

# A Guide to the Regional Planning System

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## Introduction

This guide for community groups provides an introduction to the role and responsibilities of the Department for Infrastructure for regional planning.

We also have available [guides](#) to the local planning role and responsibilities of each of the 11 Councils.

## What does the planning system do?

The planning system regulates and facilitates the development and use of land, whilst furthering **sustainable development and improving well-being**.

It operates in the public interest taking into account the present as well as the future needs of society. Planning deals with the physical environment such as land, buildings, heritage and natural resources.

## Who operates the planning system?

There are two levels to the planning system:

- Regional planning which is operated by the Department for Infrastructure (DfI); and
- Local council-wide planning which is operated by local councils (see separate guides).

# Department for Infrastructure Planning Responsibilities

As the regional planning authority the Department for Infrastructure (Dfi) is responsible for the following:

- Preparing regional planning policy and legislation;
- Setting out planning fees for the whole of the planning system;
- Processing of and decision making on “**regionally significant**” planning applications;
- Calling in planning applications which it considers should be decided by it rather than a local council. Dfi has the power to call in any planning application. This means it will make the decision instead of the local council. Dfi has said this will happen rarely and that the type of applications which would be considered for calling in are those which (a) raise issues of regional importance or strategic interest; (b) raise issues of national security; or (c) raise new planning issues.

- Oversight Role for Local Development Plans - Each local council is responsible for preparing a Local Development Plan for its area. Dfi has an oversight role whereby it approves the local council's Local Development Plan. If it decides it is necessary to do so, Dfi can:
  - direct a council to make amendments to its Local Development Plan when it is submitted in draft form;
  - take over the preparation of a council's Local Development Plan; intervene if it considers that a local council is not carrying out its Local Development Plan functions effectively;
  - direct two or more councils to prepare a joint Local Development Plan.
- Oversight and Performance Monitoring
  - This includes guidance on the planning element of the councillors' code of conduct

Local councils are required to submit an annual report to Dfi to show whether or not the objectives of their Local Development Plan are being met.

## Overseeing Councils' Decision Making on Planning Applications

Dfi can carry out an assessment of a council's performance in the processing of planning applications and has the power to recommend improvements or changes.

# Department for Infrastructure Planning Responsibilities

Councils may sometimes put forward their own developments for planning permission or have a financial or other interest in an application. Where this arises, they are required to notify DfI:

- if they are the applicant or landowner;
- if they have a financial or other interest in the proposed development;
- if the proposal is contrary to the Local Development Plan;
- if the council intends to grant permission against the advice of a **statutory consultee**;
- if the proposal results in the loss of an outdoor sports facility; or
- if the proposal may have an impact on a world heritage site.

After notifying DfI, councils must wait 28 days before granting planning permission. Within this period DfI will assess the information received and then make a decision on whether to call in the application.

## Councils' Planning Responsibilities

The 11 local councils are responsible for:

- Deciding on local and **major planning applications**;
- **Planning enforcement**;
- Preparing Local Development Plans for their area.

## Glossary

- **Regionally Significant Developments** - Regionally significant developments are those that have the potential to make a significant contribution to the economic or social success of Northern Ireland. They can also include developments which may have significant effects beyond Northern Ireland, such as offshore developments or developments which would substantially disregard the Local Development Plan policy for the area to which the development relates.
- **Statutory Consultees** - Statutory consultees are bodies which must be consulted on certain planning applications as set out in Law.
- **Major Application** - A major application is a Large-scale proposal that will have a significant impact on a Local area.
- **Planning Enforcement** - Planning enforcement powers can be used where there is a breach of planning control.

## DfI Contact Details

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Community Places is a charity and we provide free, confidential, independent planning advice to people and communities who cannot afford a planning consultant. We receive funding from the Department for Infrastructure towards our Planning Advice Service.

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