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NORTHERN IRELAND

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Eleven councils, no complete plan

Northern Ireland's Local Development Plans compared: what has been delivered, what is on the way, and where the system is falling short on infrastructure, the public realm, carbon, land and the environment.

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Facts as at 21 November 2026. A companion to "The law on the books is not the law on the ground". Not legal or planning advice. Reviewed by simulated panels of councillors, lawyers, editors and officials; their views are reasoned positions, not quotations from real people.

SUMMARY

Eleven years after planning moved to councils, the system has not produced a complete plan

Councils took over planning in April 2015, with each to produce a two-part Local Development Plan: a Plan Strategy, then a Local Policies Plan with site zonings. Six councils now have an adopted Plan Strategy. None has published even a draft Local Policies Plan. Site zonings in much of Northern Ireland still come from departmental area plans whose plan periods ended years ago. The delay is not only local: the NI Audit Office found that examination of a Plan Strategy took 22 to 43 months in total, 16 to 28 of them at the Planning Appeals Commission, and that complete plans are unlikely before the mid-2030s (May 2026).

6 of 11 Plan Strategies adopted

Fermanagh and Omagh, Belfast, Lisburn and Castlereagh, Mid and East Antrim (all 2023), Antrim and Newtownabbey and Derry City and Strabane (both 2025).

0 of 11 complete plans

No council has adopted, or published in draft, a Local Policies Plan. Causeway Coast and Glens timetables its for spring 2033.

4 plans run out in 2030

Antrim and Newtownabbey, Fermanagh and Omagh, Mid and East Antrim and Mid Ulster plan to 2030, with about four years left and no site zonings adopted.

41.4 weeks for major applications

Against a 30-week target in 2025/26. Two councils met it. Wastewater limits hold back housing across Northern Ireland.

This matters for the work in the thought piece. The code of engagement leans on "adopted plans": councils as consultees, reasons for departing from the plan, and a proposed duty on NI Water to give reasons where its investment does not match the plan. That only works if the plans exist.

1 · WHERE EACH COUNCIL STANDS

The stage each plan has reached

Six adopted, none finished

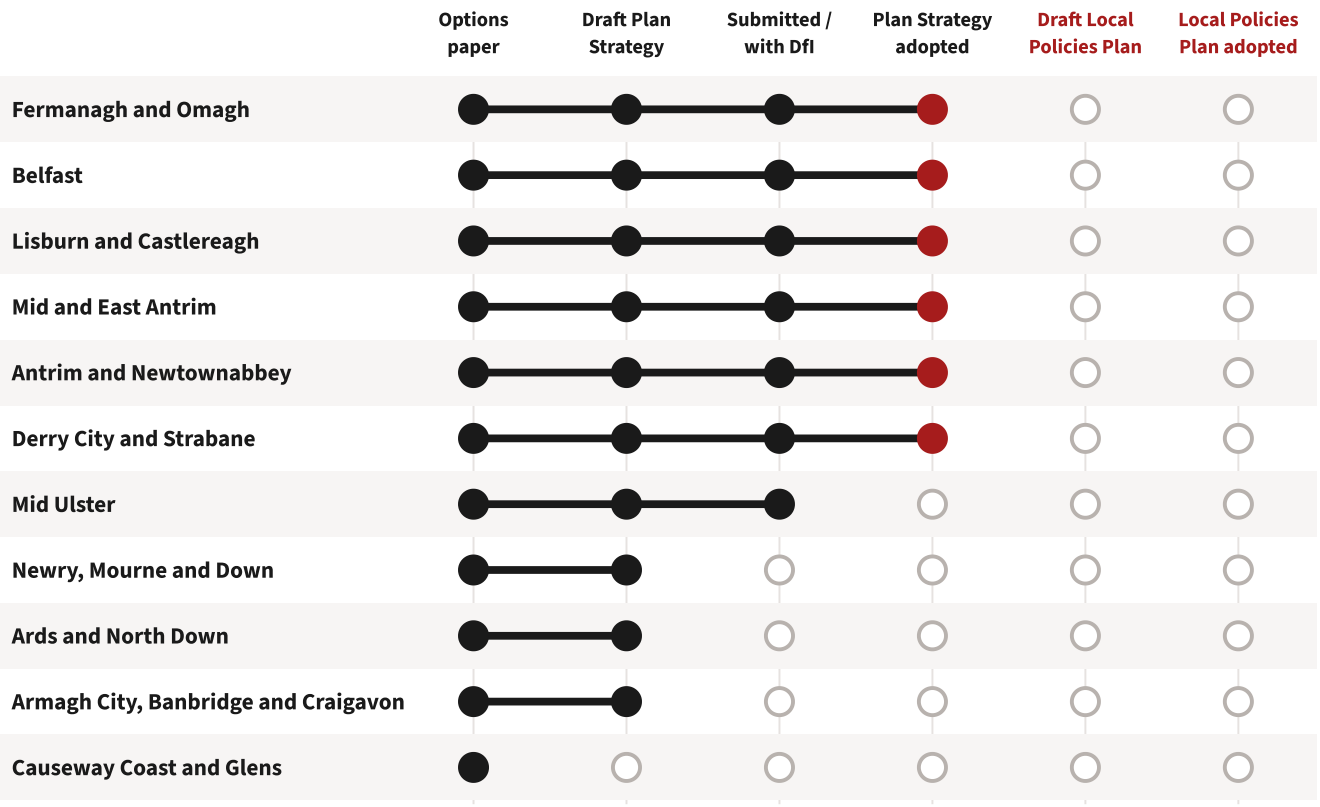


Figure 1. Stage reached by each council, as at 21 November 2026. No council has reached the last two stages; red marks an adopted Plan Strategy. Mid Ulster submitted its draft to DfI in May 2021; on 27 August 2026 DfI directed modifications under section 15 of the Planning Act (NI) 2011. Its plan is in central hands, not stalled locally.

Council	Plan to	Plan Strategy	Local Policies Plan
Fermanagh and Omagh	2030	Plan Strategy adopted 16 March 2023	Draft LPP expected Q3/Q4 2026/27
Belfast	2035	Plan Strategy adopted 2 May 2023	LPP in preparation; area guidance (SPG) being added
Lisburn and Castlereagh	2032	Plan Strategy adopted 26 September 2023, following DfI direction of 28 June 2023	Working towards draft LPP
Mid and East Antrim	2030	Plan Strategy adopted 16 October 2023	Working towards draft LPP
Antrim and Newtownabbey	2030	Plan Strategy adopted 3 July 2025; DfI s14 direction to revise (Abbey Centre as district centre), effective 28 October 2025	Draft LPP work launched November 2025
Derry City and Strabane	2032	Plan Strategy adopted July 2025; HMO policy revision under way	Draft LPP in preparation; c.180 call-for-sites bids
Mid Ulster	2030	Draft 2019, submitted to DfI May 2021; DfI s15 direction to modify the draft, 27 August 2026; not adopted; timetable under review	Not started

Newry, Mourne and Down	2035	Draft published 27 June 2025; counter-representations closed 20 April 2026; focused changes now; revised timetable: examination Q4 2026 to Q3 2027, adoption Q4 2027	Not started
Ards and North Down	2032	Draft representations 16 January to 16 March 2026; counter-representations 8 May to 7 July 2026 (published 25 September 2026); submission date not yet set	Not started
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	2035	Draft Plan Strategy published 29 September 2026; consultation to 8 December 2026	Not started
Causeway Coast and Glens	2038	Draft Plan Strategy due autumn/winter 2026; adoption timetabled autumn 2029	Timetabled spring 2033

Sources: each council's LDP pages and timetables; DfI Chief Planner's Newsletter, December 2025. Dates are as published by each council; where only a month is given, only the month is shown.

2 · WHAT HAS BEEN DELIVERED

Strategy in place, sites still to come

Where Plan Strategies are adopted, they have replaced the old regional Planning Policy Statements with local policy. Mid and East Antrim's, for example, replaced the operational policies of the Planning Policy Statements in October 2023. Councils are now adding detail through supplementary guidance. Belfast approved Development Opportunity Area guidance in April 2026, linking city-centre housing and commercial capacity to public realm and public transport improvements, the clearest example of an LDP being used to steer public realm investment. Derry City and Strabane published supporting guidance in October 2026. Fermanagh and Omagh published its Plan Strategy monitoring report in May 2026.

Plan periods against the clock

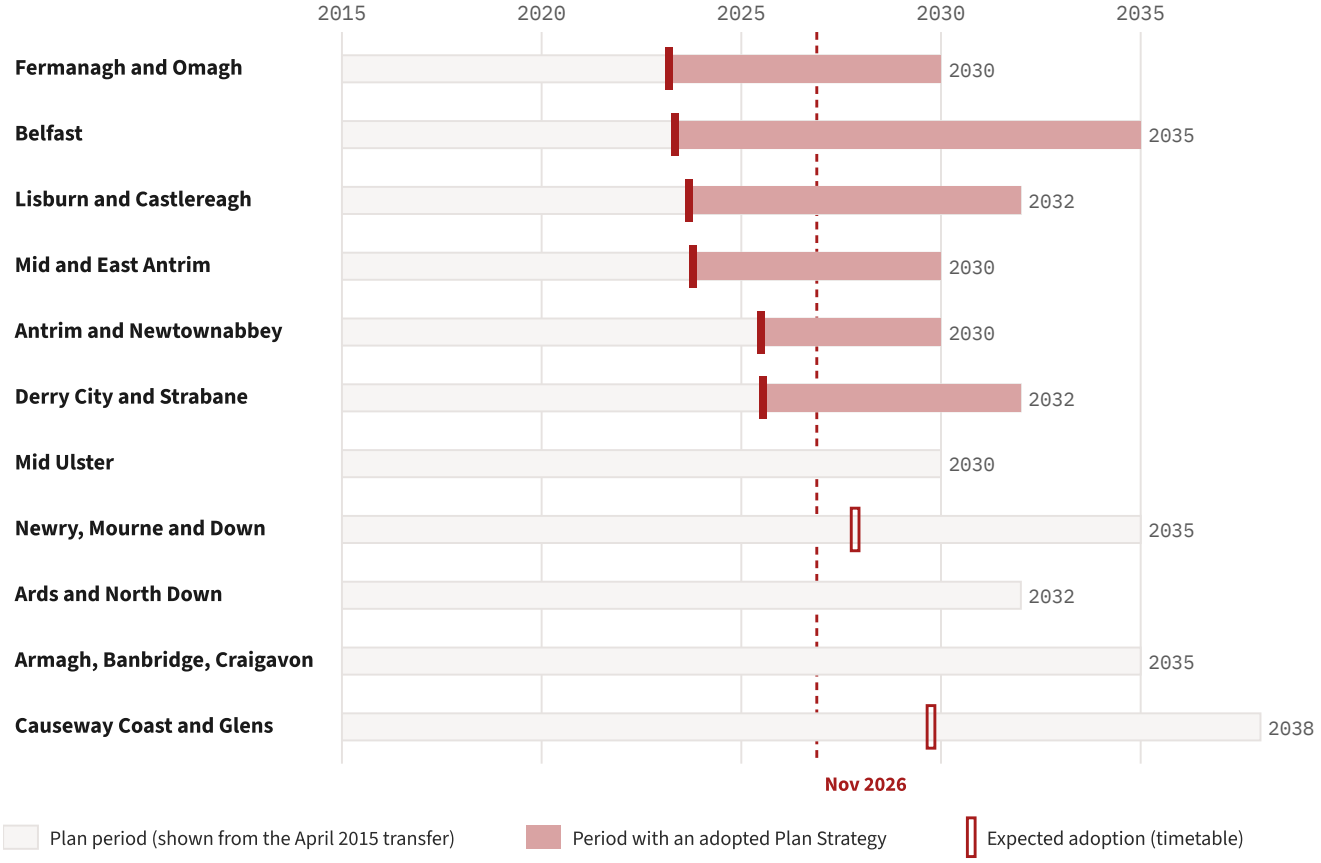


Figure 2. Each council's plan period from the April 2015 transfer of planning powers, with the period covered by an adopted Plan Strategy. Causeway Coast and Glens timetables adoption for autumn 2029, with a plan running to 2038.

The Plan Strategy is only half a plan. Until a Local Policies Plan is adopted, the zonings for housing, employment and open space still come from the old departmental area plans. A Plan Strategy adopted in 2025 for a plan ending in 2030 leaves little time to deliver against it.

Five weak points

1. Time is running out on the plans themselves

Years left in each plan

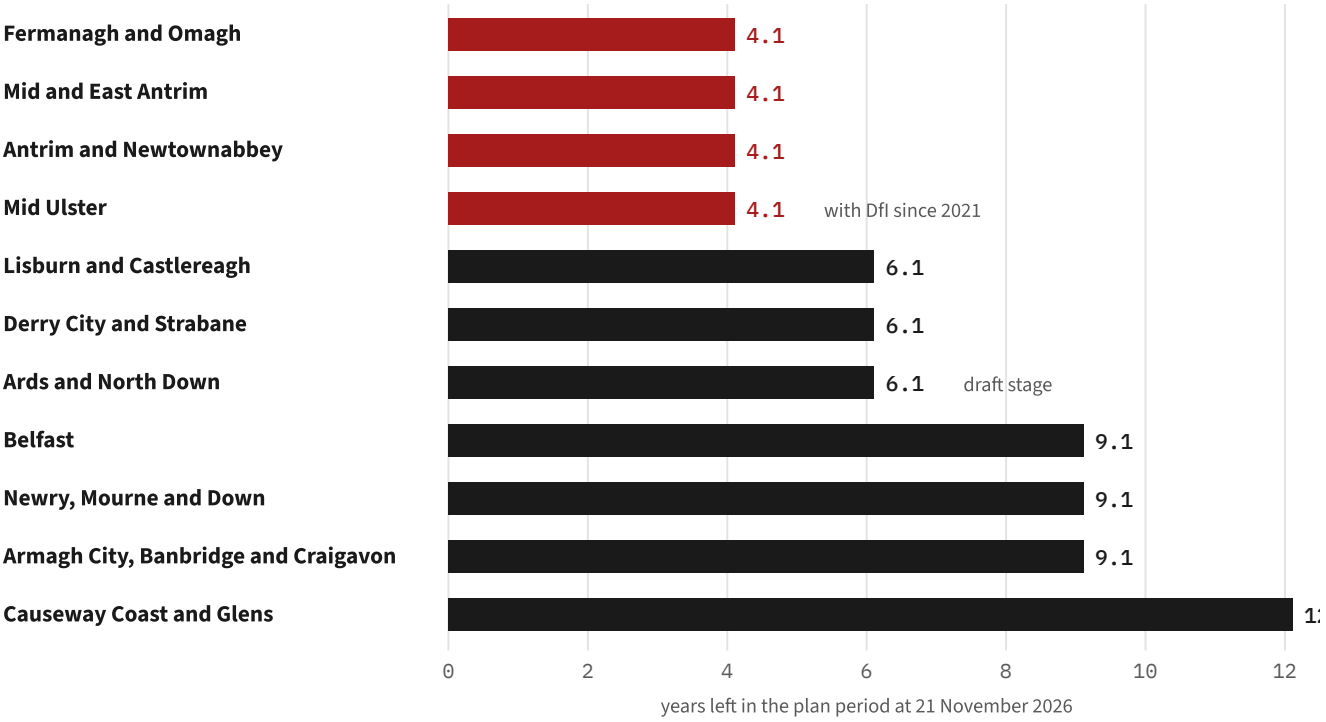


Figure 3. Years remaining in each plan period at 21 November 2026. Counted to the end of each plan's final year (31 December). Red: under five years. Four plans end in 2030, before any council is likely to have adopted site zonings. Causeway Coast and Glens has the longest runway; its draft Plan Strategy is due autumn/winter 2026.

2. Site zonings still come from area plans whose periods ended years ago

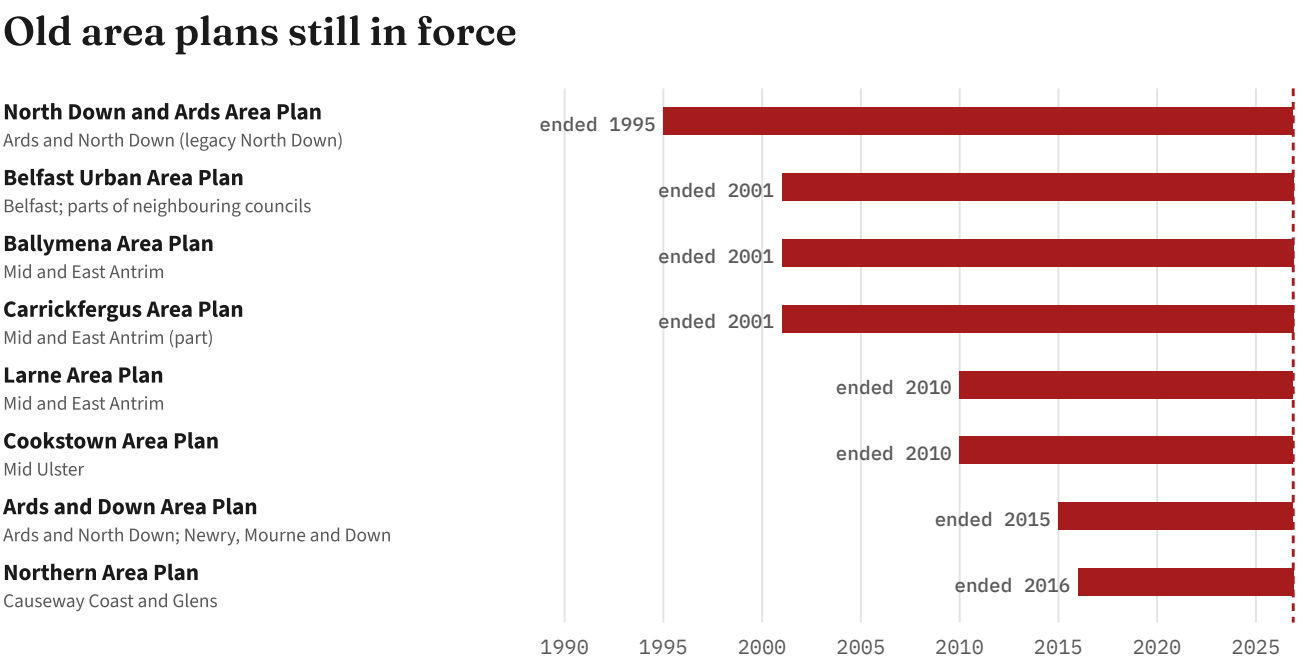


Figure 4. Examples of departmental area plans that remain the statutory development plan until each council adopts its Local Policies Plan, read with the Plan Strategy, which prevails where they conflict (Planning (Local Development Plan) Regulations (NI) 2015, Schedule). Red bars show the years since each plan period ended. Draft BMAP (2004) is a material consideration; its 2014 adoption was quashed by the Court of Appeal in May 2017. Sources: Mid and East Antrim and Mid Ulster LDP timetables; Ards and North Down extant plans page; Causeway Coast and Glens Development Plan page.

3. Decisions are slower; enforcement is improving

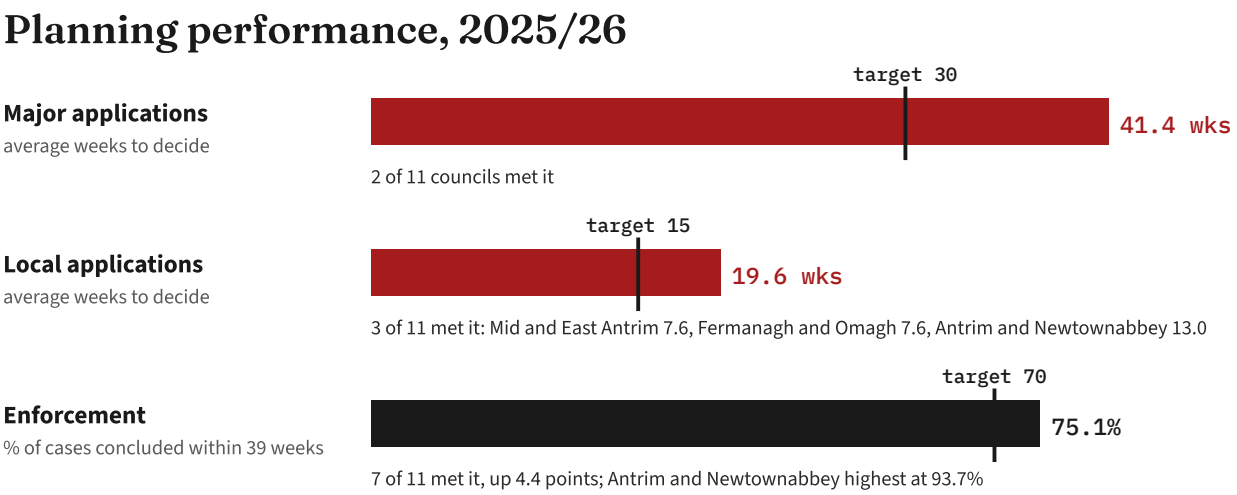


Figure 5. Northern Ireland averages against statutory targets, 2025/26. Major applications took 41.4 weeks on average, 1.8 weeks slower than 2024/25. Enforcement beat its target, up 4.4 points. Red bar: target missed; black bar: target met; vertical line: target. Source: DfI, Northern Ireland Planning Statistics 2025/26 (published 26 August 2026).

4. Infrastructure decides what the plan can deliver

Wastewater: the constraint every plan shares

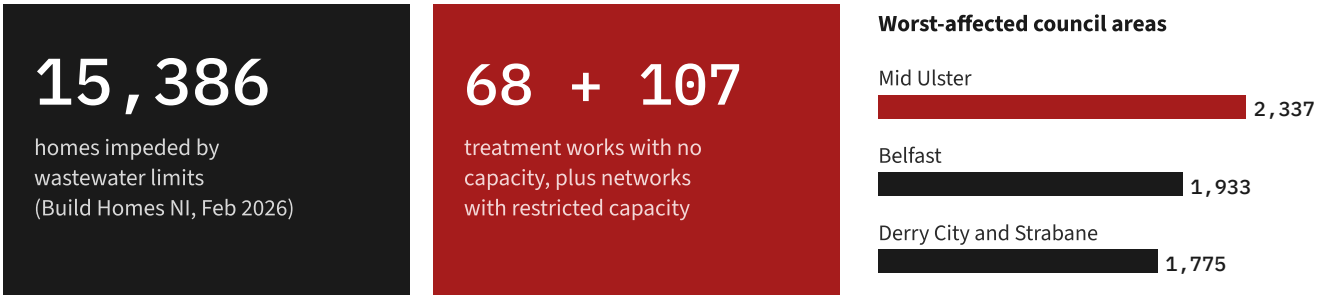
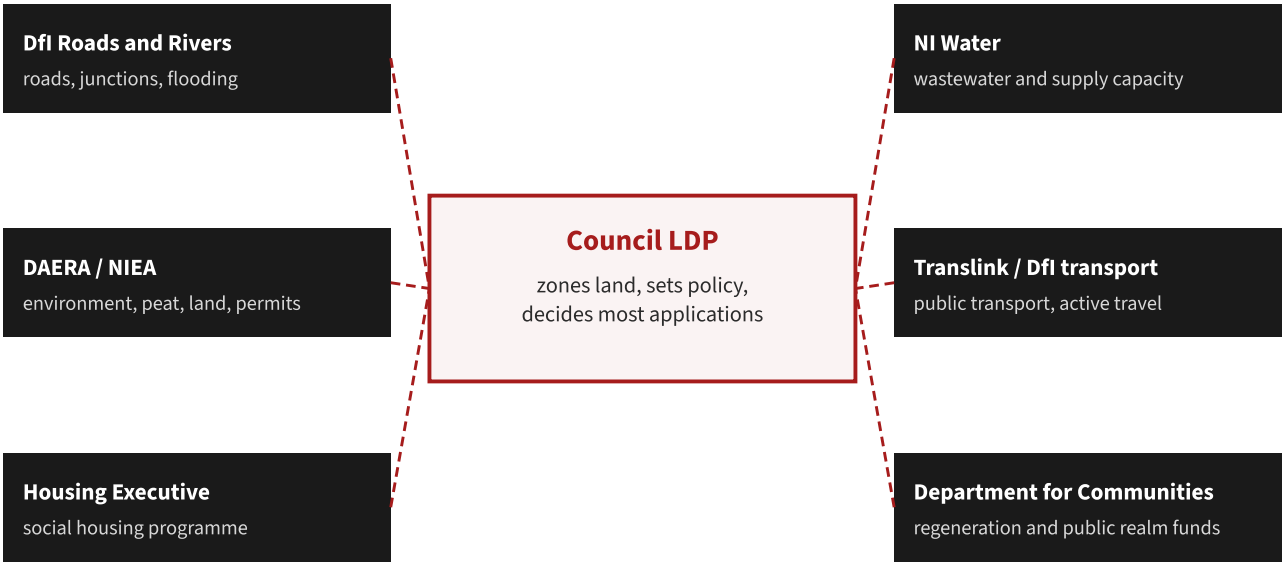


Figure 6. Wastewater capacity and housing. The homes and works figures are industry estimates reported in February 2026, not official statistics. The NI Audit Office (March 2024) found development restricted in some 100 areas, including 25 cities and towns. NI Water publishes capacity information for each council area.

An LDP can zone land for homes, but it cannot make NI Water connect them, make DfI build the junction, or make the Department for Communities fund the town-centre scheme. Those decisions sit with central bodies, which is how Northern Ireland has chosen to deliver infrastructure. Wastewater is NI Water's funding gap, not a failure of plan-making.

Resources. Councils run planning on fees set centrally and on stretched staff, while statutory consultees (DfI Roads, NI Water, NIEA) set much of the pace on major applications. DfI consulted on planning fees in October 2025 and is running its Planning Improvement Programme. Any fair reading of the numbers in Figure 5 has to include that.

The plan allocates; others build



The plan allocates; others build. Every dashed line is a dependency the LDP cannot enforce.

Figure 7. The central bodies whose programmes decide whether an LDP is delivered.

5. Carbon, land and environment policy is moving under the plans

Carbon and energy. The Strategic Planning Policy Statement was revised on renewable and low-carbon energy on 11 December 2025. Plan Strategies adopted in 2023 and 2025 were examined against the earlier policy, and drafts such as Mid Ulster's (2019) predate the Climate Change Act (NI) 2022. Councils have no statutory duty to align plans with the NI carbon budgets: section 52 of the Act binds departments, including DfI, which must also set planning proposals in its sectoral plan (section 16, not yet published). Each plan will need checking against the new policy, and against the carbon budgets DfI must work towards.

Land. Northern Ireland still has no statutory contaminated land regime: Part III of the Waste and Contaminated Land (NI) Order 1997 has never been commenced. Other controls exist, such as environmental liability and water pollution law, but the planning system carries most of the burden, through development management and conditions on brownfield sites, which is where most plans want housing to go.

Environment. Plans must undergo Habitats Regulations Assessment and cannot be adopted if they would harm the integrity of a European site, save on imperative grounds; and councils are writing biodiversity strategies alongside them (Causeway Coast and Glens, 2026 to 2032). Without the Local Policies Plan, local environmental designations have not yet been reviewed in most areas.

Public realm. Regeneration powers stayed with the Department for Communities when the 2015 reform's transfer was dropped. Councils can plan the public realm through the LDP, as Belfast's Development Opportunity Areas show, but rarely control the money.

4 · WHAT SHOULD CHANGE

Six proposals, joined to the code of engagement

1. **A two-way long-stop for Local Policies Plans.** Build on the existing timetable (section 7) and annual monitoring (section 21) duties: each council, DfI and the examining body report each year on the time each has taken, with the Department's default power (section 16) as the backstop. Amending the 2015 Regulations would do it.
2. **Interim zonings where area plan periods have ended.** Let a council adopt targeted site allocations alongside its Plan Strategy, so that it no longer depends on plans that ended in 1995, 2001 or 2010. This needs amendment of the Planning Act (NI) 2011 and must keep appraisal, Habitats Regulations Assessment, consultation and independent examination.
3. **A duty on central bodies to give reasons against adopted plans.** NI Water, DfI, the Housing Executive, the Department for Communities and Translink publish how their programmes match each adopted Plan Strategy, and give reasons where they do not (draft Bill, section 9). An Assembly Bill with Executive agreement.
4. **Use the Independent Inspectors Project** (£3 million, March 2025) to examine the Plan Strategies still to come (Mid Ulster once modified; Newry, Mourne and Down; Ards and North Down; Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon; Causeway Coast and Glens) and the first Local Policies Plans. Inspectors examine; councils still adopt.

5. **A carbon and SPPS consistency check** for every adopted Plan Strategy against the December 2025 energy policy and the NI carbon budgets, done once by DfI under its existing powers and shared, without re-opening adopted plans.
6. **A working contaminated land regime**: commence a revised Part III by DAERA order with guidance and regulations, or replace it, so that brownfield housing allocations do not rest on planning conditions alone.

How this connects. The thought piece's register asks why law is left uncommenced; this briefing shows the same problem in plan-making. The code of engagement would make councils statutory consultees on listed central decisions and would require reasons for departures from adopted plans. Northern Ireland needs those plans finished for that voice to carry weight.

Sources

DfI, Chief Planner's Newsletter 01, December 2025 · DfI, NI Planning Statistics 2025/26 annual bulletin (26 August 2026) · DfI, Planning Statistics 2025/26 bulletin · DfI, Planning Statistics 2025/26 infographic text · NI Audit Office, Planning in Northern Ireland (2022) · Antrim and Newtownabbey, Plan Strategy 2030 · Ards and North Down, Local Development Plan · Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon, draft Plan Strategy notice · Belfast, Local Development Plan · Causeway Coast and Glens, Development Plan · Derry City and Strabane, Local Development Plan · Fermanagh and Omagh, Local Development Plan · Lisburn and Castlereagh, Local Development Plan · Mid and East Antrim, Local Development Plan · Mid Ulster, Development Plan · Newry, Mourne and Down, Local Development Plan · NI Audit Office, Strategic Review of the Planning Appeals Commission (21 May 2026) · NI Audit Office, Funding water infrastructure in Northern Ireland (28 March 2024) · Planning (Local Development Plan) Regulations (NI) 2015, Schedule · Planning Act (NI) 2011, Part 2 · Climate Change Act (NI) 2022, s52 · DfI, s14 direction to Antrim and Newtownabbey · DfI, Independent Inspectors Project · Ards and North Down, extant development plans · NI Water, capacity information · Build Homes NI figures, reported February 2026 (industry source)

Notes: dates are from each council's published LDP pages and notices. Planning performance figures are Northern Ireland averages; only some council-level figures are named in the published text. Homes-impeded figures are industry estimates, not official statistics. Not yet verified against a primary source: the Derry City and Strabane call-for-sites count and the Causeway Coast and Glens 2038 plan end date. Dated items to recheck at publication: Causeway Coast and Glens draft Plan Strategy, the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon consultation, Independent Inspectors appointments, and DfI's sectoral plan under the Climate Change Act (NI) 2022.

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