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Getting involved in planning in Northern Ireland: Development Plans

Key points are:

- Your Local Development Plan will have a key role in deciding where future development goes.
- Planning authorities produce several documents that together make up the council's Local Development Plan.
- You can see these at the planning authority's office, on the planning authority's website or at planning engagement events.
- During the production of these documents there will be a number of consultation stages.
- The consultation stages are your opportunity to influence what the plan says.
- You could tell the planning authorities about sites in your area that are important for wildlife and/or encourage the local authority to create or restore habitat in the area.

What is a local development plan?

The Local Development Plan (LDP) is a collection of a number of individual documents prepared for a council area. It sets out the policies that promote and control development in your area. The LDPs, once complete, will replace the current Area Plans.

The LDPs are produced by the local council. You can see these documents at your local council office or on their website. Often, the local council will hold public engagement events and exhibitions to enable discussion with council planning officers.

The LDP takes into account the regional planning policy context which includes, for example, the Regional Development Strategy 2030 and the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) for Northern Ireland as well as relevant government strategies and guidance (see our leaflet "*The Planning System in Northern Ireland*").

The planning authority must make its decisions on planning applications in line with the policies in the LDP unless there are very good reasons not to. This is known as the 'plan-led' system. Most LDPs include policies that protect wildlife sites and species from damaging developments. These and other policies in the plan (for example, protecting open space) may help to support your objection.

How do I get involved?

It is important to get involved early on. The 'plan-led' system means that once the planning authority has approved the LDP, objections made to a planning application that conforms to the development plan will have to be very compelling to succeed. Equally, it will be much easier to resist applications where they do not conform to the plan.

Get involved at an early stage in shaping the draft Development Plan Documents. At this stage, there may be several options open for consultation and making your views known on the policies and proposals in a draft Development Plan Document will be the first, and often best, chance you have to influence how new development is planned for your area.

It is important for you to find out when the planning authority will be considering matters you are concerned with as they must receive your response before the deadline for the consultation stage.

Each council is required to publish a Plan Timetable so this can be consulted to find out the timeframe for each consultation stage of the LDP. The Plan Timetable also explains which documents the council will produce, the subject that they will cover and the dates when the planning authority will be inviting public involvement for each document. Each planning authority must produce one and keep it up-to-date. Looking at the timetable should explain the current state of the development plan process in your area. If you are still unsure, you should talk to your planning authority, which will be able to help you.

Once they have been adopted, the Development Plan will be kept under review by the planning authority and will periodically be replaced. Your planning authority will be able to tell you when the next one will be published for consultation.

Additionally, the Statement of Community Involvement sets out how the planning authority intends to consult the public in its area. Looking at this document will tell you precisely where you can find out about matters relating to both the development plan and to planning applications in your planning authority's area. It will also tell you how you can expect to be involved in the planning process. Each planning authority must produce one.

What can I say?

The consultation process is intended to enable the public to become more involved with the planning system. Most of the documents will come with a simple form for you to put your comments on. The process may seem daunting at first, but the planning authority can help you through the maze.

There are no right or wrong answers – just say what you would like to see the planning system do in your area and offer any suggestions you have. However, there are some things that are not relevant to planning (for instance, the effect that the proposal will have on property prices in the area) which you should not include – if you are unsure whether this applies to what you wish to say, officers in your planning authority can advise you.

If you are responding to a development plan consultation, there are certain things you might want to mention about wildlife and biodiversity:

- Has the council identified all the sites in your area important for biodiversity? If not, mention them, being as specific as you can. The key thing is that the council and NIEA know about them (please see our leaflet "*How important is your wildlife site?*").
- Are any sites that are important for biodiversity under threat due to proposed site allocations?
- Encourage the planning authority to look for opportunities to restore or create new habitat in its area. You can even suggest areas where this may be possible.
- Encourage the planning authority to create green (wildlife) corridors between areas that are important for biodiversity. Make specific suggestions if you are aware of places where this can be done.
- You could make suggestions about how the planning authority could take steps to maximise the biodiversity in new development schemes, for instance, requiring the developer to build ponds, plant trees, or put up nestboxes.

Keeping involved

The LDP documents will go through several rounds of consultation and modification. You should look at the documents at each stage to see if your comments have been incorporated. **If they haven't, the planning authority should provide reasons why.**

