



WOODLAND  
TRUST

# An overview of the planning system in Northern Ireland

Planning in Northern Ireland has recently undergone its biggest change for 40 years. On 1 April 2015, the Department of the Environment (DOE) transferred responsibility for the majority of planning functions to local government through the 2011 Planning Act (NI).

## The 2011 Planning Act (NI)

Northern Ireland now has had a two tier planning system. Instead of the previous 26, there are now 12 new councils including the DOE Planning Office:

1. **Antrim & Newtownabbey Office** - which covers the new Antrim and Newtownabbey council area
2. **Belfast Office** - which covers the new Belfast council area
3. **Ballymena Office** - which covers the new Mid and East Antrim council area
4. **Coleraine Office** - which covers the Ballymoney, Coleraine, Limavady and Moyle council area
5. **Craigavon Office** - which covers the Armagh, Banbridge, and Craigavon council area
6. **DOE Planning Office** - which covers the Down, Newry and Mourne area
7. **Downpatrick Office** - which covers the Ards and North Down council area
8. **Enniskillen Office** - which covers the Fermanagh council area
9. **Lisburn/Castlereagh Local Area Planning Office** - which covers the new Lisburn and Castlereagh council area
10. **Londonderry Office** - which covers the Derry and Strabane council area
11. **Magherafelt Office** - which covers the new Mid-Ulster council area
12. **Omagh Office** - which covers the Omagh council area

The new councils are responsible for:

- Local development planning, writing and maintaining the Local Development Plan

- Development management - (determining planning applications of local and major significance)
- Planning enforcement - investigating alleged breaches of planning control and determining what action should be taken

The Department of the Environment retains responsibility for:

- Determination of regionally significant applications and 'called-in' applications
- Regional planning policy
- Planning legislation
- Oversight and guidance for councils
- Performance management

## The Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland

The Department of the Environment's 'Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland' - Planning for Sustainable Development (SPPS), sets out the Department's regional planning policies for securing the orderly and consistent development of land in Northern Ireland. The SPPS was published in September 2015 and consolidates approximately twenty separate policy publications into one 120 page document.

The provisions of the SPPS must be taken into account in the preparation of Local Development Plans, and are also material to all decisions on individual planning applications and appeals.

The SPPS has the following policy on ancient woodland:

*"6.192 Planning permission should only be granted for a development proposal which is not likely to result in the unacceptable adverse impact on, or damage to known:*

*priority habitats;*

*priority species;*

*active peatland;*

*ancient and long-established woodland;*

features of earth science conservation importance;

features of the landscape which are of major importance for wild flora and fauna;

rare or threatened native species;

wetlands (includes river corridors); or

other natural heritage features worthy of protection, including trees and woodland.

6.193 A development proposal which is likely to result in an unacceptable adverse impact on, or damage to, habitats, species or features listed above may only be permitted where the benefits of the proposed development outweigh the value of the habitat, species or feature. In such cases, appropriate mitigation and/or compensatory measures will be required.”

The SPPS also sets out plan making guidance for councils, stating that they should take into account natural heritage, designated sites and landscape character. In addition, the SPPS sets out that where appropriate plans should bring forward policies for protection and enhancement. It also states that Local Development Plans (LDPs) should identify and promote the design of ecological networks throughout the plan area which could help reduce the fragmentation and isolation of natural habitats through a strategic approach.

Make sure you [find out more about the Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland](#).

## Planning Policy Statements

Planning Policy Statements (PPSs) set out the policies of the Department of the Environment on particular aspects of land-use planning and apply to the whole of Northern Ireland. Their contents must be taken into account in preparing development plans and are also material to individual planning applications and appeals.

Planning Policy Statement 2: Nature Conservation sets out specific policy on the protection of natural heritage. Policy NH5 refers specifically to ancient woodland:

“Policy NH 5 – ‘Habitats, Species or Features of Natural Heritage Importance Planning permission will only be granted for a development proposal which is not likely to result in the unacceptable adverse impact on, or damage to known:

- priority habitats;
- priority species;
- active peatland;
- ancient and long-established woodland;

• features of earth science conservation importance;

• features of the landscape which are of major importance for wild flora and fauna;

• rare or threatened native species;

• wetlands (includes river corridors); or

• other natural heritage features worthy of protection.

A development proposal which is likely to result in an unacceptable adverse impact on, or damage to, habitats, species or features may only be permitted where the benefits of the proposed development outweigh the value of the habitat, species or feature. In such cases, appropriate mitigation and/or compensatory measures will be required.”

## Local Development Plans (LDP)

LDPs are produced by the local office, because the two tier system is new, plans are all at different stages of development. Up to date LDPs must reflect the SPPS. When commenting on planning applications is important that you look at the most up to date version of the LDP and cite it where appropriate.

## Protecting woodland under threat

The Woodland Trust is committed to the conservation and expansion of Northern Ireland’s limited native woodland cover. Our priority is to act where possible to secure the protection of our ancient woodland (that’s land continuously wooded since at least 1600). Northern Ireland’s ancient woodland is a precious and finite resource, covering a mere 0.08 per cent of the landscape.

The Woodland Trust has produced the first-ever inventory of Northern Ireland’s ancient and long-established woodland, Back on the Map. The inventory, already used by Planning Service when considering all planning applications, is an important first step in putting our oldest woods on a more secure footing.

[Find out more and search for your nearest ancient woodland.](#)