



Plan the Northern Ireland We Need

Delivering planning services for the longterm benefit of Northern Ireland

“The planning system has the potential to make an important contribution to much needed development in Northern Ireland. When it works effectively, it can have a key role in encouraging investment and supporting the Northern Ireland economy, creating places that people want to work, live and invest in.” NI Audit Office Report 2022

RTPI NI Asks of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive

RTPI NI has set out its election asks for the next term of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

- Invest in planning as an essential service
- Undertake a systems review to identify causes
- Ensure resourcing is allocated in the right way and to the right level
- Promote training and skills development to improve performance
- Take climate action through planning decisions and policy
- Strengthen links between policy, implementation and delivery
- Promote and support collaborative working between stakeholders
- Support community engagement and grow confidence in the system
- Support Local Development Plans to come forward as a matter of urgency
- Take a holistic approach to design and placemaking

Why invest in planning?

Planning offers an effective process to enable solutions and facilitate a sustainable future for Northern Ireland.

Planning shapes the environments where people work, live and interact. Through strategic spatial planning, the system can ensure that all residents and businesses have a good level of access to services and infrastructure, resources are appropriately accounted for in development decisions, and that new developments make efficient use of resources and technologies. Planning can also address potential negative impacts of development which can be harmful to human health.

What next for Planning in Northern Ireland?

The Planning Act (NI) 2011 along with local government reform introduced in 2015, made significant changes to the planning system, but the improvement journey continues to enable planning services to be efficient, effective, and importantly deliver positive outcomes for communities across Northern Ireland.

Planning in Northern Ireland is under particular pressure and scrutiny and needs investing in, as a matter of urgency. Recent reports on the efficiencies and performance of the planning system provide evidence and reflection on how the planning system is operating and point towards how changes can be made to build the system's strength, introduce efficiencies and lead to good outcomes for society.

Effective change and improvement takes time, but as indicated by recent reports, now is the time to make further changes where they are needed.



Value and Invest in Planning

The importance of the planning system is recognised in the Northern Ireland Audit Office Report, Planning in Northern Ireland, however, it is equally recognised that the system is “not operating effectively”.

In responding to the Audit Office, the Public Accounts Committee recognises the complex, wider issues that impact on the functioning and delivery of the system, “the problems presented are symptomatic of a planning system that is beset by more fundamental issues”.

Understanding the complexity and addressing these “fundamental issues” holistically is key to supporting the improvement of the planning system in the longer term. RTPI NI believes the planning system urgently requires support, leadership, and a focus on how resources are deployed to deliver outcomes efficiently, effectively, and equitably.

Invest in planning as an essential service

A collaborative, well resourced, positive, plan-led planning service can deliver long term goals and ambitions and act in the long-term public interest; balancing competing interests by setting the framework and decisions for a sustainable future.

It is vital that the role and capabilities of a supported and properly resourced planning function is fully understood and supported by all stakeholders.

Undertake a systems review to identify causes

The recent evidence highlights many issues, a systems review is essential in identifying the causes and therefore the solutions. A detailed analysis would be able to identify pinch points and weaknesses in the current system by following a sample and wide range of planning applications across Northern Ireland.

Ensure resourcing is allocated in the right way and to the right level

Review to ensure the number and skills of public sector planners are deployed in the right way, with support for specialist knowledge, support and guidance for statutory consultees, guidance in managing the operation of the system, including investing in efficiency-saving digital technologies can help support the shift from a largely reactive, regulatory planning system to a proactive and strategic planning system. The systems review is an important step in informing the review of resource allocation.

RTPI NI supports the recommendation in the NI Audit Office report proposing “the Department and councils work in partnership to ensure that the planning system is financially sustainable in the longer term”.

Promote training and skills development to improve performance

The NI Audit Office report addresses the issue of skills, competency and integrity in the planning system, setting out several recommendations for change.

RTPI NI believes that the skills of planners along with ongoing training for both planners and elected members, on emerging technologies, process and practice must be addressed as a priority in addressing the future performance and delivery of the system.

All RTPI members are held to account by the RTPI’s Code of Professional Conduct which sets out the standards, ethics and expected professional behaviour. Our members abide by the highest professional and ethical standards, which mean employers, clients and the wider public trust them. We therefore encourage employers to support and promote RTPI members.



Take Climate Action

Climate change is one of the biggest challenges facing our society. There is a robust and wide-spread body of evidence which points to the need for speed in taking action and whilst it is accepted that many of the changes needed will take time, the focus for taking action must not be alleviated.

RTPI NI welcomes the progress of the NI Climate Bill (awaiting Royal Assent at the time of publication), which is an important step in leading climate action.

The Executive must now take a leadership role in delivering climate action for Northern Ireland, and support all Departments, local government, and other stakeholders and business. It has a natural role to be the coordinating body and lead the necessary actions to support Northern Ireland through the very real problems it faces through climate change.

Take climate action through planning decisions and policy

The planning system can prevent locking-in inefficient, high-carbon infrastructure that will be used for decades. Through stringent climate requirements set in policy, the planning system has the potential to avoid significant carbon lock-ins from fossil-fuelled infrastructure that make it difficult to shift to lower-carbon pathways. There needs to be a shift in thinking towards adoption of active travel and land uses which reduce energy use. This will be critical to supporting the net-zero transition.

Planning that protects natural environments, safeguarding the landscapes and places we will value in the future must be supported. Northern Ireland's environment and its natural resources are one of its particular strengths and even economic advantages.

Integrated infrastructure and development

Strengthen links between policy, implementation and delivery, to align strategic goals, indicators and investment priorities

There is a need for alignment across all strategies and plans at a regional and local level to ensure all stakeholders work towards a shared vision and maximise funding streams and resource.

Further investigation of the issues and solutions for any disconnect between policy and its implementation on the ground is important to support an 'outcome-focused' planning system in the future, that is evidence led and rooted in sustainable development.

Promote and support collaborative working between stakeholders

Local authorities are key actors in facilitating joined up working across agencies and sectors, but it requires incentivising and encouraging, given current capacity and within local authority and other sectors.

For example, the NI Audit Office report addresses the role of statutory consultees in the planning system and found, "significant silo working within the planning system. ... It is crucial that all statutory bodies involved in the planning system play their part and fully commit to a shared and collaborative approach going forward".

We also acknowledge the Public Accounts Committee's call for a positive change in culture and collaboration across the planning system, at all levels. We would suggest this needs to include wider stakeholders in the planning process, including statutory consultees, infrastructure bodies etc. This requires strong leadership and needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency if we are to deliver shared visions and objectives.

The long-awaited transfer of regeneration powers to Local Authorities would be a key tool to enable collaborative working at a local level.



Strengthen Policy and Placemaking

Support community engagement and grow confidence in the system

The report of the Planning Engagement Partnership, 'Planning Your Place: Getting Involved' sets out recommendations on how to enhance the quality and depth of community engagement in planning and place shaping. These recommendations must be acted on with the aim of developing an effective, open and transparent system which will provide certainty and over time grow confidence in the planning system.

RTPI NI calls for strong leadership, an open and joined up discussion along with a creative approach in resourcing to strengthen the planning service to enable it to deliver valued outcomes.

Support Local Development Plans to come forward as a matter of urgency

Local Development Plans (LDP) provide the opportunity for an integrated approach with other areas of policy, linking decisions on economic development with those on housing, climate change, energy generation, biodiversity, transport, and other infrastructure, providing a spatial framework for investment at different scales across Northern Ireland. The adoption of LDPs by Councils are key to the delivery of local evidenced-based policies to support their visions and deliver for their communities.

Concern has been raised regarding the speed at which LDPs are coming forward. Northern Ireland is not alone in this regard. Difficulties in progressing a new system of plans is an issue that other UK jurisdictions have all faced, and some are still challenged by. While we support the call for the progression of LDPs, it is vital that the underlying issues are understood and addressed to allow this to happen and LDPs are properly resourced and supported by all stakeholders to come forward as a matter of urgency.

Take a holistic approach to design and placemaking

Planning must strive for development that promotes a holistic approach to the planning and design of development, putting people and communities at the heart of development and framed within the wider agendas of sustainable development, climate change, decarbonisation, ecological improvement, health and wellbeing, social equity etc. This will require training for planners, the development and support of specific expertise and a collaborative approach across sectors and disciplines.

It is vital that our initial response to the pandemic, alongside the ambition to improve efficiencies throughout the wider planning system does not overlook the positives already in place, or favour short term fixes, over longer term benefits. There is good planning work taking place in Northern Ireland delivering good outcomes for communities and we must not lose sight of this.

We recommend that more emphasis is placed on the 'place' and the quality of housing, ensuring sustainable, future proofed, thriving, prosperous and connected homes and communities. The location of development is extremely important in providing a sustainable healthy community, and one that does not 'lock in' certain behaviour traits, such as car dependency, but allows for sustainable connectivity.



Links to Reports

Department for Infrastructure: Review of the implementation of the Planning Act (NI) 2011 www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/review-planning-act-ni-2011-report

NI Audit Office: Planning in Northern Ireland, February 2022, www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/publications/planning-northern-ireland

Planning Engagement Partnership: Planning Your Place: Getting Involved, March 2022, www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/planning-your-place-getting-involved

Public Accounts Committee: Planning in Northern Ireland, March 2022 www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/2017-2022/public-accounts-committee/reports/planning-in-northern-ireland/

RTPI Code of Professional Conduct: www.rtpi.org.uk/media/2577/code-of-conduct.pdf

Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI)

The RTPI champions the power of planning in creating prosperous places and vibrant communities; RTPI NI leads on our work in Northern Ireland. We have over 27,000 members, with 760 in Northern Ireland, in the private, public, academic and third sectors.

Using our expertise and research we bring evidence and thought leadership to shape planning policies and thinking, putting the profession at the heart of society's big debates. We set the standards of planning education and professional behaviour that give our members, wherever they work in the world, a unique ability to meet complex economic, social and environmental challenges. We are the only body in the United Kingdom that confers Chartered status to planners, the highest professional qualification sought after by employers in both private and public sectors.