination of planning applications.

Residential Development

- **New dwellings in existing clusters:** provision should be made for a dwelling at an existing cluster of development which lies outside a farm provided it appears as a visual entity in the landscape; and is associated with a focal point; and the development can be absorbed into the existing cluster through rounding off and consolidation and will not significantly alter its existing character, or visually intrude into the open countryside;
- **Replacement dwellings:** provision should be made for the replacement of existing dwellings where the building to be replaced exhibits the essential characteristics of a dwelling and, as a minimum all external structural walls are substantially intact. Replacement dwellings must be located within the curtilage of the original dwelling where practicable, or at an alternative position nearby where there are demonstrable benefits in doing so. Replacement dwellings must not have a visual impact significantly greater than the existing building. In cases where the original building is retained, it will not be eligible for replacement again. Planning permission will not be granted for the replacement of a listed dwelling unless there are exceptional circumstances;
- **Dwellings on farms:** provision should be made for a dwelling house on an active²⁶ and established farm business to accommodate those engaged in the farm business or other rural dwellers. The farm business must be currently active and have been established for a minimum of 6 years; no dwellings or development opportunities shall have been sold off or transferred from the farm holding within 10 years of the date of the application; and, the proposed dwelling must be visually linked or sited to cluster with an established group of buildings on the farm holding. Dwellings on farms must also comply with LDP policies regarding integration and rural character. A dwelling on a farm under this policy will only be acceptable once every 10 years;
- **Dwellings for non-agricultural business enterprises:** provision should be made for a new dwelling in connection with an established non-agricultural business enterprise. A site

specific need must exist that makes it essential for an employee of the business to live at the site of their work;

- **Infill/ribbon development:** provision should be made for the development of a small gap site in an otherwise substantial and continuously built up frontage. Planning permission will be refused for a building which creates or adds to a ribbon of development;
- **The conversion and re-use of existing buildings for residential use:** provision should be made for the sympathetic conversion and re-use, with adaptation if necessary, of a locally important building (such as former school houses, churches and older traditional barns and outbuildings), as a single dwelling where this would secure its upkeep and retention. Provision should also be made for the conversion of a locally important building to provide more than one dwelling where the building is of sufficient size; the conversion involves minimal intervention; and, the intensity of the use is considered appropriate to the locality. A former dwelling previously replaced and retained as an ancillary building to the new replacement dwelling will not be eligible for conversion back into residential use under this policy;
- **A dwelling where there are personal and domestic circumstances:** provision should be made for a dwelling to meet the long term needs of a person where there are compelling and site specific reasons related to the person's personal or domestic circumstances, and where there are no alternative solutions to meet the particular circumstances of the case;
- **A temporary caravan:** provision should be made for a residential caravan or mobile home for a temporary period in exceptional circumstances. These may include the provision of temporary residential accommodation pending the development of a permanent dwelling, or where there are compelling and site specific reasons related to personal or domestic circumstances; and,
- **Social and affordable housing development:** where a need has been identified by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, or the relevant housing authority, plan policies should support the development of a small group of dwellings adjacent to or near a small settlement. The appropriate number of social/affordable dwellings permissible will depend upon the identified need and the requirement to ensure the development is sited and designed to integrate sympathetically with its surroundings.

Non-residential Development

- **Farm diversification:** provision should be made for a farm diversification scheme where the farm business is currently active and established (for a minimum 6 years) and, the proposal is to be run in conjunction with the agricultural operations of the farm. Proposals must involve the re-use or adaptation of existing buildings, with new buildings only being acceptable in exceptional circumstances;
- **Agriculture and forestry development:** provision should be made for development on an active and established (for a minimum 6 years) agricultural holding or forestry enterprise where the proposal is necessary for the efficient operation of the holding or enterprise. New buildings must be sited beside existing farm or forestry buildings on the holding or enterprise. An alternative site away from existing buildings will only be acceptable in exceptional circumstances; and,
- **The conversion and re-use of existing buildings for non-residential use:** provision should be made for the sympathetic conversion and re-use of a suitable locally important building of special character or interest (such as former school houses, churches and older traditional barns and outbuildings) for a variety of alternative uses where this would secure

its upkeep and retention, and where the nature and scale of the proposed non-residential use would be appropriate to its countryside location.

Other types of development in the countryside apart from those set out above should be considered as part of the development plan process in line with the other policies set out within the SPPS.

Some areas of the countryside exhibit exceptional landscapes, such as mountains, stretches of the coast or Lough shores, and certain views or vistas, where in the quality of the landscape and unique amenity value is such that development should only be permitted in exceptional circumstances. Where appropriate there areas should be designated Special Countryside Areas in LDP's and appropriate policies brought forward to ensure their protection from unnecessary and inappropriate development. Local policies may also be brought forward to maintain the landscape quality and character of Areas of High Science Value.

Implementation

The LDP process will play an important role for councils in identifying key features and assets of the countryside and balancing the needs of rural areas and communities with the protection of the environment. This should include an environmental assets appraisal and landscape assessment which will provide the evidence base for the purposes of bringing forward an appropriate policy approach to development in the countryside. This should take into account Landscape Character Assessments.

In all circumstances proposals for development in the countryside must be sited and designed to integrate sympathetically with their surroundings, must not have an adverse impact on the rural character of the area, and meet other planning and environmental considerations including those for drainage, sewerage, access and road safety. Access arrangements must be in accordance with the Department's published guidance.²⁷

Supplementary planning guidance contained within 'Building on Tradition': A Sustainable Design Guide for the Northern Ireland Countryside' must be taken into account in assessing all development proposals in the countryside