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Sent: 09 March 2026 09:50

To: Maginn, Leona <leona.maginn@ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk>

Cc: Rainey, Michael <Michael.Rainey@niwater.com>

Subject: Ards & North Down Draft Plan Strategy Re-consultation - NI Water Response 6 March 2026

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Dear Leona,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Ards & North Down Borough Council Draft Plan Strategy (DPS).

Northern Ireland Water (NI Water) has reviewed the DPS and its supporting evidence as it relates to water and wastewater infrastructure.

We welcome the DPS's recognition of urgent investment needs in wastewater services and its commitment to align housing zonings with infrastructure capacity.

We also support the approach of reviewing existing zonings and capacity at Local Policies Plan (LPP) stage.

NI Water considers the DPS to be sound in its strategic approach to water and wastewater infrastructure. However, suggestions are made in the attached PDF document for the strengthening of the evidence base in the DPS with respect to the DfI Tests for Soundness.

Kind regards,

Steve

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Your Ref:

Our Ref:

Date: 6th March 2026

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Dear Leona,

RE: Consultation on Ards & North Down Borough Council – Draft Plan Strategy

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Ards & North Down Borough Council Draft Plan Strategy (DPS). Northern Ireland Water (NI Water) has reviewed the DPS and its supporting evidence as it relates to water and wastewater infrastructure. NI Water welcomes the DPS's recognition of urgent investment needs in wastewater services and its commitment to align housing zonings with infrastructure capacity. We also support the approach of reviewing existing zonings and capacity at Local Policies Plan (LPP) stage.

Key Comments

NI Water considers the DPS broadly sound but recommends targeted clarifications to strengthen its evidence base and deliverability under DfI soundness tests CE1, CE2, CE3, C1/C3 and P1. These relate particularly to: CE1 (coherence and robustness of evidence), CE2 (deliverability), CE3 (monitoring), C1 and C3 (consistency with regional policy) and P1 (accuracy of facts). The detailed comments below are provided within that context and are intended to support a sound and deliverable plan.

We also welcome the commitment that the identification and release of new housing zonings will align with any necessary supporting infrastructure, including wastewater and that further review of existing zonings, urban capacity sites and infrastructure capacity will be undertaken at LPP stage. This approach, summarised on page 47 of the Housing Technical Supplement, is consistent with the need to match growth with infrastructure capacity and is supported by NI Water.

Comments on the main DPS text

- NI Water is pleased to see the emphasis placed on early engagement with infrastructure providers. On **page 28, paragraph 1.33**, NI Water would welcome this being made more explicit by referring directly to our Pre-Development Enquiry (PDE) process. The PDE is NI Water's formal mechanism for confirming network and treatment capacity and identifying any necessary mitigation or reinforcement. This would improve clarity under P1 and CE3 and would help to ensure that development proposals are tested appropriately against available water and wastewater capacity.
- **Page 29, paragraph 1.37**, NI Water welcomes the acknowledgement of the urgent need to invest in wastewater infrastructure which is at or near capacity and limiting growth. The DPS recognises that the LDP will be progressed in a way that is compatible with these circumstances and that more detailed analysis will be undertaken at LPP stage, including a review of existing zonings, urban capacity sites and an up-to-date assessment of infrastructure capacity, particularly in relation to wastewater treatment works (WwTW) and network capacity. NI Water notes and strongly supports the statement in the Housing Technical Supplement 2 (**page 44, Resource Test**) that allocations must consider *"water, waste and sewage, including spare capacity"*, and the RDS Housing Evaluation Framework on **page 45** which confirms that studies should assess community assets and physical infrastructure, including water, waste and sewage. These references provide a helpful link between land use strategy and infrastructure capacity and contribute positively to CE1 and CE2.
- NI Water welcomes the recognition in the DPS that Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) will be encouraged in all developments and will be the preferred drainage solution where feasible and practical. The emphasis on integrating SuDS into site design from the outset aligns well with the Sustainable Water Strategy and with NI Water's own approach to managing surface water. However, NI Water would highlight that all new development should discharge storm water to an existing storm sewer or directly to an existing watercourse. The Sustainability Appraisal material suggests that directing rainwater into combined sewers may still be viewed as an acceptable option. NI Water does not accept new storm water connections to foul or combined sewers and requires storm water to discharge to dedicated storm sewers (where available) or directly to watercourses. This principle should be expressly stated in the DPS and supporting documents to ensure clarity on policy and practice and to satisfy P1 and CE1.
- Under the safeguarding of residential amenity, the DPS does not specifically reference odour zones around wastewater treatment works (WwTW) and wastewater pumping stations (WwPS), although odour is touched upon slightly. Odour zones represent a significant constraint for sensitive development, particularly housing. NI Water would therefore suggest that this section explicitly notes that odour zones around WwTW and WwPS can constrain development.
- Where non-mains infrastructure is considered, odour zones still apply, and a NI Water would suggest where a private WwTW is considered a Water Order Consent from NIEA

should be in place prior to planning approval. This clarification would support CE2 and CE3 by reducing the risk of undeliverable allocations and planning conflict.

- Section 6 **Policy PA1 page 119** refers to Planning Agreements as a mechanism for assisting with utilities infrastructure. Planning agreements cannot currently be used to deliver NI Water infrastructure.
- On page **467, paragraph 25.11**, applicants are advised to engage NI Water under the heading “Non-mains infrastructure”. Non-mains wastewater infrastructure does not fall under NI Water’s responsibility. In such cases, DAERA and the relevant regulatory bodies are the appropriate points of contact. NI Water would request that this is reflected and would correct a factual inaccuracy and improve compliance with P1.
- Development of facilities ancillary to water sports adjacent to waterways, rivers, inland lakes, and reservoirs. NI Water does not permit water sports on its impounding reservoirs, which form part of the public drinking water supply system and are generally within Drinking Water Protected Areas. This should be explicitly reflected to strengthen the policy’s consistency with water quality protection objectives under C1 and C3.
- Page **359, paragraph 17.5**, the DPS references the Living with Water in Belfast Plan (LWWP) in the context of flood risk management and infrastructure improvements. NI Water wrote to the Head of Planning in the Council on 15th January 2025 confirming that ‘In late 2024 DfI wrote to NI Water and advised that a review had been carried out and concluded that whilst the need for the Living With Water in Belfast Plan continues to exist, delivery of the Plan within the original twelve-year timescale is no longer achievable. Delivery of the Belfast Plan projects can no longer be taken forward through a formal programme but instead by individual partners, such as NI Water, and delivered as normal business at the ‘scale and pace achievable within available budgets. We would therefore suggest that the text at **page 359, paragraph 17.5**, and related Sustainability Appraisal wording, is amended to reflect the current position and the funding constraints, to maintain accuracy under P1 and robustness of CE1.
- The DPS (**page 464, paragraph 25.1**) includes some general statistics on NI Water’s services which are out of date, NI Water would ask that these are updated as below to align with our current corporate information.
 - NI Water delivers clean, safe drinking water to approximately 920,000 households and businesses,
 - Collects around 360 million litres of wastewater per day from approximately 750,000 households and organisations,
 - Operates roughly 27,000 kilometres of watermains and around 16,500 kilometres of sewers.
- The DPS page 457, paragraph 24.34 states that wastewater is not classified as a controlled waste which is correct. However, wastewater sludge is classified as a controlled waste and must be managed in accordance with the applicable waste

management legislation. There are two PPP sites within the Council area where sludge movements occur, Clarification of this point would support P1.

Technical Supplement 1: Settlement Hierarchy and Settlement Evaluation

Uses NI Water’s headroom sheet labelled June 2024 in Appendix A. NI Water issued an updated headroom sheet to the Council in February 2025, reflecting changes to the PC21 investment plan, and a further update in August 2025 to reflect the latest capacity information. For compliance with CE1 and P1, NI Water recommends that Appendix A is updated to reflect the latest headroom data provided to the Council, rather than relying on the earlier version.

Page 19, paragraph 6.24, describes each settlement in terms of the availability and capacity of water and wastewater services. NI Water has identified inaccuracies in **Appendix 1 pages 32-41**, including instances where settlements are linked to the wrong WwTW or where available capacity is incorrect e.g., Ballygowan WwTW is identified as having no capacity, the works has been upgraded and has capacity, and where a public sewer network is described as being present when in fact no network exists. These inaccuracies risk undermining confidence in the evidence base and could affect the perceived deliverability of certain allocations. NI Water would suggest that **Appendix 1 pages 32-41** and the related settlement descriptions are revised (NI Water can provide more detail on these inaccuracies on request).

NI Water would confirm that some areas within the Newtownards catchment are currently closed to further development due to *“high polluting”* assets, and that much of the network in Bangor and Newtownards is operating at capacity, with restrictions on new connections. The DPS recognises these constraints in broad terms. To fully satisfy CE2 on deliverability, NI Water recommends that the settlement evaluation explicitly acknowledges these network constraints and notes that the release of development land in affected settlements will depend on confirmation of capacity or agreement of appropriate solutions through the PDE process.

Housing Technical Supplement and Urban Capacity Study

As noted above, NI Water welcomes the statements on **pages 44 and 45** of the Housing Technical Supplement that allocations must consider water, waste and sewage including **spare capacity**, and that the Housing Evaluation Framework should assess physical infrastructure including water and sewage. Page 47 further clarifies that the housing figures are indicative strategic allocations and that detailed analysis, including up-to-date infrastructure capacity assessment, will take place at LPP stage. NI Water supports this approach and would emphasise that the phasing and release of housing – including any Phase 2 housing and major urban capacity sites – should be explicitly tied to NI Water’s annual wastewater capacity information and the outcome of PDEs. This would strengthen CE3 by embedding a clear monitoring and phasing mechanism.

On page 50, the Housing Technical Supplement notes that the LDP prioritises housing within existing urban areas. NI Water recognises the merits of this approach but draws attention to the fact that while the main WwTW serving these urban areas i.e., North

Down Ards, Ballyrickard and Kinnegar currently have capacity, there are significant constraints in the sewer networks due to unsatisfactory intermittent discharges. NI Water recommends that **page 50** explicitly acknowledges this distinction between WwTW capacity and network capacity and notes that both levels must be considered when assessing the deliverability of housing in these catchments.

Urban Capacity Study 2B, page 28 identifies potential for 27 housing units in Cloughey. NI Water notes that Cloughey is currently served by a retention tank which is at capacity and that no upgrade to NI Water infrastructure serving the village is presently planned. In these circumstances, the development potential ascribed to Cloughey should be qualified to make clear that the capacity figure is indicative and subject to confirmation of a viable wastewater solution. This would help to align the Urban Capacity Study with CE2 and P1.

Economic Development, Employment Land and Major Development

The Economic Development material, including the 2019 Employment Land Review (Technical Supplement 5 and 5A), identifies zoned industrial and employment land at Bangor, Comber, Donaghadee and Newtownards. **Page 62** notes that these zoned lands have been scored against various criteria, including *“infrastructure and connections”*, while **Appendix 6 on page 110** uses a three-tier scoring system based on whether services, including water and sewers, are available on-site, nearby or not nearby. NI Water is concerned that this scoring appears to consider only the presence or proximity of infrastructure, not whether sufficient capacity exists within that infrastructure. Many of the sites in these settlements fall within constrained network areas, including areas in Newtownards, which are now closed to new connections due to high polluting assets. To enhance the evidence base under CE1 and to support deliverability under CE2, NI Water recommends that the economic development and employment land assessments expressly acknowledge that the presence of water and sewer infrastructure does not guarantee available capacity, and will only proceed where NI Water confirms adequate wastewater capacity or where appropriate developer-funded or developer-led solutions have been agreed. This would improve consistency with regional policy requirements in the Regional Development Strategy and Sustainable Water Strategy, thereby supporting C1 and C3.

For major development in the countryside and mineral development, it is likely that significant water capacity may be required in rural locations where infrastructure is limited or absent. NI Water suggests that the relevant policies should draw attention to the need for early engagement with NI Water in such cases through the Water Impact Assessment process. This would support CE2 by ensuring that potential infrastructure constraints are recognised at plan level.

Public Utilities Technical Supplement and PC21 / PC28 Investment

The Public Utilities Technical Supplement includes Annex A, which presents a headroom capacity sheet for Ards & North Down, dated June 2024. Note 4 states that upgrades to Kinnegar and Killinchy Wastewater Treatment Works are included within NI Water’s PC21 investment programme. NI Water issued updated information to the Council in February 2025 to reflect changes to the PC21 investment programme. This

included the deferral of upgrades to Kinnegar and Killinchy WwTW due to significant capital funding constraints. To ensure accuracy under P1 and coherence under CE1, NI Water requests that **Annex A** and any associated text referring to Kinnegar and Killinchy WwTW upgrades within PC21 are amended to reflect this change.

Water Supply, Private Water Supplies and Drinking Water Protected Areas

The DPS notes on **page 451 paragraph 24.13** that the Council area is supplied from the Silent Valley and delivered through various service reservoirs but provides limited further detail on water supply.

NI Water's most recently published Water Resource and Supply Resilience (WR&SR) Plan, NI Water suggests that the DPS could briefly summarise the relevant Water Resource Zone position. In the Eastern Water Resource Zone, which covers Ards & North Down, a small supply–demand deficit identified in previous planning has been resolved over the last year through reconfiguration of the transmission network, enabling additional water to be transferred from the Northeast Zone into the Eastern Zone and removing the deficit. A concise statement to this effect would provide an up-to-date and balanced picture of water resource resilience in the Borough.

In addition, NI Water recommends that the DPS explicitly recognises that drinking water catchments feeding NI Water abstractions are designated as Drinking Water Protected Areas under Article 7 of the Water Framework Directive. Development activities within these catchments must ensure that raw water quality and quantity are protected. The DPS could usefully include a short statement that the primary concern in such areas is the potential impact of development on drinking water quality and quantity and that any development within or affecting a Drinking Water Protected Area must demonstrate measures to safeguard both. This would improve consistency with regional and European water policy under C1 and C3.

The DPS refers to the Regional Water Strategy and the Long-Term Water Strategy for Northern Ireland 2015–2040 but does not explicitly mention responsibilities for private water supplies. NI Water suggests that the DPS could state that private supplies are regulated by the Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI) and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), and that proposals involving private supplies should comply with the relevant regulatory requirements.

Summary

NI Water considers that the Draft Plan Strategy is sound in its strategic approach to water and wastewater infrastructure. The DPS appropriately acknowledges the significant capacity constraints affecting parts of Ards & North Down Borough Council, recognising the need for urgent investment in wastewater, and commits to working closely with NI Water at Local Policies Plan stage.

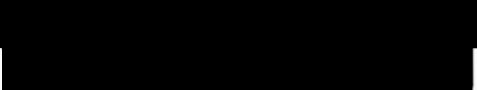
However, to strengthen the evidence base and ensure full compliance with the DfI soundness tests CE1, CE2, CE3, C1/C3 and P1, NI Water would recommend that the Council consider the amendments above for inclusion in the DPS.

Subject to these clarifications and corrections, NI Water is content that the DPS provides a robust and deliverable framework for managing growth in the Ards & North Down Borough in a manner that is consistent with currently available infrastructure, and alignment through the LPP stage with future infrastructure provision.

NI Water would stress that as a regulated utility investment decisions for the forthcoming PC28 period, and beyond, will be prioritised and agreed with the Utility Regulator, the Department for Infrastructure, the Consumer Council NI, and our environmental regulators. While NI Water will seek to support the Ards & North Down LDP through water and wastewater investment, alignment with proposed development locations and timings may be constrained by funding availability and regulatory priorities. If similar constraints persist into PC28, capital investment is likely to be focused on base maintenance and the continued provision of safe drinking water, with limited funding for major wastewater upgrades. In these circumstances, it is important that the Sustainability Appraisal does not assume that NI Water's capital programme will necessarily alleviate all infrastructure constraints.

While NI Water met with the Council in August 2025 prior to the publication of the DPS, prior to that the last meeting with Council was in 2023. Offers to meet had been extended in the interim period but had not been taken up. We remain committed to collaborating closely with the Council to facilitate sustainable development wherever possible and would welcome continued engagement, particularly at Local Policies Plan stage, to ensure that the latest capacity information is fully integrated into the zoning and phasing of development land.

Yours faithfully,


Dr Stephen Blockwell
Head of Investment Management

