STRATEGIC PLANNING GROUP

MINUTES OF MEETING
Wednesday 20th May at 10.30am
Mid and East Antrim Borough Council Offices

ATTENDEES:	
[redacted]	Planning Manager, Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council (Chair)
Rosemary Daly	Chief Planner & Director DfI Regional Planning Governance & Legislation
Kathryn McFerran	Director DfI Regional Planning Policy & Casework
[redacted]	Deputy Director of Planning and Building Control, Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council
[redacted]	Assistant Director Regeneration, Newry Mourne and Down District Council
[redacted]	Acting Head of Planning & Building Control, Mid & East Antrim Borough Council
[redacted]	Development Plan Manager, Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council (attending on behalf of Denise Dickson),
[redacted]	Planning Service Lead, Mid Ulster District Council
[redacted]	Head of Planning, Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council
[redacted]	Head of Planning, Derry City & Strabane District Council (online)
[redacted]	Planning Manager, Belfast City Council (online)
[redacted]	Planning Officer, Fermanagh & Omagh District Council (attending on behalf of Paul McDermott) (online)
In Attendance:	
[redacted]	DfI Regional Planning Governance & Legislation
[redacted]	DfI Regional Planning Governance & Legislation (minutes)

1.	**Opening of Meeting**	
1.1	Apologies from - [redacted] (Head of Planning, Ards & North Down Council), [redacted] (Director of Regeneration & Planning, Fermanagh & Omagh District Council), [redacted] (Director of Planning & Building Control, Belfast City Council), and [redacted] (Chief Executive, Fermanagh & Omagh District Council)	
1.2	Introductions were made for the purposes of those new to the SPG.	
2.	**Agenda Item 1: Minutes and action points from the previous meeting**	
2.1	The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.	
2.2	The action points from the previous minutes were reviewed: • ***AP1: DfI to organise an initial meeting of the Minerals Working Group to discuss how the group moves forward. Local government representatives to be nominated / attend.*** The 17 June has been scheduled (provisionally) for a meeting of the Minerals Working Group (MWG). [redacted] to select two Principal Officers to participate in the MWG. [redacted] suggested that PPTO officer leads from the DM and LDP workstreams would be beneficial. This approach was agreed. The draft terms of reference (TOR) for the MWG (previously shared on 3 December 2025) to be re-circulated to the SPG for input/comment. **Status – Ongoing** • ***AP2: Consideration to be given to organising a legal briefing/review on the climate agenda and its integration with the planning system at a future SPG Meeting.***	**AP1**

	DfI are keeping a watching brief on the outcome of the A5 judgment/legal proceedings. When there is an update to be given on the legal proceedings, DfI will provide an update. **Status – Ongoing**	**AP2**
	• ***AP3: Sample case studies for the Regional Planning Report to be shared before the next Planning Improvement Project Board meeting.*** DfI will issue correspondence in the next few weeks to ask for case studies/good news stories. [redacted] suggested a good example is the report had been taken to the BCC planning committee in January 2026 about travel plans and public realm schemes which demonstrate tangible outcomes. This can be shared with the SPG. RD mentioned that the Northern Ireland Audit Office have written to the department to recognise that collaborative work between DfI and councils is moving in the right direction, this will be reported in their Annual Report to be released in July. **Status – Ongoing**	**AP3**
	• ***AP4: List of Engagement / Working groups to be circulated by DfI to local government to scope out existing forums for engagement and collaboration. All parties to review and amend.*** DfI had previously circulated to the Chair of HoP. DfI will re-circulate. **Status – Ongoing**	**AP4**
	• ***AP5: Organise initial meeting of an Environmental Governance Working Group to discuss how the group moves forward. Representatives to be nominated / attend.*** Local Government to nominate a lead on this. **Status – Ongoing**	**AP5**

	• ***AP6: [redacted] to organise meeting with RD / DfI re Telecommunications issues.*** The workstream on telecommunications/PD rights has been ongoing. RD & [redacted] agreed to take this work area to the PIP board. **Status – Actioned** • ***AP7: [redacted] to forward a copy of the Planning Committee code of conduct to RD.*** [redacted] to follow up on this and take forward. **Status – Ongoing** • ***AP8: DfI and local government to review the SPG TOR again and add/amend as per discussion.*** TOR agreed. Some additional comments received in writing to be considered at next SPG. **Status – Ongoing** • ***AP9: DfI to explore potential for a Sharepoint / Teams Channel for group sharing of information.*** DfI is currently looking into this. Need to clarify who would be included in the group to allow it to operate effectively. councils. **Status – Ongoing.** • ***AP10: DfI to share date of next SPG meeting.*** Next meeting to be held in Lisburn. **Status – Ongoing**	**AP6** **AP7** **AP8**
3.	**Agenda Item 2:** General Update from Heads of Planning and Chief Planner	
3.1 **3.2**	**<u>Heads of Planning Update</u>** [redacted] advised that the Infrastructure Committee called for evidence on regionally significant applications. This was discussed at the Heads of Planning (HoP) meeting on 8 May 2026. LG discussed	

	the timescale for response to the call for evidence given their planning committee cycles, which operates on a 6-week cycle.	
3.2	KMcF advised that DfI were timetabled to appear at the Infrastructure Committee on 3 June.	
3.3	[redacted] confirmed that BCC had agreed a response at their planning committee on 19 May 2026 and that a response had been submitted on the morning of 20 May 2026. This can be shared with the HoPs. Findings/Report from the call for evidence are expected to be published in June by the DfI Committee.	
3.4	KMcF suggested that the councils write to the Infrastructure Committee and advise in relation to the councils' governance processes and procedures.	
3.5	General discussion was had about the broader implications of delays in processing regionally significant applications. RD highlighted that planning timescales are influenced by a range of factors.	
3.6	RD confirmed that a significant recruitment programme for DFI is currently underway to improve resourcing within the department.	
	Planning Improvement Programme (PIP) and Training	
3.7	[redacted] advised that training plans have been put in place for a number of workstreams e.g. DCSDC& LCCC are taking the lead on EIA training.	
3.8	[redacted] advised that he has been sitting on an NIEA group to look at improvements/speed of decisions. There is also a big focus on standing advice.	
3.9	RD indicated that one of the actions from the Planning Statutory Consultee Forum (PSCF) is a planned workshop to be held in Autumn (late November) on the consultation process. It would be helpful to do this as a collective.	**AP9**
3.10	[redacted] advised that whilst each council will have its own focus, training was highlighted as a workstream/priority within PIP.	
3.11	LG to provide an update on training needs before the PIP board to be held on the 16 June 2026.	
	Development Management (DM) Workstream	
3.12	[redacted] provided an update on progress within the Development Management workstream. The aim is to have a regional protocol	

	to look at late representations/submissions to applications about to be presented to planning committees. A meeting is to be held with DfI 21st May.	
3.13	RD also noted the positive engagement between DfI and NILGA and SOLACE (first meeting was on 18 May), including establishment of a Task and Finish Group for working with the elected members.	
3.14	The recent workshop on renewables on 11 March 2026 and the workshop on AI on 20 March 2026 were both highlighted as a successful example of collaborative working and knowledge sharing.	
	PIP Workstream and Local Development Plans (LDPs)	
3.15	It was again highlighted by LG that the current local development plan system (post 2015) is very resource-intensive for councils and requires improvements/fundamental reform. DFI confirmed work is ongoing looking at measures that can be brought forward to improve the processes through legislative reforms for LDPs.	
3.16	At this point, KMcF advised that the current legislation remains the guiding framework. While there are no immediate plans to change it, scoping work has begun to consider further changes. She also confirmed that an additional resource will be allocated to the Plan Oversight Team to take this work forward.	
	Wider Engagement and Workstreams	
3.17	KP advised that council representation on the Statutory Working Group/Planning Statutory Consultee Forum (PSCF) will be important. The involvement of SES in this forum was currently under consideration. [redacted] indicated the Committee has already asked for SES attendance at the PSCF. KP agreed to share the correspondences with DFI for the PSCF.	**AP10**
3.18	RD indicated that it would be helpful to have SES and a representative from the DM Working Group to involved in the PSCF. RD also suggested should existing representative be unable to attend please send a representative in your place.	
	[redacted] provided an update on the Improvement and Collaboration Framework (ICF), noting that the team had been operating at reduced capacity but recruitment has been completed, with a new manager due to start in June.	
3.19	[redacted] confirmed that the ICF portal has been a success and is continuing to develop. RD also noted positive feedback, highlighting its value as a resource.	

	[redacted] commented that despite limited capacity, the team has performed strongly, and recent appointments will support future delivery. An online user survey will be issued to gather feedback from council staff, consultees and agents. **<u>Chief Planner Updates</u>** **3.20** RD invited questions on the issued PIP update note. **3.21** RD advised that the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report on the PAC is due to be published. **Planning Fees** **3.22** RD confirmed that an inflationary uplift to planning fees is under review. This will hopefully build on previous uplifts over the past three years. Should it come into effect, councils will be formally advised of this in writing.	
4.	**Agenda Item 3:** Draft Terms of Reference	
4.1	The Draft Terms of Reference were agreed by the group without comment. However, prior to the meeting [redacted] had indicated that some suggested amendments may be proposed by FODC. To be finalised at the next SPG.	
5.	**Agenda Item 4:** Any Other Business	
5.1 **5.2**	Confirmation was sought on who should be invited to the SPG meetings. It was noted that SOLACE representatives, Directors and Departmental officials are typically invited, however, consideration should be given to whether a more focused attendee list would support more strategic and effective discussions. No additional items were raised.	
6.	**Date of the Next Meeting**	
6.1	The next meeting will take place at Lisburn City & Castlereagh Council offices. DfI will chair, with a proposed date during the week commencing 21 September 2026 (date to be confirmed).	

Summary of Action Points

No.	Detail	Action Owner
AP1	DfI to organise initial meeting of Minerals Working Group to discuss how the group moves forward. Local government representatives to be nominated / attend. Draft Terms of Reference for the MWG to be recirculated.	**DfI**
AP2	DFI to provide high level update on the A5 Legal Proceedings.	**DfI**
AP3	Sample case studies for the Regional Planning Report to be shared before the next Planning Improvement Project Board meeting. DFI will issue a letter seeking inputs from each council.	**DfI**
AP4	List of Engagement / Working groups to be re-circulated by DfI to local government to scope out existing forums for engagement and collaboration. All parties to review and amend.	**DfI**
AP5	Organise initial meeting of an Environmental Governance Working Group to discuss how the group moves forward. Representatives to be nominated / attended by local government.	**LG**
AP6	[redacted] to forward a copy of the Planning Committee code of conduct to RD	**LG**
AP7	DfI and local government to review the SPG TOR again and add/amend as per discussion.	**DfI & LG**
AP8	DfI to explore potential for a Sharepoint / Teams Channel for group sharing of information.	**DfI & LG**
AP9	LG to provide an update on training needs before the PIP project board, to be held on the 16 June 2026	**LG**
AP10	LG to share the letter from SES requesting attendance at the Planning Statutory Consultee Forum	**LG**