

Planning for the climate crisis

Legal and policy background

Northern Ireland



The legislative context

In Northern Ireland, legislation on tackling climate change has taken longer to come forward than in the other UK nations. However, after consideration of two Climate Change Bills throughout 2021, the Northern Ireland Assembly passed its first climate change legislation in June 2022.



Climate Change Act

The Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022¹ binds Northern Ireland to net-zero emissions by 2050, with interim targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions set for 2030 and 2040. Because of the significance of the agriculture sector in Northern Ireland, the net-zero targets include an exception for methane, for which a target of 46% reduction by 2050 is set by the legislation.

Why is this relevant?

This legislation brings Northern Ireland in alignment with the rest of the UK in having legally binding targets for emissions reductions. It also requires departments to produce Climate Action Plans to meet emissions reductions targets for sectors including energy, transport and infrastructure. Further legislation has committed Northern Ireland to a 77% emissions reduction by 2040. This was alongside the adoption of the first three carbon budgets in late 2024.²

Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011

The Planning Act (Northern Ireland) of 2011³ created a two-tier planning system by devolving planning to local planning authorities and introduced a local development plan led system to Northern Ireland.

This came into force in 2015, so the two-tier planning framework has now been in place for ten years. Whilst local planning authorities are responsible for the preparation of local development plans, the Department for Infrastructure still holds responsibility for regionally significant and 'called-in' applications, regional planning policy, planning legislation,

oversight and guidance for councils, and performance management,⁴ including ensuring that the impacts of climate change have been considered in local development plans.

Why is this relevant?

Local councils now have a range of planning powers, including the preparation of local development plans, the determination of the majority of applications, and responsibility for enforcement action. They must also produce community strategies, and the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) ties these community strategies to local development plans – making the latter the spatial interpretation of the community strategy.



The Policy Context

There are a range of national strategies and policies that are relevant to addressing climate change through the planning system in Northern Ireland. Planners should be particularly aware of the following and ensure that local development plans and decisions support and align with the following plans.



Climate Action Plans

Under the Climate Change Act, the Northern Ireland government is required to prepare a Climate Action Plan (CAP) every five years. A draft of the first plan was subject to consultation in October 2025.⁵ The plan proposes many sector-based interventions that interact with the planning system including uplifts to building regulations and land use changes to support reforestation, peatland protection and nature positive farming.

Why is this relevant?

The draft action plan identifies the key role of planning policy and decisions to support the delivery of climate action, highlighting the following actions that planning system can support:

- Encourage compact mixed-use developments;
- Encourage layouts and designs that reduce carbon emissions;
- Integrate land use and transportation;
- Enable appropriate renewable energy infrastructure;
- Preserve existing green space and carbon sinks and require the provision of new green space when new development is permitted; and
- Protect flood plains and encourage sustainable drainage systems.⁶

Whilst the importance of planning is acknowledged, the CAP could go further on issues such as promoting modal shift away from private vehicle use. In addition, the actions listed in the planning section are not consistently embedded across other sector chapters within the plan.

Regional Development Strategy 2035

The Regional Development Strategy 2035⁷ is the spatial strategy of the Northern Ireland Executive, issued in 2010. It sets out a long-term plan for economic growth and sustainable development.

Why is this relevant?

The Regional Development Strategy identifies the correlation between improving the quality of the environment and achieving a better quality of life for people and highlights the need for Northern Ireland to play its part in reducing carbon emissions. The section on the economy includes guidance headed 'Deliver a sustainable and secure energy supply', with 'Manage housing growth to achieve sustainable patterns of residential development' and 'Reduce our carbon footprint and facilitate mitigation and adaptation to climate change whilst improving air quality' featuring in the society and environment sections, respectively.

The environment section outlines the importance of planning and the environment, highlighting mitigation and adaptation measures. The Regional Development Strategy set a regional target of 60% of new homes located in appropriate 'brownfield' sites within the urban footprints of settlements greater than 5,000 population.

Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland

The Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS)⁸ was published in 2015 and contains strategic planning policies for Northern Ireland on a range of planning issues, with the aim of furthering sustainable development and improving the wellbeing of the population. The SPPS consolidated around 20 separate social, economic, and environmental policy publications into one document, and set out the strategic direction and core planning principles to underpin delivery of the two-tier planning system.

The SPPS is currently undergoing review, with one of the key drivers being the need to update policies relating to climate change mitigation and bring them in line with the Climate Change (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 and the Energy Strategy, which established a target of 80% energy consumption from renewables by 2030.⁹ The scope of the review includes revision of the 'Purpose of Planning' and 'Core Planning Principles' sections of the SPPS so that they are future proofed to appropriately support the Climate Change agenda. Other policy areas under review include Transportation, Flood Risk, and Development in the Countryside. A call for evidence to inform how policies to address climate change could be revised was conducted in early 2024.¹⁰

Why is this relevant?

The Strategic Planning Policy Statement 2015 acknowledges the need to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and respond to the impacts brought about by climate change:

'A key pledge of the Executive is 'to continue to work towards a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by at least 35% on 1990 levels by 2025'. [...] The planning system should therefore help to mitigate and adapt to climate change by shaping new and existing developments in ways that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and positively build community resilience to problems such as extreme heat or flood risk; [...] avoiding development in areas with increased vulnerability to the effects of climate change, particularly areas at significant risk from flooding [...]; promoting the use of energy efficient, micro-generating and decentralised renewable energy systems...'¹¹

Whilst it's clear the update to the SPPS is needed to bring it line with current emissions targets, extant policy, including the need to reduce greenhouse emissions, must be taken into account in the preparation of local development plans, and it is also material to all decisions on individual planning applications and appeals.



Northern Ireland Climate Change Adaptation Programme

The devolved government of Northern Ireland is required to produce an Adaptation Programme by the Climate Change Act (2008), in response to the UK wide Climate Change Risk Assessment.

The latest Northern Ireland Climate Change Adaptation Programme (NICCAP2)¹² was developed with input from all Northern Ireland government departments to put forward adaptation approaches and actions for 2019-2024. It set key priority areas to improve the resilience of Northern Ireland in the face of the socio-economic and environmental impacts of climate change. Objectives in the plan include the development of local council strategies to increase resilience in the built and natural environment and an online platform to raise awareness of good practice climate change adaptation work across Northern Ireland.

The next adaptation programme (NICCAP3) is under development and will set out the national strategy for climate adaptation up to 2029.

Why is this relevant?

The Climate Change Adaptation Programme provides information about the process of adaptation planning and the tools available to guide local planning authorities through the process.

Flood risk management plans

Flood risk management plans were first produced in 2015 to comply with the requirements of the European Union Directive on managing flood risk (2007/60/EC) (the Floods Directive), as transposed to Northern Irish legislation through the Water Environment (Floods

Directive) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009.¹³

The second cycle of Northern Ireland Flood Risk Management Plans¹⁴ (FRMP) were published in 2021 and set out measures to manage flood risk in 12 areas of potential significant flood risk up to 2027. The plans include measures that apply across regions and the whole of Northern Ireland.

One of the key actions in the Climate Change Adaptation Programme (NICCAP2) published by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in 2019 was to increase the number of Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS). There is now a specific SPG (Supplementary Planning Guidance) on SUDS in Belfast, published in May 2023. The Department for Infrastructure launched a public consultation in September 2025 on SUDS in New Housing Developments.¹⁵ However, concerns have been raised that proposals do not adequately provide oversight and monitoring of SuDS, for example through a regulatory body.

Why is this relevant?

Flood risk management plans place a duty on the planning system to take into account the likely impact of climate change on the occurrence of flooding. Proposals set out in the FRMPs should be understood and secured by planning authorities to secure the resilience of communities to present and future flood risk.

Policy to encourage SuDS in new development will aid flood alleviation through design measures such as swales, permeable paving and water storage systems to separate surface water from the sewerage.

References

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