

Local Development Plan 2032

Rural Needs Impact Assessment (RNIA) –  
draft Plan Strategy



**Ards and  
North Down**  
Borough Council

## **Rural Needs Assessment**

### **Have your say**

This Equality Impact Screening Report is issued for consultation purposes alongside the Ards and North Down Local Development Plan (LDP) draft Plan Strategy for an eight-week period commencing 17 October 2025.

### **Pre-Consultation**

To allow everyone time to read and digest the draft Plan Strategy and all its supporting documents, the Council is publishing all documentation in advance of the formal eight week\*<sup>1</sup> period of public consultation. This period of pre-consultation will run from 18<sup>th</sup> September 2025.

Please note that no representations should be made during this period, as they will not be considered outside of the formal consultation period.

During this pre-consultation period, the Council's Local Development Plan team will facilitate a series of public engagement events. Arrangements for these events will be published on the Council's website and in local newspapers.

The aims of these events are to:

- Promote understanding of the draft Plan Strategy;
- Explain how it will be tested at Independent Examination; and
- Provide guidance on the submission of representations to the public consultation.

### **Formal Consultation**

We welcome comments on the content of this Equality Screening Report from everyone with an interest in Ards and North Down and its continuing development over the Plan period to 2032. All formal representations received will be given due consideration and may assist further drafting or amendment of policies prior to an Independent Examination.

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<sup>1</sup> Legislative time period - 8 weeks for LDP consultation.

The document will be open for formal public consultation for a period of eight weeks, commencing on 17 October 2025 and closing at 4.30 on 15 December 2025.

Please note that representations received after the closing date on 15 December 2025 will not be considered.

### **Availability of the Equality (Section 75) Screening Report**

A copy of this document, and the draft Plan Strategy, is available on the Ards and North Down Borough Council website: [www.ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk](http://www.ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk)

Or it can be made available for viewing in the Council's Planning Office, at the address below, for those who do not have online access.

Should you require a copy of this document in an alternative format it can be made available - please contact the Council offices for assistance.

TEL: 028 9182 4006

### **How to Respond**

Representations should be submitted to the Local Development Plan Team via the following options:

Online Consultation Portal:

Via e-mail: [planning@ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk](mailto:planning@ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk)

By post:        Planning Service  
                    Ards and North Down Borough Council  
                    2 Church Street  
                    Newtownards  
                    BT23 4PN

### **How will the Council deal with your comments?**

Ards and North Down Borough Council will use this information to fulfil our policy development and statutory obligations. We will keep your information secure, accurate, and for no longer than is necessary in accordance with data protection laws. If you wish to find out more about how we control and process your personal data, please see the Local Development Plan Privacy Notice.

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## Background

The draft Plan Strategy (draft PS) is the first document of a two-stage Local Development Plan (LDP) process introduced by the transfer of functions including planning powers to Local Government in April 2015. The draft PS for Ards and North Down articulates a Spatial Growth Strategy for the Council area and provides the policy framework for decisions on future development across the Borough. The LDP has a statutory link to the Council's Community Plan<sup>2</sup>. It has taken account of the 'Big Plan' in the formulation of strategies and operational policy. Once adopted by the Council, the Plan Strategy will be followed by the Local Policies Plan (LPP) (second document of the two-stage process) which shall provide more detailed policy on the local allocation of land for development and designations.

The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 requires councils and other public authorities to have due regard to rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans, and when designing and delivering public services. The principles of rural proofing are incorporated in the RNIA process.

The Rural Needs Impact Assessment (RNIA) accompanies the draft PS and will be subject to public consultation prior to Independent Examination, following which (and subject to receipt of the Department for Infrastructure's (DFI) Direction) it will be adopted by the Council. Prior to publishing the draft PS, the Council published a Preferred Options Paper<sup>3</sup> (POP) for public consultation which considered a detailed range of issues for the Borough area and provided options, including a preferred option, for how these issues could be addressed.

The RNIA, and the consideration of rural needs, is only one factor that requires to be taken into account when developing the draft PS and its related policies. Other documents and directions include, but are not limited to, the Council's Corporate Plan, the Integrated Strategy for Tourism Regeneration and Economic Development, the aforementioned Community Plan; as well as the regional planning framework set out in the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) 2035, the Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland 2015 (SPPS) and other assessments including a Sustainability Appraisal (SA), Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) screening and draft Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA).

The RNIA for the Ards and North Down Local Development Plan draft PS has been produced by the Council's LDP Team, consisting of professional Planners with a

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<sup>2</sup> The Big Plan 2017-2023 and The Big Plan Part II

<sup>3</sup> Ards and North Down Borough Council Preferred Options Paper 2019

role in formulating the draft PS. The RNIA has been undertaken in accordance with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs' (DAERA) Rural Needs Act (NI) guidance and template (March 2018).

The document shall be reviewed and updated as the Plan progresses.

## SECTION 1 – DEFINING THE ACTIVITY SUBJECT TO SECTION 1(1) OF THE RURAL NEEDS ACT (NI) 2016

### **1A Name of Public Authority**

Ards and North Down Borough Council

### **1B Please provide a short title which describes the activity being undertaken by the Public Authority that is subject to the Section 1(1) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016.**

Ards and North Down Local Development Plan – 2032 – Draft Plan Strategy.

The Plan Strategy is the first of two Local Development Plan documents to be produced in accordance with Part 2 of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

### **1C Please indicate which category the activity specified in Section 1B above relates to.**

Development of Policy, Strategy and Plan

The preparation and formulation of a draft Plan Strategy forming part (as in the first document) of the Local Development Plan.

### **1D Please provide the official title (if any) of the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service document or initiative relating to the category indicated in Section 1C above.**

Ards and North Down Local Development Plan (LDP) 2032 draft Plan Strategy

### **1E Please provide details of the aims and/or objectives of the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service.**

#### Aim

The aim of the draft PS is to set out the Council's spatial development framework for the period up to 2032. It has a statutory link to and shares the vision of the Council's Community Plan that *'Ards and North Down is a vibrant, connected, healthy, safe and prosperous place to be.'*

#### Objectives

The draft PS is a plan-led policy framework that seeks to achieve its vision through a series of Plan objectives and strategic approaches along with operational policies. The Plan objectives form an approach that offers appropriate balance between improving quality of life and economic prosperity for all, whilst protecting environmental assets and seeking to ensure that development is sustainable in the

Borough in the interests of future generations. The draft PS sets out strategic approaches and operational planning policies that will be used in the assessment of all planning applications to ensure the objectives of the Plan are secured with all future development proposals.

## **1F What definition of 'rural' is the Public Authority using in respect of the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service?**

The default definition of 'rural' employed in Northern Ireland is that developed by the Inter-Departmental Urban-Rural Definition Group<sup>4</sup>. The definition was proposed in 2005 and amended in the Review of the Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements (NISRA 2015). This definition classifies those settlements with a population of less than 5,000 together with the open countryside as rural. This RNIA is based on the areas, taking account of the 'Headcount and Household Estimates for Settlements' published in March 2015 by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA).

For the purposes of the RNIA, the rural area within Ards and North Down Borough includes settlements which have a population less than 5,000 and areas of the countryside outside of settlement limits.

The draft Plan Strategy proposes that Portaferry shall be reclassified as a small town and falls under the definition of rural along with the settlements listed below:

Villages: Crawfordsburn, Balloo, Ballygowan, Helen's Bay, Ballyhalbert, Seahill, Ballywalter, Carrowdore, Kircubbin, Cloughey, Portavogie, Greyabbey, Millisle, Killinchy, Lisbane

### Small Settlements

Craigantlet, Ardmillan, Orlock, Ballybarnes, Gray's Park, Ballyboley, Six Road Ends, Ballycranbeg, Ballydrain, Ballyeasborough, Ballyfrenis, Ballygalget, Ballystockart, Cotton, Glastry, Kilmoody, Kirkistown, Rubane, Loughries, Whiterock

### Countryside

Paragraph 6.61 of the Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland (SPPS) defines the 'countryside' as land lying outside of settlement limits as

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<sup>4</sup> Group set up to examine issue of 'rural' and 'urban' in context of an absence of definitions for these in central government. See Report of the Inter-Departmental Urban-Rural Definition Group - Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements.



identified in Local Development Plans (LDPs).

Note: the draft PS proposes to reclassify Portaferry in a promotion in settlement hierarchy to a small town and to reclassify Lisbane to a village from a small settlement. The dPS also proposes to reclassify Whiterock from a village to a small settlement.

The rationale for reclassification of these small settlements is contained in Settlement Hierarchy and Settlement Evaluation Technical Supplement 1’.

The draft PS defines the countryside as any land outside of designated settlement limits.

Rural needs: ‘rural needs’ means the social and economic needs of persons in rural areas (DAERA, 2018). The DAERA guidance states that, “a ‘need’ can be considered to be something that is essential to achieve a standard of living comparable with that of the population in general.”

## SECTION 2 – UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF THE POLICY, STRATEGY, PLAN OR PUBLIC SERVICE

### **2A Is the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service likely to impact on people in rural areas?**

Yes

### **2B Please explain how the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service is likely to impact on people in rural areas?**

The definition of rural is those settlements with a population of 5000 or less and therefore anywhere outside of the settlements of Bangor, Newtownards, Comber, Donaghadee and Holywood is classed as rural.

Draft Plan Strategy Strategic Proposals and Policies

The draft Plan Strategy (draft PS) contains a Spatial Growth Strategy, Countryside Strategy, General Principles policy, Climate Change and Mitigation strategic policy, Planning Agreements policy, subject strategies and related operational policies which will apply across the Ards and North Down Borough Council area. In consideration of the coverage of the draft PS to the entire Borough, it is therefore likely to have an impact on what is defined as the rural area.

The overall aim of the draft PS is to further sustainable development across the Council area. To achieve this, the draft PS sets aforementioned Strategies and an associated operational policy framework forming the basis for the decision taking for development management proposals.

The draft PS aims to deliver on the main pillars of sustainable development which are the economy, the environment and the societal needs and aspirations. In so doing, the potential impact upon the rural area can be considered to relate to these themes. The draft PS sets out spatial and cross cutting objectives and strategic objectives related to social, economic, environmental and infrastructure considerations. Through operational policies including, but not limited to, those related to housing, economic development, town centres and retailing, tourism, the natural and historic environment and infrastructure, the draft PS will have a direct influence on development.

The policy aims are to contribute towards positive improvements, for example,

sustaining and providing for job opportunities in the rural area. Ultimately the Plan Strategy shall help towards sustaining rural settlements and hinterlands as vibrant communities.

Overall, the implementation of the draft PS is likely to contribute to a positive impact on rural dwellers and the rural area in terms of supporting economic growth, social inclusion and seek to underpin its future sustainability. It is considered that some policies will have a more direct impact on the rural areas while other policies may be more indirect in their outcomes on the lives of rural dwellers.

**2C If the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service is likely to impact on people in rural areas differently from people in urban areas, please explain how it is likely to impact on people in rural areas differently.**

The draft PS has had regard to the regional policy contained in the RDS with the focus of growth being directed towards settlements. Therefore, the Spatial Growth Strategy and policies in the draft PS seek to ensure appropriate sustainable development opportunities across the Ards and North Down Borough Council area, including urban and rural areas.

Similarly, the LDP seeks to support and sustain all our communities, both urban and rural. Whilst the policies may make distinctions between the application of policy in settlements and the countryside, the aim is to deliver sustainable development irrespective of location.

It is considered that the policies do not seek to impact on urban and rural people differently but aim to deliver positive outcomes across the range of land use areas, such as housing and economic development, in a sustainable way benefiting everyone across the Council area.

Ards and North Down Borough Council area has a mix of both diverse urban and rural areas. Approximately 74<sup>5</sup>% of the total population live in urban settlements with the remaining 26% of the usually resident population living in the rural settlements and countryside (referred to in 1F above). 'The Big Plan' Ards and North Down's Community Plan, also recognised that this can result in some individuals and communities experiencing social isolation.

Irrespective of size, settlements including rural towns and villages provide support

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<sup>5</sup> Northern Ireland Statistics Research Agency Census 2021 – derived from usually resident population by settlement.

to the wider rural hinterland in terms of employment opportunities, and services, retail, entertainment and other facilities. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the needs of people in rural areas can be met both in an urban or rural context. The fact that a policy is viewed as a rural or urban policy does not mean that the out-workings of that policy are confined to the rural or urban area of the Borough but viewed in the wider context of delivering the overall vision of the draft PS.

The LDP has the important aim of supporting rural communities by providing appropriate and sustainable opportunities for development in the countryside. To achieve this aim, the Countryside Strategy will seek to

- facilitate development which supports rural communities and contributes to a sustainable rural economy in Ards and North Down;
- protect, conserve, and where possible enhance the rural landscape, seascape, natural environment, and historical and cultural heritage assets associated with the countryside of Ards and North Down; and
- promote high standards in the design, siting, and landscaping of development in the countryside.

Rural industry and employment differ from that of towns and cities. Difficulties with access to services, and issues with connectivity, social and digital, can have a disproportionate impact on rural dwellers.<sup>6</sup>

In terms of individual policies, while not specific to the rural area, there are several that, by the nature of the development associated, will have more likely significant impacts on the countryside and smaller settlements.

The Countryside Strategy seeks to set out the range and types of development which are considered to contribute to the aims of sustainable development and are therefore considered in principle to be acceptable in the Countryside. There are a range of operational development policies that relate to the rural area of the countryside (i.e. that area outside any settlement limits). The Countryside Strategy sets out opportunities for a range of types of residential and non-residential development in CS 1 and links to related operational planning policies.

The Countryside Strategy also contains a retained approach in relation to Rural Wedges. The function of these specific areas is to distinguish and maintain separation between settlements and serve to maintain the rural character of the countryside.

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<sup>6</sup> DAERA Key Rural issues, Northern Ireland 2024

## **Social**

**Housing** by its nature will have a degree differential impact in the rural area. The Housing Strategy seeks to create balanced communities with high quality sustainable residential environments to meet the housing needs of everyone. While the Housing Strategy seeks to promote higher density housing developments in our town centres and in other suitable locations that benefit from high accessibility to public transport, it also seeks to support rural communities by facilitating sustainable, well-designed residential development in the countryside. Rural housing has been considered extensively through the development of the dPS; for example, in the strategic allocation and the drafting of the related operational planning policies. Opportunities have been afforded to the rural area and in the countryside provided the relevant planning criteria have been met.

**Open space, sport and outdoor recreation** facilities play an important role in improving health and wellbeing not limited to location. The protection and enhancement of sporting and outdoor recreational facilities in urban areas may also reduce the demand for such activities in the countryside and may have an impact on rural dwellers. This can sometimes help provide relief for more fragile environments in the rural area. Those policies for outdoor recreation in the countryside will impact on the people in the rural area positively and will improve the service provision of the rural area as well as improving the health and wellbeing of rural dwellers. Open space enriches the character of the Borough and can contribute towards civic pride and community cohesion. Outdoor recreation in the countryside is important not only to the local community but benefits the rural economy and can promote tourism. The key purpose of the LDP in relation to outdoor recreation in the countryside is to ensure it operates as sustainably as possible.

## **Economic**

**Economic Development Strategy and policy direction** generally reflects the Spatial Growth Strategy for the LDP. The draft Plan Strategy directs planned economic development growth that is balanced with the sustainability objectives of the LDP to ensure that environmental quality for the countryside is not compromised. Whilst there may be a perception that the rural policies are prohibitive, they reflect the importance of sustaining vibrant rural communities. The dPS recognises the role small enterprise plays in rural life and provides a degree of flexibility for a number of uses, provided that the established rural character is retained.

Proposed policies in relation to **Town Centres and Retailing** reflect the overall thrust of the dPS in that development is directed to appropriate locations. A retail hierarchy is proposed and for the consideration of development proposals in a sequential test approach. The LDP acknowledges the role of village and other rural settlements which help sustain rural communities by meeting daily shopping and service needs of residents. This has a variety of positive and negative impacts on the rural area.

Opportunities for **tourism development** exist principally within settlements where infrastructure is already in place. A tourism hierarchy is identified for the Borough. The priority areas are principal settlements, within settlements, urban waterfronts and town centres. The Tourism policies, e.g. tourist amenities in the countryside, are influenced by the need to protect our natural heritage for future generations. The Tourism policies in the countryside have potential to impact differently on people living in urban and rural areas. The policies include a specific policy in relation to safeguarding tourism assets, as well as policies for tourism development in the urban and countryside areas. The proposals that come forward to be assessed through the policies and be developed will attract more visitors resulting in a beneficial impact on the rural economy and will result in employment opportunities that will benefit the rural community.

The minerals industry, through extraction and processing, makes a significant contribution to the local and wider economy as a valued provider of employment, particularly in rural areas. There are also a number of challenges arising from this form of development. A suite of policies in relation to **Mineral Development** is included in the dPS. Specific proposals can have potential adverse impacts on the environment and on the amenity and wellbeing of people living in proximity to extraction and processing sites. The scale of extraction can present a visual intrusion and degradation of the landscape. Minerals can only be extracted from sites where they occur thus presenting a challenge as there may be limited opportunities for consideration of alternative sites. While the Borough has a history of a range of minerals extraction, today sandstone is the only rock currently extracted in the Borough. The extraction sites in the Borough are all located in rural areas and produce a third of the sandstone extracted in Northern Ireland. The Borough contains quarries that extract rock with a highly polished stone value – highly valued for road building and exported to Great Britain.

## **Environmental**

Policies for the **Natural Environment** have the potential to impact on the rural area more than urban areas due to extent and coverage, as much of our natural environment is located in rural areas. The impacts largely stem from the level of protection given to the conservation of natural assets, such as habitats and

landscapes; for example, in the rural area versus those in the urban area where there is a presumption in favour of development (subject to relevant material considerations). The Borough is rich in varied landscapes, habitats and landscape features. Our greatest Natural Environment assets are in the rural area. The Borough is also subject to extensive natural environment designations both international e.g. Ramsar, Special Protection Areas (SPA), Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), and National – e.g. National Nature Reserves. The proposed Natural Environment policies retain existing high level designations.

There is little which separates the impacts of **Historic Environment** policies on the rural area from the urban area. The policy provisions are the same for rural and urban areas and so no meaningful differential exists. One new designation of an Area of Significant Archaeological Interest has by virtue of its rural siting and related policies a slight differential impact.

The dPS presents policies in relation to **Coastal Management**. The Coastal Management Strategy shall seek to protect the undeveloped coast from inappropriate excessive or obtrusive development. Designation UCZ1 in relation to the undeveloped coastal zone is by virtue of location outwith settlement limits and wholly in the rural area. The designation is intended to provide additional protection for the unique landscape value, visual amenity, and nature conservation interest of the Borough's coastline. Coastal change policy included in the dPS has a policy presumption against development in known areas of land instability and coastal erosion in coastal areas.

**Flooding** can be a potential issue for all areas as it can stem from several sources. Deforestation, agricultural drainage and changing land use practices can lead to increased flows in watercourses and increased potential from fluvial flooding. If there is a significant differential impact it would be in favour of the rural area in that less development of a certain nature could have reduced potential for surface water flooding. It is considered that the proposed flooding policies, therefore, are not more or distinctively impactful on the rural area.

## **Infrastructure**

**Renewable and low carbon energy and minerals policies** by virtue of the nature of the existing or likely location of proposals related to that form of development shall have potential for impact in the rural area. All forms of renewable energy have potential impacts on the rural area that are not arguably matched at present in urban areas. Wind energy development proposals are more likely to be located in

rural areas. While the Borough does not have any wind farms<sup>7</sup> at present, there are single turbines. Wind energy development proposals are sited usually where wind speeds are sufficiently fast and cannot normally be sited in close proximity to developed areas where sensitive receptors such as residential development will be. Therefore, there are more likely impacts – both positive and negative, on the rural area. A degree of visual impact and impact in relation to landscape character is to be expected, but there will also be financial benefits to individual landowners (who are normally resident in the affected area) in terms of renewable energy for their own operations and for selling to the national grid. While the dPS seeks to positively facilitate the Borough's full potential for renewable and low carbon energy development, the support for these forms of renewable energy generation and storage is in suitable locations where they are not considered likely to cause unacceptable adverse impacts. A cautious approach will be adopted within those areas considered to be most sensitive to proposals for renewable energy and storage.

**Solar energy and hydro schemes**, by their nature, are also more likely to be in rural areas and, like wind energy, can have associated amenity issues such as visual impact. Hydroelectric development also has the potential to negatively impact on fisheries and nature interests in rivers. Applications under policy should include assessments and reports in relation to impacts on priority species and habitats. Similarly, **biomass energy** - particularly through combustion, can impact on such things as air quality and water quality (through emissions) and can produce significant noise. However, it also has financial benefits for the local economy; and biomass fuel can secure a long-term income for farmers, forestry owners and contractors, and transport operators in rural areas.

There are differential impacts associated with **Transportation policies** as the provision of public transport and transport infrastructure is mostly centred around our urban centres. Private transport is a necessity in many rural areas in terms of access to employment and basic services. Data from NISRA's continuous household survey indicates that 92% of rural households in Northern Ireland had access to at least one car or van. There is a lower amount in terms of public transport provision to the rural areas; however, this should be considered in the context of the population these transport services support. The draft Plan Strategy has an **Active Travel Policy**. Provisions for such things as active travel and high levels of connectivity may be considered more difficult to achieve in rural areas; however, it is anticipated that such requirements will be applied in a way that is proportionate and appropriate to the scale and locational context of a proposal.

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<sup>7</sup> Defined as development comprising more than 2 turbines



There are some differential impacts associated with development related to waste management in the rural area. **Waste policy** can direct certain types of waste disposal development to rural areas e.g. re-use of former mineral extraction sites. Given the low likelihood of such developments, the impact is likely to be negligible over the Plan period. Due to the location of some developments there is likely to be no access to mains sewerage and thus non-mains sewerage is required usually through a septic tank. This can have an additional cost attributed to it whilst an accumulation of these types of developments can have an impact on the environment.

The draft PS also contains overarching **General Principles Policy** for all forms of development in both urban and rural areas. It has a specific principle for furthering sustainable development and threads this aim throughout the chapter as a common theme underpinning the other principles.

This chapter includes specific reference to development proposals in the countryside needing to demonstrate account of rural design guidance.

The Strategic Policy for **Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation** applies to proposals across the entire Borough. It signposts to relevant operational planning policy.

**2D Please indicate which of the following rural policy areas the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service is likely to primarily impact on.**

Given the interrelationship between urban and rural areas, the strategies and policies of the draft PS will primarily impact upon the following social, economic, and environmental aspects of rural areas:

- Rural Businesses;
- Rural Tourism;
- Rural Housing;
- Jobs or Employment in Rural Areas;
- Education or Training in Rural Areas;
- Broadband or Mobile Communications in Rural Areas;
- Transport Services or Infrastructure in Rural Areas;
- Poverty in Rural Areas;
- Deprivation in Rural Areas;
- Rural Crime or Community Safety;
- Rural Development; and
- Agri-Environment.
- Other – Coastal Development, Renewable Energy and Low Carbon Energy

Development, Landscape (natural and built/historic environment), Minerals Development

**2E Please explain why Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service is NOT likely to impact on people in rural areas.**

The strategies and policies have the potential to impact on people in rural areas, as described in summary.

### SECTION 3 – IDENTIFYING THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC NEEDS OF PERSONS IN RURAL AREAS

**3A Has the Public Authority taken steps to identify the social and economic needs of people in rural areas that are relevant to the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service?**

Yes

**3B Please indicate which of the following methods or information sources were used by the Public Authority to identify the social and economic needs of people in rural areas.**

The following methods were utilised

- consultation with the community
- consultation with other organisations (Stakeholder and Statutory/Non-Statutory Consultees)
- evidence position papers
- published statistics
- other Council publications
- Government publications
- data from the Community Plan

**3C Please provide details of the methods and information sources used to identify the social and economic needs of people in rural areas including relevant dates, names of organisations, titles of publications, website references, details of surveys or consultations undertaken etc.**

See further detail in Appendix 1 of information sources and references.

## Preferred Options stage

A series of Position Papers were produced to inform the LDP process at the Preferred Options Paper stage. Each Position Paper identified a separate topic area and provided an executive summary of the current position in relation to that topic area. Baseline reviews took place along with consideration of regional strategic planning policy and any locally distinct need identified, used to justify the policy direction for each topic area which is carried through to the draft PS.

Information for Position Papers was collated through research, consultation and discussion with government departments, agencies and public bodies. Desk based research was undertaken of local and central government websites, published research and reports. Topic papers were published as part of the Preferred Options Paper (POP) following consultation with Elected Members.

The POP was published with a full public consultation exercise inviting comments from all interested parties. Public consultation events were held at various venues/locations and at various times throughout all the District Electoral Areas of Ards and North Down Borough Council area. Council officers from the LDP team attended these engagement opportunities to aid interested parties in understanding the POP and how to respond to it. At these events various topics were discussed and expanded upon. Views expressed largely included the specific housing, economic and social needs relating to the rural areas of the Borough. The POP was also forwarded to statutory consultees, including government departments. At the end of the consultation period all the responses received were collated and a Public Consultation Report produced to inform the LDP process going forward.

## Engagement with Elected members

The formulation of the draft Plan Strategy for the LDP has involved engagement with Elected Members, both through a series of policy workshops and Committee meetings where Members actively engaged in the process of drafting and reviewing specific policies. Members who represent District Electoral Areas which are rural in nature and in service to those constituents, are particularly aware of the social and economic needs of those areas which play a pivotal role within the Council as a whole.

## Sustainability Appraisal (SA)

During the SA process the approach and policies of the draft Plan Strategy have been considered in detail with the aim of ensuring the overarching aim of sustainable development is considered throughout the document.

**3D Please provide details of the social and economic needs of people in rural areas which have been identified by the Public Authority.**

The Regional Development Strategy (RDS) 2035 sets out at a strategic level the approach to the delivery of growth across the whole of Northern Ireland which includes rural areas. The Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland (SPPS) sets out the planning requirements for the whole of Northern Ireland. The SPPS sets out rural policy and the delivery of sustainable development across a range of topics including employment, housing and economic growth. The Council is required to have regard to these strategic documents along with other government advice and guidance to ensure that the needs of the entire Council area are delivered in a sustainable manner.

The RDS seeks to sustain rural communities living in the smaller settlements and the open countryside and to improve accessibility for rural communities (SFG13 and SFG 14). Key considerations of the RDS are the role and function of rural settlements and accessibility to services. The RDS in respect of the rural area identifies the need to:

- Establish the role of multi-functional town centres. These should be the prime locations for business, housing, administration, leisure and cultural facilities both for urban and rural communities.
- Connect rural and urban areas. This is necessary to widen the economic base of town, village and countryside, provide support and networking opportunities to encourage the formation of local alliances to exploit complementary resources and facilities.
- Revitalise small towns and villages. This is particularly relevant to those towns and villages which have been static or declining and contain areas of social need. Deprivation happens in different ways in different places. An integrated approach between government departments, agencies and communities will ensure that regeneration plans reflect the specific needs of each community.
- Facilitate the development of rural industries, businesses, and enterprises in appropriate locations. Farming plays a major part in sustaining rural community networks, as employers, consumers and producers. Forestry and fishing also contribute to communities, in employment and commercial terms, as well as in terms of recreation opportunities. Other industries such as tourism and renewable energy can provide further jobs and opportunities in rural areas as long as they are integrated appropriately within the settlement or rural landscape.
- Encourage sustainable and sensitive development. The expansion of rural tourism and development which is both sustainable and sensitive to the

environment should be encouraged. This includes the ability of settlements and landscapes to absorb development.

- Improve the overall connectivity of rural communities to services and other parts of the Region by exploring innovative ways of bringing these services to the communities. Using the community hall, local school or church hall for visiting service providers will help keep people living in rural areas connected. Different service delivery approaches could include outreach and mobile services or increased use of digital technology.
- Integrate local transport. Promoting integrated rural transport initiatives which meet the needs of those living in isolated areas and in particular elderly and disabled people.

Ards and North Down has vibrant rural areas with active communities and sectors that contribute to the overall employment base. Our rural settlements and hinterlands also have considerable character and importance. The local communities have a strong business bases but require to be supported and sustained to remain vibrant. There is a need to support and sustain through a range of planning policies that can address appropriate levels of development in housing and employment opportunities whilst protecting the character and heritage of rural settlements and the open countryside. As well as the need to sustain vibrant rural communities and consolidate their current base, there are also various elements of rural life which have been identified as needing to be improved.

**If the response to section 3A was yes, go to Section 4A**

## SECTION 4 – CONSIDERING THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC NEEDS OF PERSONS IN RURAL AREAS

### **4A Please provide details of the issues considered in relation to the social and economic needs of people in rural areas.**

In the formulation of the Spatial Growth Strategy, Countryside Strategy and the suite of policies for the draft PS, the future sustainability of the rural area has been considered.

As previously identified, in order for communities in the rural area to be sustained, an appropriate level of housing and economic opportunities is required. Policies contained in the draft Plan Strategy offer appropriate and sustainable uses in such rural locations and seek to deliver towards maintaining the existing population and giving opportunity to future residents to live and work there.

#### **Housing**

The Council will seek to meet housing need over the Plan period through appropriate land and housing provision across the settlement tiers. An allocation to those rural settlements shall consolidate their role and function as local centres for housing, employment and services whilst sustaining and maintaining the villages and the smaller settlements. The provision of an allocation to the open countryside is in line with the aim of facilitating sustainable rural development of an appropriate scale.

The Strategic Policy for the Countryside, Policy CS 1, sets out the range of types of development which are considered to contribute to the aims of sustainable development and are therefore considered in principle to be acceptable. In the countryside, the draft Plan Strategy shall continue to provide opportunity for people who need to live in the countryside to continue to do so e.g. to ensure that active farm holdings have opportunities for new residential development to maintain the active farm business and special personal and domestic circumstances.

The draft Plan Strategy has considered the housing needs of other rural dwellers that are not farmers or associated with a non-farming business. The dPS provides a number of other opportunities for non-farming community through policies for infill dwelling proposals, clustering and replacement and conversion of existing buildings (subject to other relevant material considerations).

As mentioned above, the draft PS also provides for opportunities for housing within settlement limits of the Borough's rural settlements.

## **Economic Need**

Meeting the need for appropriate employment opportunities to sustain the rural population is recognised - reflecting The Community Plan Outcome 4 - All people in Ards and North Down benefit from a prosperous economy. There is a need to balance the provision of opportunities without harming the character and amenity of the countryside. The draft PS acknowledges the need to support existing businesses in the rural area and allow sufficient flexibility to facilitate their expansion. The policies allow diversification to help sustain farming, with new employment opportunities to present themselves in the rural area.

**Balance between Housing and Employment** – there is a need for employment opportunities and housing provision to be balanced to ensure a sustainable rural community, therefore the housing and economic policies contained in the draft PS ensure this link is maintained and built upon. The key challenge in the draft PS is the balance of development which brings social and economic benefits while protecting a unique resource and sense of pride in a place.

**Protection of Rural Areas** - To protect the natural and historic environments of the countryside from inappropriate development requires the management of housing and economic uses in a sustainable manner that also supports and sustains rural communities. In addition, the protection of natural and historic environments in rural areas is ensured through appropriate designations, for example, the Strangford and Lecale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), to ensure the countryside is maintained for future generations to enjoy. The draft Plan Strategy sets out strategies and policies for housing, employment and historic/natural environments in the countryside and for coastal management – in particular the undeveloped coast.

The draft Plan Strategy contains operational planning policies with key policy tests which development proposals must meet to ensure appropriate, sustainable development can be accommodated whilst offering the highest possible protection of rural areas.

**Transportation infrastructure and service provision** is an ongoing issue in rural areas with rural dwellers dependant for the most part on private vehicle usage and the contraction of services by the public transport provider. The provision of public transport is particularly important for people who do not have access to a car. The draft PS seeks to address this issue, in conjunction with the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) as the competent transport authority, through

the Local Transport Study and a forthcoming Transport Plan. The Transport Study prepared by DFI encourages a modal shift across the entire Council area reducing the reliance on the car and a move to public and other modes of transport. The use of technology is vital for rural people and to allow rural business to succeed. The need to connect places physically and digitally has been acknowledged in the policies. These linkages all help reduce a sense of isolation and improve connectivity for businesses and people in the rural area.

**Community Facilities** - there is a need to ensure that facilities such as health and education can be accommodated so that rural people have adequate access to these facilities in appropriate locations. It is important that rural dwellers have access to necessary facilities in order that their day-to-day needs can be met. The suite of policies promotes the requirement for such facilities and their long-term viability. Linking to economic opportunities, villages and rural centres also provide for sustaining rural communities by meeting daily shopping and service needs and adding to vitality of rural settlements commensurate with the position in the hierarchy.

**Tourism** - there is a need for appropriate tourism facilities with links to the wider area through walking and cycling provision (active travel). Strategic Greenways are also key to encouraging sustainable growth and connectivity between places, attractive to residents and visitors alike. This area of economic activity can ensure the long-term viability of the rural area and rural businesses. The growth in various forms of tourism is encouraged and the appropriate use of the rural area as a resource for tourism activity. The linkages to the overall protection of the existing historic and natural assets of the rural area are retained in the draft PS.



## SECTION 5 – INFLUENCING THE POLICY, STRATEGY, PLAN OR PUBLIC SERVICE

### **5A Has the development, adoption, implementation or revising of the Policy, Strategy or Plan, or the design or delivery of the Public Service, been influenced by the rural needs identified?**

Yes

### **5B Please explain how the development, adoption, implementation or revising of the Policy, Strategy, or Plan or the design or delivery of the Public Service, has been influenced by the rural needs identified.**

The Spatial Growth Strategy, Countryside Strategy, other subject strategies and planning policies as set out in the draft PS are aimed at encouraging sustainable growth across the rural area to sustain rural communities. The draft PS seeks to address the issues of the rural needs identified in previous sections (3C and 3D). The draft PS seeks to ensure that the entire Council area and its residents have the opportunity for better access to employment, housing, transport, public services and facilities and that the historic and natural heritage is safeguarded for future generations.

The objectives and planning policies in the draft PS will encourage sustainable growth across the rural area delivering towards sustaining our vibrant rural communities and resisting economic and social decline.

In order to facilitate a sustainable level of rural housing, the draft PS makes a provision for housing proposals across the settlement tiers which include rural settlements and also to the countryside, subject to normal planning considerations.

In relation to housing in the countryside, the draft PS contains a policy provision for dwellings on farms, dwellings for established rural businesses restoration and replacement of rural dwellings and the conversion and reuse of other rural buildings.

Provision is made in the draft PS for clustering, infilling, special personal and domestic circumstances and affordable housing in the countryside. All of these opportunities are all subject to meeting the relevant policy tests and criteria set out in the draft PS.

#### Economic Need

In terms of economic development in the rural area, the Countryside Strategy and Economic Development Strategy, along with operational planning policies, have been designed to allow for opportunities for small rural start-up businesses. The Strategy

also seeks to provide more opportunities for existing businesses in the rural area to expand and grow in order to support employment in our vibrant rural communities.

#### Minerals

The draft PS balances facilitating minerals development against the need to protect the environment and our most vulnerable and scientifically important landscapes. The draft PS acknowledges the importance of continuing to permit the extraction of minerals in the rural area, as this is an area which provides rural employment both directly and indirectly through associated manufacturing and construction industry.

#### Social Need

The draft PS recognises the importance of connectivity and the need to ensure that rural areas remain linked both via physical roads and infrastructure and through improvement in telecommunications infrastructure. The direct provision of such infrastructure is beyond the remit of the LDP; however, the Council shall continue to work with government departments and stakeholders in relation to these matters.

The draft PS will facilitate telecommunication development where it is appropriate, without causing negative environmental impacts or effects on human health.

In relation to environmental protection, all rural development proposal will be subject to criteria-based policies as well as strategic designations which will protect the most vulnerable of our unique landscapes from inappropriate development.

#### **5C Please explain why the development, adoption, implementation or revising of the Policy, Strategy or Plan, or the design or delivery of the Public Service, has NOT been influenced by the rural needs identified.**

The role of the draft PS and the process of the preparation of the two-stage Local Development Plan is to enable and facilitate development. The Spatial Growth Strategy and policies are applied to all development proposals which are considered and determined by the Council. The role of the Plan is not the actual provision or delivery of facilities across the Council area. The actual delivery of key services to the rural area goes beyond the remit of the draft PS and planning powers. Delivery of a range of statutory services depend on key stakeholders such as Government Departments/agencies who are responsible for improvements (for example) to the road network, provision of public transport as well as health, education and facilities. Ards and North Down Borough Council acknowledges the importance of these services to the entire community and in particular their impact on the rural area and will continue to liaise with key stakeholders for their delivery which is facilitated by the strategies and policies contained in the Local Development Plan (Draft PS). This will

be of particular importance in developing the Local Policies Plan and continuing to support positive outcomes in terms of the overall Ards and North Down Borough Council Corporate Plan 2024-2028 and delivering towards the Council's Community Plan 'The Big Plan'.

## Section 6 – DOCUMENTING AND RECORDING

**6A Please tick below to confirm that the RNIA Template will be retained by the Public Authority and relevant information on the Section 1 activity compiled in accordance with paragraph 6.7 of the guidance.**

I confirm that the RNIA Template will be retained, and relevant information compiled.
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<b>Rural Needs Impact Assessment undertaken by:</b>	Leona Maginn on behalf of Ards and North Down Borough Council (Planning Service)
<b>Position / Grade</b>	Principal Planning Officer
<b>Date</b>	
<b>Rural Needs Impact Assessment approved by:</b>	
<b>Position / Grade</b>	
<b>Date</b>	

## Appendix 1 – Range of Information sources used in formulation stages of POP and dPS preparation

- NISRA Census 2011 and 2021
- and previously available NI Neighbourhood Information Service [www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/Home.aspx](http://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/Home.aspx);
- Local Government Election Results;
- Household Estimates, NISRA;
- Household Projections, NISRA;
- House Condition Survey
- Northern Ireland Housing Market Review and Perspectives
- NIHE – Housing Investment Plans;
- DOE / DfI planning statistics;
- DRD – Ensuing a Sustainable Transport Future;
- DETI – Statistics on Electricity Consumption
- DOE – Renewable Energy Statistics;
- DARD Flood Maps / DfI Flood Maps; and
- NISRA – Local Government Tourism Stats.

### Extant Development Plans related to the Council area

- Ards and Down Area Plan 2015
- Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan BMAP 2015 associated technical supplements; in combination with the Planning Appeals Commission Inquiry report.
- Bangor Town Centre Plan 2001
- North Down and Ards Area Plan 1984 – 1995
- Belfast Urban Area Plan 2001

The Ards and North Down Borough Council - Community Plan “The Big Plan;” and related reports and statistics produced.

Ards and North Down Borough Council Housing Monitor produced by LDP team;

Village Plans and Masterplans

Strangford and Lecale AONB Management Plan;

(non-exhaustive)