

Development Plan Practice Note

05

Preferred Options Paper (POP)

Revised November 2025

Version 3



Department for

Infrastructure

An Roinn

Bonneagair

Department für

Infrastructure

Preamble

This Development Plan Practice Note (DPPN) is designed to guide planning officers, and others engaged in the planning system, through the key requirements for the preparation of the Preferred Options Paper. It deals primarily with procedures as well as good practice. It forms part of a series of practice notes published by the Department¹ stemming from **the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011** (the 2011 Act) and any related subordinate legislation. The emphasis is very much on advice but where explicit legislative requirements must be followed these will be made clear. In this practice note, any references to sections are references to sections of the 2011 Act and any references to regulations are references to regulations of **the Planning (Local Development Plan) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015** (the LDP Regulations), unless otherwise stated.

Where appropriate, this practice note will therefore highlight:

- Relevant legislation;
- Procedural guidance;
- Definitions;
- Best practice examples/relevant case law.

This guidance is not intended to replace the need for judgement by planning officers in the plan making process. Nor is it intended to be a source of definitive legal advice. Reference should be made to the actual legislation referred to in this document and if any discrepancy or conflict exists between the Practice Note² and legislation, the provisions of the legislation will prevail.

¹ Department means the Department for Infrastructure unless otherwise stated. The Department for Infrastructure came into being on 8 May 2016 and the Department of the Environment was dissolved in accordance with the Departments Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 and The Departments (2016 Act) (Commencement) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016.

² Please ensure you are considering the most up to date version of Development Plan Practice Note 05 on the Department's website at www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk and the Planning Portal at www.planningni.gov.uk and the most up to date planning legislation on the UK legislation website at www.legislation.gov.uk, which is also available via the Department's website.

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Preferred Options Paper (POP) provides the basis for consulting with the public and stakeholders on a series of options for dealing with key issues in the plan area. It aims to stimulate public comment and help interested parties to become involved in a more meaningful way at this earliest stage of plan preparation. Public and stakeholder participation as part of the preparation of the preferred options paper is regarded as crucial, particularly in identifying relevant local issues which need to be considered from the outset of plan preparation. Effective community and stakeholder engagement also strengthens the evidence base for plans and strategies which in turn, is used to inform the preparation and help justify the 'soundness' of the local development plan.
- 1.2 While the POP stage of local development plan preparation has passed for all councils and will not be repeated in the current cycle of development plans, this DPPN has been updated as part of a wider review of DPPNs and reflects changes made to NICS Departments and legislation since powers were transferred to councils upon the creation of the two-tier planning system.

2.0 Legislative context

- 2.1 **Part 2 of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 (the 2011 Act)** sets out the requirements for local development plans. **Section 3 of the 2011 Act** Survey of District requires a council to keep under review the matters which may be expected to affect the development of its district or the planning of that development. Those matters include the principal physical, economic, social and environmental characteristics as well as population, communications, transport and traffic. A council may also consider any other matters if they so wish or if the Department directs them to do so e.g. climate change. Furthermore, a council may also consider any changes which are likely to occur and the effect such changes will have on the development of its district.

2.2 **Part 3 of the Planning (Local Development Plan) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (the LDP Regulations)**, sets out the requirements for the preparation of the POP. **Regulation 9** requires a council to engage with the consultation bodies for the purpose of generating alternative strategies and options and to take account of any comments received in the preparation of the POP. **Regulation 10 and 11** set out the requirements in relation to availability and public consultation on the POP, respectively.

3.0 The purpose of the POP

3.1 A council must prepare a POP to inform interested parties and individuals on the matters that may have a direct effect on the plan area and to set out possible options for development as well as a council's preferred option. The purpose of the POP is to set out:

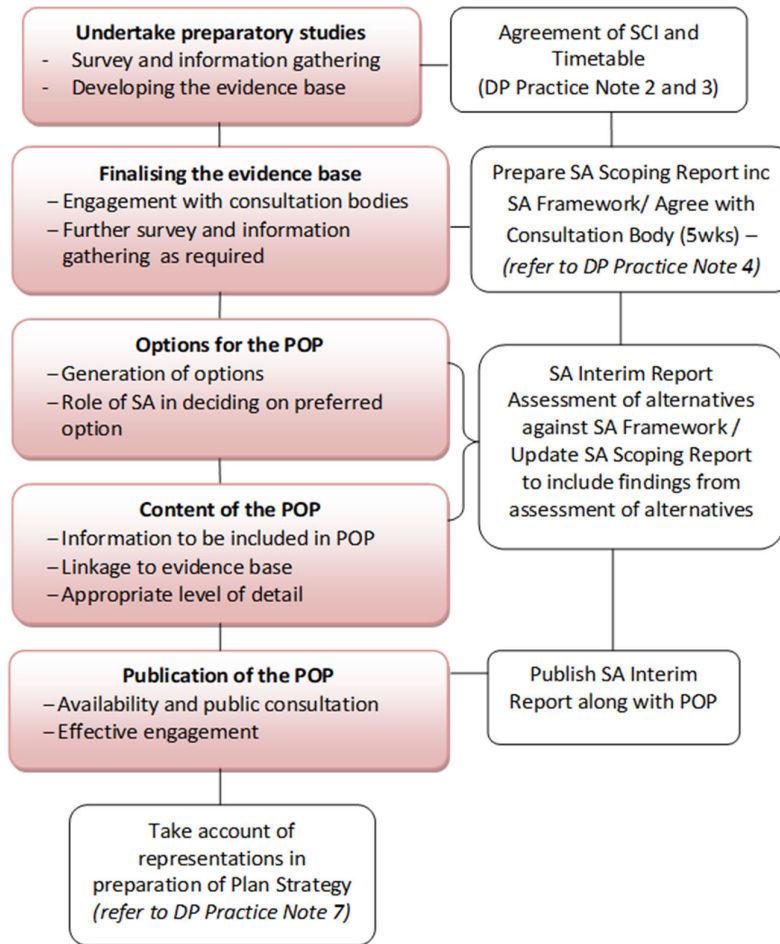
- a series of options for dealing with key issues in the plan area;
- evidence to appraise the different issues and options; and
- a council's preferred options and its justification.

4.0 Key stages in the preparation of the POP

4.1 The key stages in the preparation of the POP are broadly set out in Figure 1. A council should publish its POP in accordance with the agreed Timetable and Statement of Community Involvement. **Regulation 6 (2)** of the LDP Regulations requires a Timetable to include an indicative date for the publication of the preferred options paper.

4.2 Although a Timetable and SCI must be agreed with the Department prior to the preparation of the draft Plan Strategy and draft Local Policies Plan, a council should undertake the majority of preparatory work for its POP in advance or in parallel with the Timetable and SCI approval process in order to maximise time savings and expedite the publication of the POP. A council should publish its POP approximately 4 months following the agreement of its Timetable and SCI.

Figure1: Key Stages in the preparation of the Preferred Options Paper



Key

Covered by this DP Practice Note

5.0 Undertaking preparatory studies

5.1 Undertaking preparatory studies early in the process should enable a council to establish the main social, economic and environmental characteristics, key

issues and needs of the plan area prior to the agreement of the Timetable. This will also enable a council to be in a position to focus on generating options and drafting the POP as soon as the Timetable has been agreed.

Survey and information gathering

- 5.2 There are various sources of information depending upon the nature and detail of the evidence required. These include existing council data, other strategies and research work, use of consultants/working with external stakeholders, joint working with adjoining council(s), information from relevant Departments, a council's Community Plan and any other local knowledge through community and stakeholder engagement.
- 5.3 Whilst surveying and information gathering will be an ongoing function of a council, it will be particularly important at the early stage of plan preparation. Information obtained at this stage will be used to establish the baseline of the social, economic and environmental characteristics of the plan area and enable a council to determine the issues which need to be addressed by the LDP. In doing so, this will help to inform and develop a council's vision for the plan area which will steer the general direction for the aims and objectives for the LDP.
- 5.4 It is recommended that survey and information gathering should therefore be carried out for a range of topic areas which will enable it to formulate policies and proposals whilst taking account of the 'Regional Development Strategy 2035' (RDS) and also any policy issued by the Department such as 'A Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland' (SPPS). These include:
- **Population** - gathering demographic information e.g. Census etc
 - **Settlements** – information on the character, development potential, areas of protection etc;
 - **Housing and urban capacity** - identifying areas of land with potential for development;
 - **Archaeology, built and natural heritage** – gathering information on designations and identifying areas of protection;

- **Economic development, industry and commerce** – identifying areas of land with economic potential;
- **Town centres and retailing** – to determine the vitality, viability of towns and settlements;
- **Open space and recreation** – information on existing open space and recreation requirements for plan area;
- **Countryside/rural area** – information on landscape; environmental designations, areas of development pressure etc;
- **Coast** – where relevant, gathering information to facilitate appropriate development and/or to determine areas of protection;
- **Tourism** – identifying tourism demand and growth areas whilst safeguarding tourism assets;
- **Renewable energy** – gathering information on renewable energy development / areas of protection;
- **Transportation** – gathering information on issues, requirements and proposals for future transport development;
- **Waste Management** – information on the need for future waste management facilities;
- **Telecommunications, public services and public utilities** – information to identify needs of the community and plan area;
- **Development constraints** – e.g. identification of areas of flood risk, hazards, minerals constraint etc. where relevant.

5.5 The list above is not exhaustive. A council may also need to address particular issues relevant to their local area and this should be reflected in the information gathered for the preparation of the POP and LDP. A council must exercise judgement as to the appropriate individual sites that may require such information at this early stage in the plan process. Evidence should be proportionate and inform what is in the plan, rather than being collected retrospectively in an attempt to justify the content of the LDP. A council should have an idea of what it is needed for, how it is going to be used and how much detail is needed.

- 5.6 The nature of the evidence will vary according to the document being prepared, the nature of the area and the type of issues that need to be addressed. Information gathered by surveys, research and from the consultation bodies is likely to be required on a settlement by settlement basis. However, information on very large individual sites that may require master planning should also be gathered at this stage. Some evidence will be pivotal in developing and testing options at the early POP stage, other types of evidence may be more detailed e.g. information on smaller individual sites that will be required to make adjustments to settlement boundaries.

Developing the evidence base

- 5.7 Effective survey and information gathering will be vital to the plan preparation process as it will be used to establish the context and provide a reliable and comprehensive evidence base for the preparation of the POP and DPDs as well as undertaking the sustainability appraisal (SA).
- 5.8 A council should develop its evidence base with a view to fulfilling the requirements of SA and strategic environmental assessment (SEA). In particular, survey and information gathering will inform the social, economic and environmental baseline as well as highlight any problems and issues which the LDP may need to address. SA should aim to show how policies and proposals in the development plan document help to achieve the social, economic and environmental objectives for the plan area. Section 7 provides further detail on the stages of SA which should be carried out in parallel with the preparation of the POP.
- 5.9 The evidence base should therefore provide the justification through research/fact finding and community participation to support the choices made not only in the POP, but also the subsequent policies and proposals contained in the draft Plan Strategy and draft Local Policies Plan. The preparation of the evidence base should therefore be regarded as a process with information being reviewed and kept up date to ensure that it remains reliable and relevant, particularly as policies and proposals evolve through the subsequent stages of the plan preparation process.

6.0 Finalising the evidence base

6.1 Following the agreement of the Timetable and SCI, a council should have completed the majority of the plan preparatory work on a range of topic areas. Once a council has established its baseline position, it should engage with consultation bodies and undertake further survey and information gathering as required in order to finalise the evidence base which in turn, will be used to generate options for the POP.

Engagement with consultation bodies

6.2 Regulation 9 of Local Development Plan Regulations requires a council to engage with the consultation bodies for the purpose of generating alternative strategies and options. In preparing the POP, a council must also take account of any representations received from the consultation bodies.

6.3 Regulation 2 lists the consultation bodies which are;

- Northern Ireland government departments;
- Adjoining council(s);
- Water/sewerage undertaker;
- Northern Ireland Housing Executive;
- Civil Aviation Authority;
- Any person to whom the electronic communication code applies by virtue of a direction given under Section 106(3) of the Communication Act 2003(c);
- Any person to whom a licence has been granted under 10(1) of the Electricity (Northern Ireland) Order 1992(a);
- Any person to whom a licence has been granted under Article 8 of the Gas (Northern Ireland) Order 1996(b);

6.4 Whilst the majority of consultees will fall within the above list, a council may also consult other bodies depending upon the nature of the information required and the issues that need to be addressed by the LDP. A council should therefore exercise judgement in relation to whether they wish to

engage additional consultees in the preparation of the POP and LDP.
Information on how and when a council proposes to engage the community and stakeholders in exercising its planning functions must be set out in its SCI.

- 6.5 Once a council has identified the consultation bodies, it should initiate the consultation process by writing to each of them to request strategic information and to highlight any relevant issues which should be considered at this stage of plan preparation. This information could be gathered through written correspondence or meetings, whatever method is deemed appropriate. A council should request consultees to respond in line with the agreed Timetable and relevant service agreement (where applicable) to enable efficient progress in the preparation of the POP and LDP.
- 6.6 As the preparation of the POP involves formulating options for growth and deciding on a preferred option, it is not necessary at this stage to request or gather detailed information on smaller individual sites. The receipt of more detailed information from consultees as well as research and survey information can be carried out in stages in line with the level of detail required for each plan document being prepared.

Further survey and information gathering

- 6.7 As surveying and information gathering will be an ongoing process, a council should regularly review its findings to ensure that the evidence remains reliable and up to date. In particular, a council may wish to review its findings and/or undertake further research in light of any responses received following engagement with statutory consultees and/or any additional consultation body.

7.0 Options for the POP

Generation of Options

- 7.1 The preparation of the evidence base should enable a council to develop a strong understanding of the social, economic and environmental characteristics as well as any specific issues and challenges facing the plan

area. By analysing this information, a council should be able to develop a distinctive vision and identify the main issues which need to be addressed by the plan.

- 7.2 Options at the POP stage should concentrate on key plan issues which are capable of implementation and represent a range of different approaches within the realm of the plan. Options should set out the approach that could be taken on a range of issues such as urban and rural housing, industry and business, retailing and related activities, health education and community facilities, public utilities, transportation, recreation leisure and tourism, conservation, minerals and the countryside.
- 7.3 As the POP will influence the preparation of the draft Plan Strategy and draft Local Policies Plan, the options and alternatives contained in the POP, should focus on how the draft Plan Strategy or draft Local Policies Plan will implement the strategic vision and objectives whilst taking account of the regional planning framework provided by the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) 2035, prevailing planning policy and any other policy and advice issued by the Department. A council must also consider other information such as the Community Plan and any other local strategies in order to ensure that the subsequent LDP is locally distinctive and as comprehensive as possible to facilitate an integrated and co-ordinated approach to the planning and development of the area.
- 7.4 The options considered should be realistic and deliverable. Therefore, in some cases there may only be one reasonable option available. Under these circumstances, the alternative would be to consider the scenario without the implementation of the plan i.e. 'do nothing' option. If a council considers that there are no alternative options available, then this should be explained and justified.

Role of Sustainability Appraisal in deciding the preferred option

- 7.5 The purpose of SA is to promote sustainable development through the integration of social, environmental and economic considerations into the preparation of the LDP. SA must incorporate the requirements of the

European Directive 2001/42/EC on the assessment of effects of certain plan and programmes on the environment (SEA Directive). **The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004, (EAPP (NI) Regulations)** set out more detailed requirements for the process and content of the environmental assessment of plan and programmes.

- 7.6 Sustainability appraisal (SA) should be a continual process running in parallel with the preparation of the POP and LDP, starting from the options and alternatives being considered at the POP stage, all the way through to the policies and more detailed proposals being considered in the draft Plan Strategy and draft Local Policies Plan. At the POP stage, the information and evidence base prepared for the generation of options and alternatives will also fulfil part of the requirements of EAPP (NI) Regulations.
- 7.7 Information gathered for the POP will help to set the context and framework for the sustainability appraisal and provide the basis for the preparation of a scoping report. Although a formal scoping report is not mandatory, it is considered good practice to set out the evidence base and framework of sustainability objectives against which the social, economic and environmental effects of implementing the local development plan can be appraised.
- 7.8 The scoping phase of SA should commence and run concurrently with the preparation of the preferred options paper. It should include:
- a review of other policies, plans, programmes, and objectives relevant to the plan with information on synergies or inconsistencies;
 - baseline and other information, either already collected or still needed with notes on sources and any problems encountered;
 - social, environmental and economic problems/issues identified as a result of work undertaken;

- the SA framework, including the suggested SA objectives and indicators (and targets where these are proposed), and how they were chosen; and
- consulting on the scoping report in accordance with EAPP (NI) Regulation 11 and setting out the proposals for the structure and level of detail of the subsequent SA report on the
- draft plan.

7.9 Once the SA Scoping Report has been agreed with the Consultation Body as required by EAPP (NI) Regulation 11, it can be used to inform the decision making process by appraising options and alternatives in order to assist a council in deciding upon its preferred option in light of the alternatives considered and the sustainability objectives of the draft Plan Strategy or draft Local Policies Plan.

7.10 The SA process³ should help a council to decide on its preferred option, by highlighting the sustainability implications of each option and by putting forward recommendations for improvement. The appraisal needs to compare all reasonable alternatives including the preferred option and assess these against the baseline environmental, economic and social characteristics of the area and also the likely situation without the implementation of the plan.

7.11 In preparing the SA Interim Report (consisting of SA Scoping Report and assessment of alternatives), a council should focus upon the performance of different options against the objectives of the sustainability framework as agreed with the Consultation Body. The assessment of alternatives should articulate how a council has arrived at its preferred option and if possible, include technical evidence to make the decision making process more transparent and justify any comments provided. In doing so, a council should use the results of the SA to help provide a sound evidence base to justify their preferred option in light of the alternatives considered.

³ Development Plan Practice Note 4 Sustainability Appraisal incorporating SEA

7.12 The SA Interim Report should be published along with the POP for consultation. This will help stakeholders and the public to compare the sustainability implications of the options and a council's preferred option and contribute to a more meaningful and informed public consultation process.

8.0 Content of the POP

8.1 The POP should set out a council's vision and overall objectives, a series of options for dealing with key issues in the plan area and a council's preferred options. The options considered should be set within the regional and prevailing planning policy as well as other relevant regional and local plans and strategies e.g. Community Plan.

8.2 The POP should also provide a description of the plan area's needs, issues, natural resources and constraints as well as a description of the characteristics of each settlement in order to identify strengths, opportunities, constraints and existing development potential. Options should set out the approach that could be taken on a range of issues such as urban and rural housing, industry and business, retailing and related activities, health education and community facilities, public utilities, transportation, recreation leisure and tourism, conservation, minerals and the countryside.

8.3 The preferred options should be outlined and the justification of those options should be indicated. It is recommended that the POP should contain the following:

- Regional and local context;
- A council's vision and objectives for the plan area;
- Linkages to regional and planning policy and any other relevant matters such as the Community Plan;
- Options including a council's preferred options consisting of broad proposals for plan issues such the settlement hierarchy, housing in settlements, natural and built heritage, economic development, industry

and commerce, town centres and retailing, open space and recreation, development in the countryside, tourism, transportation, renewable energy, waste management, telecommunications, public Services and public utilities and any other issues as considered relevant e.g. minerals and coastal development.

- Justification and use of evidence base for options considered as well as for a council's preferred option;
- Maps to show the plan context, settlements, countryside, protected areas/environmental designations, key infrastructure and transport networks etc.
- Maps and diagrams to illustrate the options and preferred option for growth e.g. settlement hierarchy, linkages to neighbouring district council(s) and any other information as considered relevant.

8.4 A council should also consider highlighting strategic issues or including topic questions to instigate and encourage focussed discussion and engagement to provide constructive comments on the options and preferred options during the consultation process. The POP may also contain the following information:

- Details of specific consultation arrangements;
- Information on how to respond;
- Response form for the submission of representations to the POP;
- Reference to the Timetable and Statement of Community Involvement.

Linkage to evidence base

- 8.5 As the evidence base will be used to test the 'soundness' of the development plan document, it is important to provide transparency in the process by linking the evidence used to justify the preferred option over the other alternatives considered in the POP and the subsequent policies and proposals contained in the draft Plan Strategy and draft Local Policies Plan.
- 8.6 A council should also refer to the performance of different options in the assessment of alternatives in the SA and highlight relevant baseline information and evidence in order to facilitate meaningful public and stakeholder feedback. If a council can demonstrate that its preferred options are the most appropriate having gone through an objective appraisal process, it will pay dividends in terms of helping to provide the justification to defend the Draft Plan Strategy and Draft Local Policies Plan at Independent Examination. It will also provide a benchmark for seeking changes to the plan, as potential objectors will be required to challenge the soundness and sustainability of the Draft Plan Strategy or Draft Local Policies Plan and demonstrate why any proposed change(s) would be more appropriate in terms of meeting the tests of soundness.

Appropriate level of detail

- 8.7 In preparing the POP, a council will need to consider the most appropriate level of detail of information. Whilst the POP should concentrate on strategic issues and options, insufficient detail will prevent stakeholders and the community from providing constructive input into the consultation process. However, too much detail may lead to an increased focus on site specific issues which should be dealt with at the later stages of plan preparation. There should be a sufficient level of detail/technical evidence about the various options to enable a clear understanding of the different outcomes of options considered and how a council's preferred options are justified.

9.0 Publication of the POP

Availability and public consultation

9.1 Regulation 10 and 11 of the LDP Regulations sets out the requirements for the availability and public consultation on the POP. The publication of the POP should also be undertaken in accordance with the requirements set out in a council's agreed SCI and Timetable for the LDP.

9.2 Regulation 10 requires a council to:

- make available for inspection during normal working hours at its principal office and such other places as a council considers appropriate;
 - a copy of the POP;
 - such supporting documents as in the opinion of a council are relevant to the POP;
 - a document containing a statement indicating the period within which representations may be made on the POP;
 - notice of the address to which representations are to be sent.
- send the above information to the consultation bodies;
- give notice by local advertisement of the following;
 - the title of the local development plan;
 - a statement of the fact that the POP is available for inspection and the places and times at which it can be inspected;
 - a brief description of the content and purpose of the POP; and
 - details of how further information on the POP may be obtained.
- publish on its website;
 - the POP;
 - such supporting documents as in the opinion of a council are relevant to the POP; and
 - the local advertisement mentioned above.

9.3 Regulation 11 sets out the requirements for public consultation on the POP. Any person may make representations about a council's POP. Any

representation must be made within the period and sent to an address specified by a council. A council must make the POP available for public consultation for a period of not less than 8 weeks and not more than 12 weeks starting from the day it makes the documents available for inspection under Regulation 10.

- 9.4 It is important to note that representations made at the POP stage under Regulation 11 must be taken into account before the preparation of a development plan document. Therefore, representations made at the POP stage will not be taken forward as representations to be considered later at the Independent Examination on the draft Plan Strategy or draft Local Policies Plan.
- 9.5 As the POP aims to stimulate public comment and views that will inform the content of the LDP, it is important that all those who may wish to comment on the POP are made aware that they have an opportunity to do so. Before a council prepares and submits its development plan document to the Department, it must publicise its POP and make it available for public consultation.
- 9.6 The publicity requirements are a statutory minimum and therefore a council may do more to publicise the availability of its POP, if it chooses to do so. It is important to note that if a council gives a commitment to go beyond these minimum statutory requirements in its SCI⁴, it must comply with that commitment otherwise, the development plan document may be found to be 'unsound' at Independent Examination.

Effective engagement

- 9.7 A council should aim to build consensus through early stakeholder and community involvement. Early engagement and front-loading at the preferred options stage is vital to the effective delivery of the LDP as it provides stakeholders and the public an opportunity to influence the policies and proposals contained in the LDP by sharing their knowledge, particularly of local issues and problems in the plan area.

⁴ Development Plan Practice Note 2 Statement of Community Involvement

- 9.8 A process of community engagement must be carried out in accordance with the agreed SCI. The purpose of public consultation is to provide anyone who wishes to submit a representation to the POP an opportunity to do so. This may include advertising in the local and regional newspapers, public exhibitions, meetings/discussions, focus groups and workshops the facilitate engagement and encourage feedback on the issues and options set out in the POP and also any associated documents such as the accompanying SA Report.
- 9.9 Effective engagement with stakeholders and the community can help to identify issues that need to be considered early in the process, refine and improve options to build consensus and encourage a higher level of ownership which should in turn lead to fewer representations to the LDP as it progresses to adoption. This process of community and stakeholder engagement will also help to ensure that any further issues or potential impediments to the plan are highlighted and considered as necessary in order to help avoid unexpected delays to the agreed Timetable for the preparation of the draft Plan Strategy and the draft Local Policies Plan.
- 9.10 Following consultation on the POP, a council must take account of any representations received before it prepares the draft Plan Strategy and draft Local Policies Plan.

DPPN 5 Review – Schedule of changes

Page Number	Paragraph Number	Summary of change
Cover page	N/A	Revised date and version number
Page 1	N/A	Updated preamble text and footnotes with links to the relevant legislation
Page 3	4.2	Insertion of draft Plan Strategy and draft Local Policies Plan
Page 5	5.2	Correction of typographical errors
Page 7	5.9	Correction of typographical error
Page 8	6.3	Correction of typographical errors
Page 11	7.6	Correction of grammatical errors
Page 13	8.3	Correction of typographical errors
Page 15	8.6	correction of grammatical errors
Page 15	8.7	Correction of typographical errors
Page 17	9.4	correction of grammatical errors
Page 17	9.6	Correction of typographical errors
Page 18	9.8	Correction of typographical errors
Page 18	9.9	Correction of grammatical error
Backpage	N/A	Replacement of DOE with Department for Infrastructure and updated address of Department
N/A	Where necessary	Reference to “draft” Plan Strategies and Local Policy Plans has been made
N/A	N/A	Updates to footnotes

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