

# Local Development Plan | 2030

Draft Plan Strategy

Evidence Paper 17: Natural Heritage

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## Executive Summary

- Given its unique location between two loughs, the Borough is home to rich and diverse range of natural heritage assets.
- The LDP will seek to balance development, with the protection of the natural environment that contributes greatly to quality of life.
- The draft Plan Strategy will bring forward policies and proposals which will aim to conserve, protect and where possible enhance natural heritage assets, including at the International, national and local level. This approach will put biodiversity and the protection of ecosystem services at the heart of the local planning agenda, with an emphasis on achieving an appropriate balance of sustainable development.
- The Local Policies Plan will consider and designate various other natural heritage assets within the Borough.
- The International/European/National statutory natural heritage designations within the Borough are comprised:
  - 2 RAMSAR sites;
  - 2 Special Protection Areas;
  - 1 Special Area of Conservation;
  - 9 Areas of Special Scientific Interest; and
  - 4 Nature Reserves.
- The local designations within the Borough are comprised of:
  - 2 Local Nature Reserves;
  - 28 Sites of Local Nature Conservation Importance (SLNCIs) in the legacy Newtownabbey Borough Council area; and
  - There are no SLNCI currently designated within the legacy Antrim Borough Council area.
- The detailed boundaries of these natural heritage designations can be viewed on the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) map viewer, <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/services/protected-areas-web-viewer>.
- The Borough has one remaining area of priority peatland, which is located at Sluggan Moss. It is important for environmental protection and conservation.

# 1 Introduction

- 1.1 This is one of a series of background papers being presented as part of the evidence base to inform the preparation of the Antrim and Newtownabbey Local Development Plan 2030 (LDP). This paper draws together the evidence base used in relation to the topic of Natural Heritage and should be read in conjunction with other evidence papers relating to Coast, Loughs and Landscape. The evidence in this paper was collated at a point in time and may be subject to further updates. Evidence papers should be read collectively.
- 1.2 In line with Departmental guidance, the Council has updated its evidence base to inform the next stage of the LDP known as the Plan Strategy. This paper updates the 'Shaping Our Environment' baseline evidence paper, as it relates to natural heritage, which accompanied the Council's Preferred Options Paper (POP), published in January 2017.
- 1.3 It should be noted that the evidence base collected to inform the draft Plan Strategy also forms the basis for additional assessments and appraisals required as part of the LDP preparation, most notably the Sustainability Appraisal.
- 1.4 Furthermore, this paper forms part of the Council's Countryside Assessment which includes the four related strands:
  - Settlement Evaluation (*Evidence Paper 2*);
  - Landscape Character Assessment (*Evidence Paper 16*);
  - Environmental Assets Appraisal (*Evidence Papers 7 and 17*); and
  - Rural Pressure Analysis (*Evidence Paper 18*).
- 1.5 Northern Ireland has a rich and diverse natural heritage, created through the interaction of centuries of settlement and land management on the underlying rocks, landforms and soils. Natural Heritage designations can be defined as habitats, species, landscapes and earth science features. Many of these sites are of such importance that they are designated under International and European legislation.
- 1.6 The richness of the Borough's natural heritage, in terms of landscapes, natural environments and biodiversity is recognised through its location between two regionally significant Loughs in Northern Ireland. As custodians of our Borough's natural heritage, the Council has a responsibility to aid the enhancement and protection of significantly important designated sites for future generations. Development can potentially impact adversely on our environment and it is therefore important that the planning process ensure that any potential environmental impacts, whatever the scale, are identified to enable the effects to be considered, avoided or mitigated.
- 1.7 The Borough's natural heritage offers opportunities for enjoyment and recreational activity, contributing to the overall health and wellbeing of our

society. Natural heritage can also contribute to sustainable economic activity. The LDP will play an important role in identifying key features and assets of the natural environment and landscapes, while balancing the needs of rural areas and communities.

## **2 Legislative Context**

### **The Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011**

- 2.1 The Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 (hereafter referred to as the 2011 Act) is the principal planning legislation in Northern Ireland, which underpins the reformed two-tier planning system that commenced on 1 April 2015. It introduced the plan-led system, where the LDP is the primary consideration for decision making on all new development schemes and proposals will be required to accord with it's provisions unless, exceptionally other material considerations indicate otherwise.
- 2.2 Under the new Planning System introduced in 2015, the LDP will comprise of two documents, a Plan Strategy and a Local Policies Plan that will be prepared in sequence. It also requires the LDP to be subject to a Sustainability Appraisal.
- 2.3 In relation to natural heritage, the 2011 Act contains the legislative context to allow for Tree Preservation Orders.

### **The Planning (Local Development Plan) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015**

- 2.4 These Regulations set out the sequence in which the Council's new LDP is to be prepared and provides detail on the content and procedure of each stage in the LDP preparation process and independent examination.

### **The Planning (Statement of Community Involvement) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015**

- 2.5 These Regulations set out the sequence in which the Council's Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) is to be prepared and provides detail on the content and procedures required. The Council published it's SCI in January 2016 the purpose of which is to define how the Council will engage with the community in the delivery of the LDP. It is set within the context of the Council's Corporate Plan and meets the requirements of the 2011 Act.

### **Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006**

- 2.6 Section 25 of the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006 requires all Northern Ireland Departments and Councils, in exercising their functions, to act in the way they consider best calculated to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development. Section 5 of the 2011 Act copper-fastens this duty by requiring those who exercise any function in relation to LDPs to do so with the objective of furthering sustainable development.

**Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014**

- 2.7 The Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 introduced a statutory link between a Council's Community Plan and LDP, and requests that the preparation of the LDP must take account of the Community Plan.

**Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998**

- 2.8 The Council has a statutory duty under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 as a public authority, in carrying out its functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between the nine equality categories of persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation; men and women generally; persons with a disability and persons without; and persons with dependants and persons without.
- 2.9 Council has engaged and will continue to engage with Section 75 groups throughout the LDP process, adhering to the Council's SCI.

**Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016**

- 2.10 The Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 provides a statutory duty on 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 and came into effect for Councils in June 2017.
- 2.11 Rural needs is an ongoing and integral component of the Council's LDP.

**The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004**

- 2.12 It is a statutory requirement that all plans and programmes that are likely to have a significant environmental effect must be subject to a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA). The European Union Directive '2001/42/EC' states that an SEA is mandatory and was transposed into local legislation in the form of The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004 (the EAPP (NI) Regulations). The objective of the SEA directive is to provide for a high level of protection of the environment and to contribute to the integration of environmental considerations into the Council's LDP, with the view to promoting sustainable development.
- 2.13 The SEA is an ongoing process and must be carried out in conjunction with, and integrated into the LDP process. Under the provisions of the SEA Directive and the Regulations, an environmental report is published with the LDP document.

**The Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995**

- 2.14 The LDP is required to consider its impact on the integrity of Natura 2000 sites (these comprise Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Areas and RAMSAR Sites) and will be subject to a Habitats Regulation Assessment (HRA). Similar to the SEA the HRA is an on-going process, which will take place at key

stages during the preparation of the LDP. The Regulations contribute to transposing the requirements of the EC Habitats and Birds Directives.

### **The Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002**

- 2.15 This Order provides DAERA with the power to declare areas of land as Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs), where the land is of special interest for its flora, fauna, geological, physiographical or other features that need to be protected.

### **The Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985**

- 2.16 This Order provides DAERA with the power to acquire land for managing it as a nature reserve. The Department may also enter into a management agreement with the owners and occupiers for this purpose.

### **The Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985**

- 2.17 This Order introduced a number of offences relating to killing, injuring or removing wild birds or wild animals listed in Schedule 5, and prohibits interference with places used for shelter or protection. Additionally, the Order makes it an offence to uproot or trade in any wild plant listed in Schedule 8. The Order aims to prevent the spread of non-native species (i.e. Japanese Knotweed) which may be detrimental to native wildlife.

### **Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011**

- 2.18 This Act amended the 1985 Order by giving greater protection to a wider range of plants, animals and birds. The Act introduced a statutory duty on all public bodies to further the conservation of biodiversity.

### **Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009**

- 2.19 This Act divides the UK waters into marine regions with an inshore and offshore region, under the administration of the four regions of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Each region will have a marine plan authority who are responsible for marine planning. This Act includes a licensing system for the management of development from the mean spring high water mark out to the 12 nautical mile mark (inshore region).

### **Marine Act (Northern Ireland) 2013**

- 2.20 This Act, along with the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009, required the former Department of the Environment (now DAERA), as the Northern Ireland Marine Authority, to prepare and adopt an inshore and offshore region marine plan. For administrative purposes, the marine plans are combined within one document. The Marine Plan, once adopted will help to manage the Northern Ireland Marine Area and enhance sustainable development.

### **3 Regional Policy Context**

#### **Draft Programme for Government Framework 2016-2021**

- 3.1 The key aim of the draft Programme for Government (PfG) is to grow a sustainable economy through investing in the future, tackling disadvantage, improving health and wellbeing, protecting the people and the environment, building a strong and shared community and delivering high quality services.
- 3.2 The delivery of many of the strategic outcomes will be the responsibility of central government, however, the LDP will play a supporting role in helping to deliver many of these. Particularly relevant are Outcome 2, 'We Live and Work Sustainably, Protecting the Environment', and Outcome 12, 'We Have Created a Place Where People Want to Live and Work, to Visit and Invest'.

#### **Sustainable Development Strategy Northern Ireland 2010**

- 3.3 One of the key principles outlined in the Everyone's Involved - Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS) relates to 'Living within Environmental Limits'. This promotes the need to protect and improve the environment with emphasis on the limits of the planet's environment, resources and biodiversity and to ensure that finite resources are protected for future generations. One of the key priority areas relates to 'striking an appropriate balance between the responsible use and protection of natural resources in support of a better quality of life and a better quality environment'. This promotes sustainable land and marine management, better planning and management of development in ways which are sustainable and which contribute to creating a better environment.

#### **Regional Development Strategy 2035**

- 3.4 The Regional Development Strategy 2035 (RDS) provides regional guidance to conserve, protect and where possible enhance the natural environment. The RDS recognises that Northern Ireland has a unique natural environment with diverse biodiversity, landscapes and waterways. To protect the environment as a sustainable asset for future generations RG11 aims to 'conserve, protect and, where possible, enhance our built heritage and our natural environment'. Furthermore, the RDS indicates that designating special areas of the countryside from inappropriate development for protection is an effective way of ensuring our wildlife and natural landscapes retain their individual characteristics.
- 3.5 Specific to the Belfast Metropolitan Area, 'SFG5: Protect and enhance the quality of the setting of the BMUA [Belfast Metropolitan Urban Area] and its environmental assets' sets out to protect areas of high scenic value, Belfast Lough and the hills around the BMUA from development. Additionally, it sets out the use of green spaces to help manage access to important wildlife sites and minimise the potential for damage due to visitor pressure.

- 3.6 The RDS identifies the need for distinctive landscape character to be conserved, protected and where possible enhanced in areas of landscape quality. The LDP will therefore play its part in supporting the enhancement and protection of sensitive landscapes and natural heritage areas within the Borough.

#### **Draft Marine Plan**

- 3.7 The Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 and the Marine Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 introduces a new system of marine planning for the Northern Ireland Inshore and Offshore regions. The draft Marine Plan produced by DAERA Marine and Fisheries Division, provides a regional approach for the application of the national policy objectives defined by the Marine Policy Statement (i.e. Achieve Good Ecological Status of Marine Waters). The draft Marine Plan takes account of the economic, social and environmental needs of the marine area, and provides guidance and operational policies.
- 3.8 The Marine Plan for Northern Ireland, once adopted, and the Marine Policy Statement are the key documents that planning authorities must consider for undertaking their responsibilities within the Intertidal Area in respect of:
- The Local Development Plan;
  - Development Management; and
  - Enforcement.
- 3.9 The adopted Marine Plan will be considered within the Planning Hierarchy as the same level as the RDS 2035. It's policies will be considered as a material consideration within the development process for land based applications in the Intertidal Area.

#### **Regional Transportation Strategy for Northern Ireland 2002-2012**

- 3.10 The Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) for Northern Ireland 2002-2012 identifies strategic transportation investment priorities and considers potential funding sources and affordability of planned initiatives over the strategy period. The RTS is a 'daughter document' of the Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2035, which sets out the spatial development framework for Northern Ireland up to 2035.
- 3.11 This Strategy was supported by three initiatives namely Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan 2004, Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan 2015 and the Sub-Regional Transport Plan 2007.

#### **Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan 2004**

- 3.12 The Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) 2004 is the local transport plan for the Belfast Metropolitan Area (BMA) including Metropolitan Newtownabbey. This plan delivered a phased and costed implementation programme of transport schemes to 2015. This plan took forward the strategic initiatives of the RTS 2002-2012.

### **Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan 2015 (2005)**

- 3.13 The former Department for Regional Development (DRD), now the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) prepared the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTN TP) 2015. The Plan is based on the guidance set out in the RDS 2035 and the RTS 2002-2012. The Plan presents a range of multi-modal transport initiatives to manage, maintain and develop Northern Ireland's Strategic Transport Network. The Regional Strategic Transport Network of Northern Ireland comprises the complete rail network, five Key Transport Corridors (KTCs), four Link Corridors, the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Corridors and the remainder of the trunk road network.

### **Sub-Regional Transport Plan 2007**

- 3.14 The Sub-Regional Transport Plan (SRTP) 2007 covers Antrim and takes forward the strategic initiatives of the Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS) for Northern Ireland 2002-2012. The SRTP deals with the transport needs of the whole of Northern Ireland with the exception of the BMA and the rail and trunk road networks, which are covered, in the BMA and RSTN TP.

### **Ensuring a Sustainable Transport Future – ‘A New Approach to Regional Transportation’ 2011**

- 3.15 Ensuring a Sustainable Transport Future (ESTF) was developed to build on the RTS for Northern Ireland 2002-2012 and to refocus and rebalance the investment in the future. Unlike the 2002 Strategy, Ensuring a Sustainable Transport Future (ESTF) does not include details of schemes or projects. Rather, the Department has set three High Level Aims for transportation along with twelve supporting Strategic Objectives, covering the economy, society and the environment. The ESTF complements the RDS 2035 and contains high-level aims and strategic objectives to support the growth of the economy, enhance the quality of life for all and reduce the environmental impact of transport. It sets out the approach to regional transportation and is used to guide strategic investment decisions beyond 2015. Work is progressing on the implementation of the ESTF and the Council will ensure that any future transportation projects affecting the Borough are appropriately reflected in the LDP.

### **Forthcoming Transport Plans**

- 3.16 The Department for Infrastructure is currently preparing new Transport Plans which will cover the Borough. This includes a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Plan for all of Northern Ireland and a new Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan which will cover Belfast City Council, Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council, Ards and North Down Borough Council and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council as well as Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council. Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council is represented on the Project Boards for both plans along with other Councils.

- 3.17 As part of the preparation for the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan, the Department is preparing a Transport Study for the greater Belfast area and the Council has taken the emerging study into consideration in the preparation of its draft Plan Strategy. Work will also continue to bring forward the next stage of the LDP, the Local Policies Plan, alongside the Department's Transport Plans.
- 3.18 Further information on the Transport Study and Transport Plans is available on the Department of Infrastructure's website <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/>.

### **Sustainable Water – A Long-Term Water Strategy for Northern Ireland 2015-2040**

- 3.19 'Sustainable Water – A Long-Term Water Strategy for Northern Ireland (2015-2040)' sets out a range of initiatives to deliver the Executive's long term goal of a sustainable water sector in Northern Ireland. The Strategy recognises how planning can impact on flood risk and water quality and aims to ensure that existing water and sewerage infrastructure and investment proposals inform future planning decisions and the preparation of LDPs.
- 3.20 The Strategy sets out a number of matters that the Council's new LDP will need to take into account which are summarised below:
- Ensuring planning decisions are informed by up to date information on the risk from all significant sources of flooding;
  - Prevention of inappropriate development in high flood risk areas and ensuring that future development does not increase flood risk;
  - Exceptional development within high flood risk areas must make provision for adequate mitigation measures;
  - Ensure surface water drainage is adequately addressed; and
  - Planning policy should promote sustainable water and sewerage services by making appropriate space for water and sewerage infrastructure including sustainable drainage systems.

### **Strategic Planning Policy Statement 2015**

- 3.21 At the centre of the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) are the pillars of sustainable development. Within the environmental pillar of sustainable development, the SPPS indicates that protecting and enhancing the built and natural environment includes heritage assets, landscape and seascape. To achieve this an integrated approach to the management of the natural and cultural aspects of the landscape is required. The planning system plays an important role in conserving, protecting and enhancing the environment whilst ensuring it remains responsive and adaptive to the everyday needs of society. The SPPS indicates the policy approaches to new development should be reflect difference within the region, be sensitive to local needs and sensitive to environmental issues, including the ability of landscapes to absorb new development.

- 3.22 The LDP should consider areas of the countryside that exhibit exceptional landscapes, such as loughshores, where the quality of the landscape and unique amenity value is such that development should only be permitted in exceptional circumstances. These areas should be designated for their intrinsic environmental importance within LDPs and appropriate policies brought forward to ensure their protection from unnecessary and inappropriate development.
- 3.23 The SPPS requires LDPs to adopt a strategic approach to identify and promote the design of ecological networks to help reduce the fragmentation and isolation of natural habitats. In addition, LDPs should seek to identify and promote green and blue infrastructure where this will add value to the provision, enhancement and connection of open space and habitats.
- 3.24 The SPPS notes that LDPs and the policies they contain should be rigorously assessed for their environmental impacts. Councils should apply the precautionary principle when considering the impacts of a proposed development on natural or international significant landscape or natural heritage resources.

#### **Other Planning Policy**

- 3.25 Current operational planning policy, in relation to aspects of the natural heritage is primarily included within Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 2: Natural Heritage.
- 3.26 Other policies in relation to natural heritage assets, primarily related to protection from the adverse impacts of development are contained within PPSs 3, 4, 7, 8, 10, 11, 15 (Revised), 16, 18 and 21.
- 3.27 These PPSs, as well as the SPPS, have been taken into consideration in the formulation of the detailed development management policies, which are contained within the draft Plan Strategy document.

#### **Departmental Guidance**

- 3.28 The LDP has been prepared taking account of Departmental policy and guidance, which is available by contacting the Department for Infrastructure.
- 3.29 The Development Plan Practice Note 7 'The Plan Strategy' published in 2015, guides officers and relevant users through the key requirements for the preparation of the Plan Strategy and deals primarily with procedures as well as good practice.
- 3.30 The supplementary planning guidance 'Creating Places - Achieving Quality in Residential Development' (2000) has been the principle guide for use by prospective developers in the design of all new housing areas. It identifies that new development should respect and protect nature conservation interests.
- 3.31 The supplementary planning guidance 'Living Places: An Urban Stewardship and Design Guide for Northern Ireland' (September 2014) is a key reference

point for formulating LDPs and states that ‘working with nature’ is a key component of responsible place making.

- 3.32 Similarly the rural design guide, ‘Building On Tradition - A Sustainable Design Guide for the Northern Ireland Countryside’ (April 2012) offers advice on opportunities to build in nature, biodiversity and wildlife habitats into developments in the rural area.
- 3.33 When carrying out any works to or in and around trees, current best practice is contained in BS 5837:2012 (Trees in relation to design, demolition and construction).
- 3.34 DAERA has produced a number of guidance documents to aid Councils in their preparation of LDPs. These documents have been taken into consideration in the preparation of the draft Plan Strategy and will also be used in the preparation of the Local Policies Plan.

#### **Other Strategies/Conventions**

- 3.35 The EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020 was published in May 2011 and focuses on six major targets related to loss of biodiversity. It aims to reduce key pressures on nature and ecosystem services in the EU through better implementation of existing nature conservation legislation, anchoring biodiversity objectives into key policies and closing important policy gaps.
- 3.36 Within the context of the EU Biodiversity Strategy, Valuing Nature ‘A Biodiversity Strategy for Northern Ireland to 2020’ sets out how our government plans to meet its international obligations and local targets to protect biodiversity and ensure that the environment can continue to support our people and economy. To help stakeholder bodies achieve these obligations, DAERA published ‘The Biodiversity Duty – A guide for public bodies’ (May, 2016).

## **4 Local Policy Context**

### **Existing Development Plans**

- 4.1 The following is a list of the legacy development plans that apply to the Borough:
- Antrim Area Plan 1984-2001 and its alterations (AAP);
  - Belfast Urban Area Plan 2001 (BUAP);
  - Carrickfergus Area Plan 2001<sup>1</sup> (CAP);
  - Draft Newtownabbey Area Plan 2005 (dNAP); and
  - Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 (dBMAP).

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<sup>1</sup> Insofar as it relates to that part of the legacy Carrickfergus Borough Council area at Greenisland that transferred to Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough in 2015 under Review of Public Administration (RPA).

- 4.2 It should be noted that the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan adopted in September 2014 was subsequently quashed as a result of a judgement of the Court of Appeal delivered in May 2017. As a consequence, the BUAP is now the statutory development plan for the Metropolitan Newtownabbey area of the Borough, with dBMAP remaining a material consideration.

### **Community Plan – Love Living Here 2017**

- 4.3 The Council's Community Plan, 'Love Living Here', sets out a shared vision and agreed outcomes for the area up to 2030. The successful implementation of the Community Plan will be marked by a demonstrable improvement in how services are delivered across the Borough and the quality of life its citizens experience. As such the Community Plan is an important document and has been taken into account in the preparation of the Council's LDP.
- 4.4 The Community Plan sets out four outcomes which are as follows:
- Our citizens enjoy good health and wellbeing;
  - Our citizens live in connected, safe, clean and vibrant places;
  - Our citizens benefit from economic prosperity; and
  - Our citizens achieve their full potential.

- 4.5 It also sets out one wildly important goal namely that the Borough's vulnerable people are supported.

### **Corporate Plan – Our Borough Your Vision 2019-2030**

- 4.6 The Council's Corporate Plan sets out a vision for the Borough and identifies what it needs to do between now and 2030 to achieve this. The Vision for the Borough up to 2030 is defined as,

*'A progressive, smart and prosperous Borough. Inspired by our people; driven by ambition.'*

- 4.7 The Corporate Plan sets out a number of objectives in relation to Place, People and Prosperity. The LDP has a key role to play under the objective of 'Place' and the Corporate Plan states:

*'We will have succeeded if: People take pride in their surroundings. People feel safe. Our environment, natural habitats and built heritage are protected and enhanced. We have vibrant and welcoming towns, villages, neighbourhoods, and rural areas. We have an efficient planning process that promotes positive development and sustainable growth.'*

### **Council Masterplans/Village Plans**

- 4.8 Through the Village Renewal Scheme as supported by the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 the Council benefited from funding to devise and update plans for the development of villages in the Borough. Whilst these plans are non-statutory, they have been prepared in close conjunction with local residents and identify a range of potential projects to improve the settlements. These range from short term goals to long-term aspirations. The village plans

alongside the masterplans relating to the Borough will be considered in the preparation of the LDP where relevant.

### **Legacy Biodiversity Action Plan 2007-2011**

- 4.9 The Council's legacy Biodiversity Strategy aims to ensure that our variety of life is protected and enhanced, through focused, local action. It is an important step towards ensuring that locally, we take responsibility for our biodiversity. Fulfilling this Plan will require the enthusiasm and commitment of many different organisations, groups and individuals. Biodiversity is vital to our survival and well-being. Biological diversity or biodiversity describes the total variety of all living things and where they live. This includes people, plants, animals, their genetic variation and the habitats in which they live. Biodiversity is everywhere, from gardens to hedgerows, from loughs to mountains.

### **Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council Biodiversity Action Plan**

- 4.10 The Council is currently updating the Biodiversity Action Plan to include the entire Borough. When published, the data will be taken into account within the LDP process and relevant updates applied.

### **Cross Boundary Policy Context**

- 4.11 In considering the local policy context, it is important to note that the Borough does not sit in isolation. Accordingly, it will be important to take account of neighbouring local authorities comprising: Belfast City Council; Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council; Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council; Mid Ulster District Council and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council.
- 4.12 Neighbouring Council's Preferred Options Papers (POPs), supporting evidence base and draft Plan Strategies have been taken account of, as these are regarded as the main cross boundary documents to be considered in addition to regional guidance.
- 4.13 Table 1 indicates each Council's position in relation to natural heritage as set out in their POP and draft Plan Strategy documents.

**Table 1: Neighbouring Council Position**

| <b>Council</b>                                       | <b>Document</b>  |
|--|--|
| Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council | POP document states that one of the overarching principles is 'Managing and Protecting our Built and Natural Environment.' It also contains a range of preferred options which seek to: Protecting international, national and local nature conservation designations; Identifying and protecting local nature conservation designations; Identifying and protecting Sensitive Landscapes; Identifying and protecting Local Landscape Policy Areas (LLPAs); and Identifying and protecting Urban / Rural Landscape Wedges. |

|                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Belfast City Council                 | Draft Plan Strategy includes a range of policies which seek to 'value and conserve our unique natural and built heritage to enhance and develop tourism.' In support of this are the detailed policies, relating to the protection of natural heritage features, trees as well as various landscape and coastal designations.   |
| Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council | The POP contains the cross-cutting theme, 'Protecting and promoting the natural environment' and includes the preferred option to 'Retain the existing policy-led approach with regards to the protection and enhancement of Natural Heritage Assets but in addition provide opportunity to identify potential new environmental designations across the Council area.' |
| Mid and East Antrim Borough Council  | POP document includes a range of preferred options, which seek to achieve Overarching Principle 6 'Protection and Enhancement of the Built and Natural Environment'.  |
| Mid Ulster District Council          | The draft Plan Strategy includes a range of detailed planning policies to conserve, protect and where possible enhance the natural environment.   |

4.14 The Council has responded to neighbouring Council's POPs and LDP documents as they are published. In addition, the Council is also represented on a number of working groups and project boards to discuss cross boundary issues. This includes the Metropolitan Area Spatial Working Group, the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan Project Board and the Lough Neagh Forum.

4.15 In consideration of neighbouring Council's documents as well as regional policy, it is the opinion of the Council that its draft Plan Strategy is sound and is not in conflict with neighbouring Council's emerging LDPs.

## 5 Preferred Options Paper

5.1 The Council's Preferred Options Paper (POP) was published in 2017 and was the first formal stage in the preparation of the LDP for the Borough and was designed to promote debate in relation to key strategic planning issues arising in the area. The POP set out a range of strategic options in relation to how and where development should be located within the Borough. It included options for the Borough's settlements, centres, employment land and housing locations, as well as a number of other key planning issues.

5.2 In addition, the Council asked the public for their views on a range of planning topics and issues. A total of 148 representations were received which were considered during the development of the draft Plan Strategy document and, where relevant, these will also be considered during the preparation of the Local Policies Plan. Details are set out in the Council's published 'Preferred Options Paper Public Consultation Report 2019'.

## 6 Soundness

- 6.1 The LDP is prepared to meet the tests of soundness as set out in the Department for Infrastructure's Development Plan Practice Note 6: Soundness (Version 2, May 2017).

## 7 Biodiversity

- 7.1 Biodiversity is the variety of plant and animal life in the world, or in a particular place or habitat, and includes all species of plants and animals, and the habitats in which they live. Biodiversity is essential to sustaining the living networks and systems that provide us all with health, food, wealth, fuel and the vital ecosystem services need to sustain human livelihoods (see Figure 1).
- 7.2 It is important to recognise the biodiversity significance of Northern Ireland's habitats in the British Isles and beyond. As one of the most westerly outliers of Europe, many of our communities of plants and animals represent extreme oceanic (mild and wet) examples.
- 7.3 Northern Ireland Priority Species requiring conservation action are also identified and the list now stands at 481 species, an increase of 271 on the 'old' list when the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy was being prepared. These include species of bees, beetles, birds, butterflies, crustaceans, fish, fungi, lichens, liverworts, mammals, molluscs, mosses, moths, reptiles and vascular plants.
- 7.4 The range of priority habitats and species listed through the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy will be protected from development and proposals that could harm their integrity, continuity, links or ecological relationships.
- 7.5 The most common form of conserving biodiversity is designation, protection and management of the best sites of nature conservation importance. While areas of international and national nature conservation importance are already protected from development through other statutory designations, conservation of biodiversity is enhanced through the LDP by designating Sites of Local Nature Conservation Importance (SLNCIs).

**Figure 1: Ecosystem System Services**

Source (FODC, 2017)

- 7.6 In addition to the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy, LDPs should also have regard to any Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAPs) which have been prepared for the Council area. LBAPs aim to conserve biodiversity through local partnerships, taking into account both national and local priorities by involving local people and local organisations through practical delivery of biodiversity conservation.
- 7.7 The All-Ireland Pollinator Plan, aims to address pollinator decline and protect pollination services across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The scheme was developed by a steering group, which included the Ulster Farmers Union and Northern Ireland Environment Agency. The loss of natural and semi-natural habitats has been a key driver in pollinator declines. The Pollinator Plan aims to take steps to reverse pollinator losses and help restore populations to healthy levels. The Pollinator Plan recognises that Councils, working locally in partnership, can play a leading role in providing habitat where pollinators can survive and thrive.
- 7.8 The annual value of pollinators for human food crops has been estimated at €153 billion world-wide. The free service they provide is worth over £7 million per annum for apples in Northern Ireland and €3.9 million for oilseed rape in the Republic of Ireland. Other pollinator-dependant crops in Ireland include apples, strawberries, raspberries, currants, tomatoes, peas and courgettes.

## 8 Types of Natural Heritage Designation

8.1 Natural heritage features and designated sites should be identified as part of the plan-making process and where appropriate, policies brought forward for their protection and/or enhancement. Generally, sites are selected for their rarity value or for the diversity of species and habitats they contain, or as a representative example of their habitat type on a local, national or international scale. Some designations are brought forward under the LDP process. The range of designations include:

### International (including European) Designations

- RAMSAR Sites – wetlands listed under the RAMSAR Convention to protect those of international importance;
- World Heritage Sites (WHS) – designated under the UNESCO World Heritage Convention of 1972. (No WHS are located within Antrim and Newtownabbey Council area. The Giant's Causeway and Causeway Coast World Heritage Site the only WHS designation in NI);
- Special Protection Areas (SPAs) – sites designated under the Birds Directive (EC) as being important areas for breeding, over wintering and migrating birds; and
- Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) – natural habitats protected under the Habitats Directive. Collectively known as 'Natura 2000' sites.

### National Designations

- Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs) – such sites are of special interest by reason of their flora, fauna, geological and/or physiographical features and are designated under the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 (as amended);
- Nature Reserves and National Nature Reserves – these are designated under the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (NI) Order 1985 and are managed by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs or by agreement with another Department, a District Council or a voluntary conservation body;
- Marine Conservation Zones – designated by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to protect, conserve and manage its priority marine features (habitats, species, natural features);
- Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty – designated by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs primarily for their high landscape quality, wildlife importance and rich cultural and architectural heritage.

### Local Designations

- Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) and Wildlife Refuges – LNRs can be designated by local Councils under the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 while Wildlife Refuges are provided for under the Wildlife Order.
- Sites of Local Nature Conservation Importance –these are designated through the LDP, with policies included for their protection and/or enhancement.

8.2 The detailed boundaries of these natural heritage designations can be viewed on the DAERA map viewer, <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/services/protected-areas-web-viewer>.

## **9 Environmental Assets within the Borough**

### **RAMSAR Sites**

- 9.1 RAMSAR sites are wetlands of international importance, listed under the RAMSAR convention, where signatories are required to conserve such areas through the highest form of protection. A wetland is defined as an area of marsh, fen, peatland or water, whether natural, or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salt and including areas of intertidal marine water. Within the Borough, two RAMSAR sites have been designated at Belfast Lough, and Lough Neagh and Lough Beg.
- 9.2 Belfast Lough RAMSAR Site - This area qualifies by regularly supporting internationally important numbers of redshank in winter and nationally supports important numbers of shelduck, oystercatcher, purple sandpiper, dunlin, black-tailed godwit, bar-tailed godwit, curlew and turnstone. Belfast Lough as a whole is also used by several other waterfowl species including great crested grebe, scaup, eider, goldeneye and red-breasted merganser.
- 9.3 Lough Neagh & Lough Beg RAMSAR Site - This site is a significant asset to the Council area and one of the most important wetland habitats in the UK. The area qualifies by being the largest freshwater lake in the UK, supporting beds of submerged aquatic vegetation fringed by associated species-rich damp grassland, reed beds, islands, fens, marginal swampy woodland and pasture. The area regularly supports substantial numbers of individuals from particular groups of waterfowl which are indicative of wetland values, productivity and diversity.
- 9.4 Lough Neagh and Lough Beg regularly supports over 20,000 waterfowl in winter, including nationally and internationally important numbers of pochard, tufted duck, goldeneye, little grebe, great crested grebe, cormorant, mute swan, greylag goose, shelduck, wigeon, gadwall, teal, mallard, shoveler,

scaup, and coot. Additionally, the area supports an important assemblage of breeding birds including, in nationally important numbers, great crested grebe, gadwall, pochard, tufted duck, snipe and redshank. Other important breeding wetland species include shelduck, teal, shoveler, lapwing and curlew.

### **Special Protection Areas**

- 9.5 All European Member States are required to identify internationally important areas for breeding, overwintering and migrating birds and designate them as Special Protection Areas (SPAs). There are two SPAs designated in the Borough as outlined below.
- 9.6 Lough Neagh and Lough Beg SPA – The area qualifies by regularly supporting internationally important numbers of wintering Bewick's and Whooper swans and also by regularly supporting nationally important numbers of breeding common tern. It qualifies as a wetland of international importance by regularly supporting over 20,000 of a variety of species of waterfowl in winter.
- 9.7 Belfast Lough Open Water SPA – The area qualifies as a SPA by regularly supporting internationally important numbers of redshank in winter. The site also regularly supports nationally important numbers of shelduck, oystercatcher, purple sandpiper, dunlin, black-tailed godwit, bar-tailed godwit, curlew and turnstone. Belfast Lough as a whole is also used by several other waterfowl species including great crested grebe, scaup, eider, goldeneye and red-breasted merganser.

### **Special Areas of Conservation**

- 9.8 Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) are designated to protect some of the most rare or seriously threatened habitats and species in a European context and relevant authorities must take measures to maintain and restore them. There is currently only two SAC's within the Borough but they are managed as one entity.
- 9.9 Rea's Wood and Farr's Bay SAC - This area (although both sites physically separated) has been designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) because it contains habitat types and/or species which are rare or threatened within a European context and because of its alluvial forests, which are considered to be one of the best areas in UK. These forests, characteristic of the floodplains of lowland rivers, are now rare throughout Europe.

### **Areas of Special Scientific Interest**

- 9.10 Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) are areas of land that have been identified through a scientific survey as being of the highest degree of conservation value, based on their flora, fauna and geological or physiographical features. They have a well-defined boundary and by and large remain in private ownership.
- 9.11 There are nine ASSIs within the Borough, either in whole or part, which are listed below:

- Aghnadarragh ASSI – designated due to geological features;
- Ballypalady ASSI - designated due to geological features;
- Inner Belfast Lough ASSI. - designated due to fauna;
- Lough Beg ASSI - designated due to flora and fauna;
- Lough Neagh ASSI - designated due to flora, fauna, geological and physiographical features;
- Outer Belfast Lough ASSI - designated due to flora, fauna and geological features;
- Sandy Braes ASSI - designated due to geological features;
- Shane's Castle ASSI - designated due to flora and fauna; and
- Tardree Quarry ASSI - designated due to geological features.

### **Nature Reserves and Local Nature Reserves**

9.12 A Nature Reserve is an area of importance for flora, fauna or features of geological or other special interest. These sites are reserved and managed for conservation as well as providing special opportunities for study and/or research. There are four Nature Reserves within the Borough and are as follows:

- Farr's Bay Nature Reserve;
- Lough Neagh Islands Nature Reserve;
- Rea's Wood Nature Reserve; and
- Randalstown Forest Nature Reserve.

9.13 Local Nature Reserves are declared by local authorities to protect sites of local importance for nature conservation, education and amenity. There are 2 Local Nature Reserves designated within the Borough at:

- Monkstown Wood Nature Reserve (designated in 2007); and
- Carnmoney Hill Nature Reserve (designated in 2006).

### **Sites of Local Nature Conservation Importance**

9.14 Outside of the natural heritage assets designated under legislation, a number of Sites of Local Nature Conservation Importance (SLNCIs) are designated through BMAP. These sites are identified on the basis of their flora, fauna or earth science interest. As BMAP states policy for the control of development within SLNCIs is contained within PPS 2: Natural Heritage.

9.15 The following SLNCIs lie totally or partially within Metropolitan Newtownabbey are:

- Brookmount Glen;
- Carnmoney Hill;
- Carnmoney Plug (Geodiversity);

- Glas-Na-Bradán;
- Glas-Na- Bradán (Geodiversity);
- O`Neil Road;
- Three Mile Water;
- Willowbrook; and
- Hazelbank Park.

9.16 SLNCIs are designated in the remaining settlements at:

- Craig Hill, Ballyclare;
- Doagh River/Morley Bridge, Doagh;
- Baird`s Brae, Craigarogan;
- Hillhead House, Hillhead;
- Dismantled Railway, Kingsbog Crossing, Kingsmoss; and
- Ballymartin Water below Roughfort Bridge, Roughfort.

9.17 SLNCIs are designated within the Newtownabbey Countryside at:

- Ballypalady (Geodiversity);
- Ballyvoy Plantation;
- Boghill;
- Breckenhill and Drumadarragh;
- Carn Hill;
- Hydepark Dam;
- Kilgreel House;
- Rea Hill;
- Stoneyford East;
- Straidhill Plantation;
- Tildarg Dam;
- Cavehill/Colinward; and
- Knockagh-Dorisland.

9.18 The legacy Antrim Area Plan predates the designation of SLNCIs, and as such, there are no SLNCI designations within the legacy Antrim Borough Council area. As the Council's new LDP process progresses, the Local Polices Plan will identify SLNCIs.

### Habitats and Species Data

- 9.19 As well as the information outlined above in terms of statutory international/European/national and development plan Natural Heritage designations, outside of these, the DAERA also holds unpublished sensitive data relating to habitats and species, generally located within the rural area.

### Peatland - Sluggan Bog

- 9.20 The area of Sluggan Moss is formerly a large lowland bog, largely destroyed by commercial peat extraction. The entire area north of the Connaught Road has been cut-away leaving exposed peat devoid of vegetation. A fringe of birch woodland surrounds the site, with areas managed for pheasant; the canopy is dominated by birch trees with occasional willow. The area south of the Connaught Road has also been cutover but turf cutting has been confined to localised areas around the site periphery where peat removal is undertaken by hand and excavator. Small areas of remaining uncut bog have been hydrologically disturbed due to drainage and adjacent peat removal. Bog vegetation comprises typical bog species, dominated by heather, which is leggy in places.
- 9.21 Sluggan Bog still provides an important peatland habitat and the small remaining uncut areas represent probably the last piece of uncut peatland in the Borough. Sluggan Bog has helped contribute to our understanding of prehistoric environments. The area has been of outstanding importance and its perennial research relevance means that Sluggan Bog should be preserved even though it will progressively degrade over the coming decades.
- 9.22 An NIEA field study from 2017 shows that there is beginning to be a re-emergence of Sphagnum cover from traditional low levels. Bryophyte (mosses) Report from 2017 names six types of sphagnum moss, three of which; *Sphagnum rubellum*, *Sphagnum inundatum* and *Sphagnum magellanicum* would indicate active peat. This data shows the remaining areas of uncut bog are active peatland and represents a priority habitat not only for the Borough but also the whole of Northern Ireland. With this in mind, the Council's new LDP should consider conserving, protecting and possibly enhancing this area of important peatland for future generations.

## 10 Key Findings

- 10.1 The following key findings in relation to natural heritage have been identified through the evidence in this paper:
- Given it's unique location between two loughs, the Borough is home to a rich and diverse range of natural heritage assets.
  - The LDP should seek to balance development, with the protection of the natural environment, which contributes greatly to quality of life.

- The draft Plan Strategy will bring forward policies or proposals which will aim to conserve, protect and where possible enhance natural heritage assets, including at the International, national and local level. This approach will put Biodiversity and the protection of ecosystem services at the heart of the local planning agenda, with an emphasis on achieving an appropriate balance of sustainable development.
- The Local Policies Plan will consider and designate various other natural heritage assets within the Borough.
- The International/European/National statutory natural heritage designations within the Borough are comprised of:
  - 2 RAMSAR sites;
  - 2 Special Protection Areas;
  - 1 Special Area of Conservation;
  - 9 Areas of Special Scientific Interest; and
  - 4 Nature Reserves.
- The local designations within the Borough are comprised of:
  - 2 Local Nature Reserves;
  - 28 Sites of Local Nature Conservation Importance (SLNCIs) in the legacy Newtownabbey Area; and
  - There are no SLNCI currently designated within the legacy Antrim Borough Council area.
- The Borough has one remaining area of priority peatland, which is important for environmental protection and conservation at Sluggan Moss.



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