

## **Section 14 Direction - Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 and Planning (LDP) Regulations (NI) 2015**

This direction is issued pursuant to s14 of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

This direction may be cited as the:-

**Department for Infrastructure Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, Revision of Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council Plan Strategy, (s14) Direction 2025.**

### **1.0 Commencement**

1.1 This direction comes into operation on 28 October 2025.

### **2.0 Interpretation**

2.1 In this direction:

"the Act" means the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011;

"council" means Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council;

"regulations" means the Planning (Local Development Plan) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015;

"the Department" means the Department for Infrastructure;

"modifications" means changes required and included as part of this direction;

"recommendations" and "recommended amendments" means those as set out in the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) Independent Examination (IE) report under which section 10(8) refers;

"IE report" means the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) report on the Independent Examination (IE) of the Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council draft Plan Strategy.

### 3.0 **Purpose**

3.1 The Council adopted their Plan Strategy (PS) on 3 July 2025, following receipt of the Department's s12 direction on 27 September 2024. This direction required the Council to adopt the Plan Strategy subject to 93 modifications. It also required the removal of references to the proposed Abbey Centre 'Town Centre' designation through modifications (MOD) 15 and 16.

3.2 This direction is issued pursuant to Section 14(2)(c) of the 2011 Act and requires the Council to prepare new strategic and operational planning policy in respect of the Abbey Centre, taking account of the town centre first approach contained in regional planning policy for retail and other main town centre uses.

3.3 The Abbey Centre will be designated as a 'District Centre' in line with the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) (para 6.276) which states that district centres should be retained and consolidated, and should be a focus for local everyday shopping, and ensure their role is complementary to the role and function of the town centre. District centres fulfil an important retail role in providing consumers with convenience and choice in locations outside city and town centres.

### 4.0 **Justification**

4.1 The Department's statutory role and oversight powers are set out in the Planning (NI) Act 2011 and include areas such as responsibility for the formulation and coordination of regional planning policy, and its role in the adoption of local development plans (LDPs) prepared by councils. Under the provisions of the Act, the Department must '*formulate and co-ordinate policy for securing the orderly and consistent development of land and the planning of that development*'. This includes the coordination of LDP policies prepared by councils. Section 1 of the Act requires the Department to ensure that '*any*

*such policy*’ is in general conformity with the Regional Development Strategy (RDS). Furthermore, the Department must exercise its functions under subsection 1 with the objective of furthering sustainable development and promoting or improving well-being.

4.2 The Department concluded that the Council’s proposed designation of the Abbey Centre as a ‘large town centre’ did not meet the necessary requirements in relation to regional strategic objectives for town centres and retailing. The Department noted and considered the recommendations of the IE report and the Council’s supporting evidence, however ultimately concluded that regional strategic planning objectives were not met by the proposed designation of Abbey Centre as a ‘large town centre’ and therefore was considered not to be in general conformity with the RDS<sup>1</sup>.

## 5.0 **Scope of Revision**

5.1 The scope of the revision hereby directed shall be limited to providing the required designation and strategic and operational planning policy for the Abbey Centre. In addition, the revision may necessitate consideration of consequential policy areas to ensure the revised PS continues to provide a coherent and effective planning framework.

## 6.0 **Policy Requirements**

6.1 The revised PS policy in respect of the Abbey Centre shall take account of Regional Development Strategy 2035 (RDS), and in particular the spatial framework guidance contained within SFG3 to ‘Enhance the role of Belfast City Centre as the regional capital and focus of administration commerce, specialised services and cultural amenities’.

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<sup>1</sup> The Department’s s12 direction and accompanying explanatory note (dated 27/09/24) setting out the Department’s rationale can be viewed on the Council’s website.

6.2 New policy for Abbey Centre should support and strengthen the distinctive role of Belfast City Centre as the primary retail location in Northern Ireland. In addition, a precautionary approach should be applied in relation to future major retail development proposals based on the likely risk of out of centre shopping developments having an adverse impact on the Belfast City Centre shopping area.

6.3 The Council should also take account of the provisions of the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) 2015. Para 6.268 of the SPPS reinforces the strategic guidance of the RDS in promoting the precautionary approach to major retail development proposals. The aim of the SPPS is to support and sustain vibrant town centres through the promotion of established town centres as the appropriate first choice location of retailing and other complementary functions, consistent with the RDS.

6.4 The Council therefore should take account of the Regional Strategic Objectives for Town Centres and Retailing, which include and are not limited to:

- securing a town centres first approach for the location of future retailing and other main town centre uses;
- adopting a sequential approach to the identification of retail and main town centre uses in the PS revision;
- ensuring the PS revision is informed by robust and up to date evidence;

6.5 Consequently, the Council should:

- Review and update the retail evidence base. This will require an update to Evidence Paper 4: Retail and Commercial Leisure Study (Jan 2019). Of particular relevance 'Market share & Capacity Assessment' and 'Policy and Proposals' sections in respect of the Abbey Centre. This will include review of but not limited to Para 6.16, 6.30 Figure 6.2, 6.59, 6.61 & 6.68, Appendix F.

- Review and update the hierarchy of centres to include Abbey Centre as a district centre in the Figure 5: 'Hierarchy of Centres in our Borough" and Table 4 as a district centre.
- To safeguard existing /established town centres and minimise adverse impact, the Council should define the spatial extent of the Abbey Centre district centre boundary, as supported by the updated evidence base.

#### Statement of Common ground

6.6 As result of the district centre designation, the Council should also review and update the Statement of Common Ground (SoCG) between neighbouring councils to ensure that cross boundary working is appropriately documented and managed.

#### 7.0 **Procedural Matters**

7.1 The Council must prepare a timetable for the revision of the PS and submit this to the Department for agreement in accordance with Part 2 of the 2015 Regulations.

7.2 The Council must prepare the revision in accordance with its Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) and Part 5 of the 2015 Regulations.

7.3 When the Council consults on the s14 PS revision, it will need to follow the sequence of requirements set out in the Act from s8 to s10 and regulations 15 to 20, which will include availability of documents including any representations received and the submission to the Department to cause an IE.

7.4 The Department will continue to engage with the Council on the progress of the revised PS, and completion of the PS process.

## 8.0 **Departmental Intervention**

8.1 Failure to comply with this direction or submission of an unsatisfactory revised PS may result in the Department exercising its powers under Section 15 or 16 of 2011 Act to prepare or revise the Plan Strategy directly.

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