

Regional Development Strategy 10 year review issued for consultation

The 10-year review of the Regional Development Strategy (RDS), the Government's overarching spatial plan for Northern Ireland, was issued last week by Regional Development Minister, Conor Murphy. The plan, which seeks to guide the location, type and quantum of development throughout the region, is open to consultation until 31 March 2011.

A consistent theme running throughout the draft RDS amendment is the need to reposition for change. It talks about the need for a further RDS review post-RPA, the need to plan for climate change, the document's influence on the Programme for Government and its alignment with the Executive's economic strategies. It also raises sensitive political issues – a clear theme is the Minister's vision to increase cross-border co-operation, working on an all-island basis and an objective to address east-west regional economic disparity.

New strategies

This is not the first review (the original document published in 2000 was reviewed in 2008) but it differs from its predecessor in a number of significant ways. Much of the higher level visions, aims and strategies remain the same, but some of the more specific policy directions could impact considerably on developers, landowners and district and borough councils. The new concepts include:

- The introduction of sub-regional centres;
- Settlement 'clusters'; and
- A review of the Housing Growth Indicators.

Strategic guidance also seeks to grow the population of the nine SRCs by providing additional housing areas.

Unlike the 2008 review (which was published as a short supplement to the main document) the current consultation proposes to issue a new, leaner and meaner strategy in one document. The draft for example is around 180 pages long compared to the 242 pages (plus update) of its predecessor.

Sub Regional Centres

Until now the spatial strategy set out in the RDS identified a hierarchy of settlements based on the premise that Belfast and Derry/Londonderry are the major regional cities that would be promoted as the economic hubs of the east and northwest respectively. A network of towns such as Ballymena, Omagh, Armagh etc would provide local services to its population and the surrounding rural areas. The major towns are identified either as main or local hubs depending on its size and function but are generally on a level-footing.

The draft amended RDS seeks to change this fundamentally. The relatively indiscriminate spatial strategy set out in the original RDS is replaced with a proposal to identify nine 'Sub-Regional Centres' (SRCs) where new development "should be considered first in the decision process" and are considered "best placed to perform higher service centre roles". This policy is clearly to the benefit of the SRCs and at the expense of the others.

The nine SRCs are: Ballymena, Coleraine, Cookstown, Craigavon, Downpatrick, Enniskillen, Newry, Newtownards and Omagh.

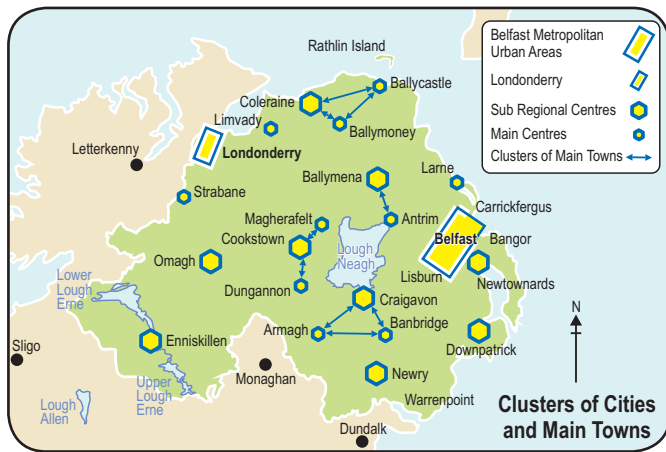
Notable absentees are: Banbridge, Armagh, Dungannon, Antrim and Strabane.

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Settlement clusters

Settlement clusters are linked to the designation of SRCs. The idea is that neighbouring towns should cluster around the SRCs to provide a level of services and infrastructure that they could not provide on their own. A potential problem is that some towns may lose out on economic development proposals currently in the system if this policy is implemented. The map over the page identifies the clusters proposed:





The RDS amendment is clearly intended to become operational before the review of public-administration - the document itself notes that a further amendment will be required post RPA. That being the case many of the current council areas will clearly be unhappy with the cluster approach. Banbridge and Armagh, for example, both 'main hubs' in the current RDS, will now be subservient to Craigavon (which is also currently identified as a 'main hub'). Dungannon, also a 'main hub' in the current RDS will also be hierarchically inferior to Cookstown under current proposals.

The designations are not immaterial either – the specific direction that when considering new development the SRCs should be given priority will clearly be the source of objection from many local councils.

Review of the Housing Growth Indicators (HGIs)

In 2000 the published RDS set out HGIs for NI based on each of Northern Ireland's 26 district council areas. In total it identified a need for an additional 160,000 dwelling units in Northern Ireland between 1998 and 2015, the specific location and distribution of the units to be identified through area plans. It allocated 51,000 of those units to the wider Belfast area. The 2008 review subsequently uplifted the NI need to 208,000 and to 66,500 for Belfast. The most recent public inquiry into an area plan, BMAP, took into account the 2008 review.

The latest draft figures set out in the amended RDS draft are not easily comparable to the latest figures used at the BMAP inquiry. It bases the new HGIs on a 2008 base (as opposed to 1998), which means it takes a bit of digging to understand if this is an increase or decrease in real terms. It proposes a new total of 189,500 for Northern Ireland between 2008 and 2025 and 60,600 for Belfast.

Using the data from the BMAP Inquiry it can be seen that the new HGIs represent a decrease in housing allocations across the plan area in real terms, and if adopted by the Planning Appeals Commission (who are currently considering the evidence presented at the Inquiry) the additional 16,000 housing units expected to be zoned may be reduced to around 12,000 units or less.

Other amendments

Other changes include:

- The identification of 'key developments' including Royal Exchange, Titanic Quarter, City Quays, and The University of Ulster Belfast Campus;
- An aim to grow the population of the City of Belfast (i.e. the current Belfast City Council area);
- The identification of 'economic corridors' based along the main transport routes;
- The reduction of Northern Ireland's Carbon Footprint

Developers, land owners, local councils and all those with a development interest would be well advised to seek advice on the implications of the revised RDS on their interest. The RDS, once published, will guide development in Northern Ireland until 2025. All new areas plans must be in 'general conformity' with the strategy and all future housing allocations will be based on the amended HGIs.

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