



# **Call for Evidence: Strategic planning policy for Development in the Countryside**

**Launch date: 7 March 2016**

**Respond by: 6 May 2016**

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## Introduction

The Department of the Environment (DoE) will be undertaking a review of strategic planning policy for development in the countryside as set out in the Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland (SPPS). This Call for Evidence will help to inform the scope of this review.

## How to Respond

You are invited to submit your views in response to this Call for Evidence **by 6 May 2016**. Comments after this deadline will not be accepted.

**All responses must be marked 'Development in the Countryside' and should be emailed to the Department at the following address:**

[sppsteam@doeni.gov.uk](mailto:sppsteam@doeni.gov.uk)

Please note that your response may be made public by DoE. For example, information people provide in response to this call for evidence, including personal information, may be subject to publication or disclosure in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) and the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA). If you want the information that you provide to be treated as confidential please tell us, but be aware that we cannot guarantee confidentiality.

## Background

1. DoE published the SPPS 'Planning for Sustainable Development' in September 2015. The SPPS consolidates 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 Annex A.
  
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. The policy objectives 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.
  
3. The current strategic policy approach is to cluster, consolidate and group new 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.

## Why undertake a review?

4. During the consultation on the SPPS, DoE received a significant number of representations on planning policy for development in the countryside. Taking into account issues raised through the consultation on the SPPS and other representations from the public and elected representatives, the Minister of the Environment, Mark H Durkan, committed to undertake a review of regional strategic planning policy for development in the countryside following publication of the SPPS in final form.

## Purpose and scope

5. This Call for Evidence is part of the process of gathering the necessary information to inform the subsequent review of strategic planning policy. The evidence received will improve 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.
6. It should be noted that this Call for Evidence relates to the regional strategic policy for development in the countryside rather than local policy which will be brought forward through Local Development Plan (LDP) policies. Councils are responsible for preparing their LDP and in doing so they must take account of the strategic policy set out in the SPPS.
7. Whilst DoE welcomes comments on all aspects of strategic planning policy for development in the countryside (and any other information and evidence that may assist in the forthcoming review) it is particularly keen to hear views on the following key question.
  - How should strategic planning policy assist with achieving sustainable development to support a vibrant rural community, without compromising our natural and built environment, and other assets of acknowledged importance?

## Next steps

8. The information gathered as a result of the Call for Evidence will be considered by DoE and will help inform the upcoming review of strategic planning policy for development in the countryside.
  
9. Depending, in part, upon the evidence received, the scope of the review will be refined to focus on the key issues where further research should be undertaken. Any necessary revisions to strategic planning policy will follow the normal policy development process. This will entail preparation of a consultation draft policy document which would be subject to full public consultation.

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# Annex A

## Development in the Countryside

- 6.61** 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).
- 6.62** 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).
- 6.63** 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.
- 6.64** 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.
- 6.65** 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

- 6.66** 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.

**6.67** 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**

**6.68** 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.

**6.69** 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.

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

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

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

**6.73** 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 active<sup>26</sup> 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 terms needs of a

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<sup>26</sup> For the purposes of the SPPS 'agricultural activity' is as defined by Article 4 of the European Council Regulations (EC) No. 1307/2013

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 being 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.

**6.74** 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.

**6.75** Some areas of the countryside exhibit exceptional landscapes, such as mountains, stretches of the coast or lough shores, and certain views or vistas, 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. Local policies may also be brought forward to maintain the landscape quality and character of Areas of High Scenic Value.

## Implementation

- 6.76** 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.
- 6.77** 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.<sup>27</sup>
- 6.78** 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.

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<sup>27</sup> Development Control Advice Note 15 'Vehicular Access Standards' (Second Edition) August 1999