

Belfast City Local Development Plan 2035: Timetable

March 2016

1 Introduction

- 1.1 On 1 April 2015, as part of local government reform, Belfast City Council assumed responsibility for a number of functions previously carried out by government departments, including statutory town planning responsibilities. Alongside this, Belfast's district boundaries were expanded to take in around 53,000 additional residents, 21,000 households and 1,000 business premises from areas that were formally parts of Lisburn City Council, Castlereagh Borough Council and North Down Borough Council areas. In addition, the reform programme also introduced new Community Planning responsibilities.
- 1.2 This marks the most significant change to the Northern Ireland (NI) planning system in over 40 years and presents the Council with an unprecedented opportunity to address the development challenges within Belfast in a more co-ordinated way. The Council are therefore now commencing with the production of the Belfast City Local Development Plan (LDP) 2035, which will set out a clear vision for how the Council area should look in the future by deciding what type and scale of development should be encouraged and where it should be located.
- 1.3 This Timetable sets out the key stages and indicative timescales in the process to produce the Belfast City LDP 2035. It is a public statement of the Council's programme for the production of the new plan and will help ensure that the plan process is efficiently managed and that the key stakeholders such as the consultation bodies and the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) are kept informed and can manage their own resources to facilitate their involvement in the LDP process.
- 1.4 It has been prepared in accordance with the advice set out in the Department of the Environment's (the 'Department') Development Plan Practice Note 3: Timetable (April 2015) and fully meets the requirements of the Planning Act (NI) 2011 and the associated Planning (Local Development Plan) Regulations (NI) 2015. This requires the Council to prepare this Timetable in consultation with key stakeholders such as the PAC, agree it with the Department and publicise the adoption of the Timetable prior to commencing work on the production of the LDP.
- 1.5 The Timetable was approved by resolution of the Council at its meeting on **XX April 2016** and has been agreed with the Department prior to formal publication.

2 What is the Local Development Plan?

- 2.1 The Belfast City LDP 2035 will set out a clear vision for how the Council area should look in the future by deciding what type and scale of development should be encouraged and where it should be located. It will inform the general public, statutory authorities, developers and other interested bodies of the policy framework and land use proposals that will implement the strategic objectives of the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) and other regional planning policies, and will guide development decisions within Belfast up to 2035.
- 2.2 In summary, The Belfast City LDP 2035 will:
 - Provide a 15 year plan framework to support economic and social needs in the city, in line with regional strategies and policies, while providing the delivery of sustainable development;
 - Facilitate growth by coordinating public and private investment to encourage development where it can be of most benefit to the wellbeing of the community;
 - Allocate sufficient land to meet the needs of the city;

- Provide an opportunity for all stakeholders, including the public, to have a say about where and how development within the local area should take place;
- Provide a plan-led framework for rational and consistent decision making by the public, private and community sectors and those affected by development proposals; and
- Deliver the spatial aspects of The Belfast Agenda, the city's Community Plan.

2.3 The new LDP will comprise of two development plan documents:

- **Plan Strategy** – The strategic policy framework for the plan area as a whole across a range of topics. It will set out an ambitious but realistic vision for Belfast as well as the objectives and strategic policies required to deliver that vision. Establishing this strategic direction early in the plan process will provide a level of certainty on which to base key development decisions in the area as well as the necessary framework for the preparation of the Local Policies Plan; and
- **Local Policies Plan** – The Council's local policies and site specific proposals in relation to the development and use of land in Belfast. It will contain the local policies, including site specific proposals, designations and land use zonings required to deliver the Council's vision, objectives and strategic policies, as set out in the Plan Strategy.

2.4 Although the new LDP documents will be distinctive to Belfast, reflecting local circumstances and the challenges facing the council area, they should also ensure that the objectives are integrated with, add value to and assist in the delivery of national, regional and local policies and strategies within Northern Ireland, Belfast and other district councils. There is also a statutory link between the new LDP and the Council's emerging Community Plan, known as the Belfast Agenda. It is intended that the LDP will be the spatial reflection of the Belfast Agenda and that the two plans should work in tandem towards the same vision for the area and its communities and the long term social, economic and environmental objectives.

2.5 Once adopted, this LDP will replace the current development plan for the district produced by the Department. In Belfast the existing development plan comprises:

- Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) 2015 (adopted September 2014); and
- Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) Subject Plan for the Belfast City Council Area 2015 (adopted December 2008).

3 The Plan Preparation Process

3.1 Prior to work commencing on the production of the development plan documents, two key documents must be produced and agreed with the DOE. They can be summarised as follows:

- **Statement of Community Involvement (SCI)** – The SCI sets out how and when we will engage with the local community in both the preparation of planning policy and decisions around planning applications. It promotes a more meaningful and effective approach to enable interested parties and the local community to engage early in the plan process and throughout its preparation. It is anticipated that the final SCI will be formally published in April 2016.
- **Timetable** – This Timetable sets out the Council's programme for the production of the Plan Strategy and Local Policies Plan, including key milestones and timelines for plan production, covering all elements of the process through to adoption.

3.2 Alongside these documents, preliminary work towards the production of the LDP will involve the development of a comprehensive and reliable evidence base, which will include the commissioning of a series of preparatory studies, that will help inform policy development and help justify the

‘soundness’ of the LDP documents. This evidence will provide the basis for the development of strategic policy options, the identification of preferred options for public consultation, the drafting of the two development plan documents, demonstrating the ‘soundness’ of the plan through the independent examinations and for the finalisation of the Plan Strategy and Local Policies Plan for adoption.

3.3 The diagram on the following page provides indicative dates for a number of the key stages in the production of the LDP. The key elements of this process are can be summarised as follows.

- **Preferred Options Paper (POP)** – The publication of the POP represents the start of work on the LDP. The POP is a consultation paper setting out the key plan issues and the preferred options available to address them. It seeks to promote debate on issues of strategic significance which are likely to influence the shape of future development within the city. Any representations or views received as a consequence of its publication will be considered whilst formulating the draft Plan Strategy and Local Policies Plan.
- **Draft Plan Strategy** – The draft Plan Strategy is a public consultation document and is not the final plan. It is an indication of our intentions regarding the future development of the area and is a key part of the public participation process. Following a formal 12 week period of public consultation, all representations received will be made available for public inspection for a further 8 week period.
- **Soundness Based Independent Examination** – The purpose of the independent examination is to determine the soundness of the draft Plan Strategy, taking into account representations or counter representations. Following the examination, an Advisory Report of its findings will be issued to Central Government.
- **Binding Report** – Following the independent examination, Central Government will issue a binding report to the Council, requiring us to adopt the draft Plan Strategy as originally prepared, or with modifications.
- **Adoption of the Plan Strategy** – Once the required changes are made, the final Plan Strategy will be formally adopted and published by the Council. At this point, the Plan Strategy will become a principal consideration when determining future planning applications for development in the City.
- **Draft Local Policies Plan** – The draft Local Policies Plan is a public consultation document. It will be consistent with the adopted Plan Strategy and will be our detailed land use proposals regarding the future development of Belfast. This draft document is a key part of the public participation process. As with the Plan Strategy, following a formal 12 week period of public consultation, all representations received will be made available for public inspection for a further 8 weeks.
- **Soundness Based Independent Examination** – As with the Plan Strategy, the Local Policies Plan will also be subject to an independent examination to determine its soundness. Following the examination, an Advisory Report of its findings will be issued to Central Government.
- **Binding Report** – Following the independent examination, Central Government will issue a binding report to the Council, requiring us to adopt the Local Policies Plan as originally prepared, or with modifications.

Belfast City Local Development Plan (LDP) 2035 - Timetable

	Key Stages	Notes on Proposed Process	Indicative Timescales
Preliminary Work	Publication of Statement of Community Involvement (SCI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Final SCI to be submitted to Department for approval 	April 2016
	Publication of Timetable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consult Statutory Stakeholders Final SCI to be submitted to Department for approval 	May 2016
	Preparation of evidence base to underpin production of Plan Strategy and Local Policies Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commission specific, specialist studies required (e.g. Population and Housing Growth) Internal Council consultation to develop evidence base and identify key issues Identification of key issues in relation to specific themes for consultation with relevant statutory consultees and key stakeholders Consult consultation body (NIEA) with Sustainability Appraisal (incorporating SEA) Scoping Report 	May – June 2016
	Informal consultation with Elected Members, statutory stakeholders and community representatives		
	Publication of Preferred Options Paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12 week public consultation Publish Topic Papers and supporting evidence alongside POP, including appraisal of alternative options Publication of Sustainability Appraisal (inc. SEA) Interim Report Initial EqlA and HRA Screening 	September – November 2016
Plan Strategy	Consideration of responses to POP consultation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preparation of Public Consultation Report Informal consultation with key stakeholders 	Early 2017
	Publication of Draft Plan Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12 week public consultation, followed by 8 week consultation on representations Publication of Sustainability Appraisal (inc. SEA) and Public Consultation Report Publication of EqlA and HRA where required 	Second half 2017
	Soundness Based Independent Examination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advisory report to Central Government Central Government Issues binding report to Council 	Spring 2018
	Adoption of Plan Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Changes made to finalise Plan Strategy Publication of final Sustainability Appraisal (inc. SEA) and Public Consultation Report Publication of final EqlA and HRA where required 	Early 2019*
Local Policies Plan	Informal consultation with Elected Members and statutory stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Informal consultation with relevant statutory consultees and key stakeholders Consult consultation body (NIEA) with Sustainability Appraisal (incorporating SEA) Scoping Report 	Spring 2018 – Early 2019
	Publication of Draft Local Policies Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12 week public consultation, followed by 8 week consultation on representations Publication of final Sustainability Appraisal (inc. SEA) and Public Consultation Report Publication of final EqlA and HRA where required 	Spring - Autumn 2019
	Soundness Based Independent Examination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advisory report to Central Government Central Government Issues binding report to Council 	Early 2020
	Adoption of Local Policies Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advisory report to Central Government Central Government Issues binding report to Council 	Late 2020*
Monitor and Review	Monitoring and Review of LDP, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Annual Monitoring Reports 5 and 10 year review (leading to commencement of a replacement Local Development Plan) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advisory report to Central Government Central Government Issues binding report to Council 	On going

Sustainability Appraisal (incorporating Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA))

* May require a longer period depending on changes required following Independent Examination

- **Adoption of the Local Policies Plan** – Once the required changes are made, the final Local Policies Plan Strategy will be formally adopted and published by the Council. The Plan Strategy and Local Policies Plan together will become the principal consideration when determining future planning applications for development in the City.

3.4 AS part of the LDP preparation, the Council is also required to carry out a number of assessments on the emerging development plan document proposals. These include:

- **Sustainability Appraisal (SA)** – A tool for appraising policies to ensure they reflect sustainable development objectives (that is social, environmental and economic factors). This is required in relation to both development plan documents and will involve consultation on the scope of the appraisal alongside the POP consultation.
- **Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)** – A procedure to follow that contributes to the integration of environmental considerations in the preparation and adoption of plans and programmes. It will be undertaken in relation to both development plan documents as an integral part of the SA process above. Prior to completing an SEA, an initial screening exercise will be undertaken at the POP stage to determine if the LDP requires a full SEA.
- **Habitats Regulation Assessment (HRA)** – This considers the potential impact of LDP policies and proposals on European nature conservation sites. Prior to completing an HRA, an initial screening exercise will be undertaken at the POP stage to determine if the LDP requires a full HRA.
- **Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA)** – In line with the Council’s Equality Scheme, an Equality Screening exercise will be undertaken at the POP stage to assess if the LDP is likely to have an impact on specific groups identified in s75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. If required, a full EqIA will be undertaken for both the Plan Strategy and the Local Policies Plan. Views on any equality screening documents or draft EqIAs will also be sought as part of the formal consultation processes.

3.5 In most cases, these assessment processes will run in parallel with the preparation of the POP, the Plan Strategy and the Local Policies Plan. Relevant reports will be published at each of the key stages of the plan making process.

4 Delivery

4.1 Meeting the indicative timescales set out within the Timetable is dependent upon a number of factors, including effective governance arrangements, involvement of elected Members, adequate resourcing and the management of risk.

Governance

4.2 A **steering group** comprising elected representatives from the council Planning Committee, the Director of Planning and Place and other senior Council officers will be established to oversee the development of the LDP. This is a high-level co-ordinating body that will ensure overview and strategic input on behalf of the whole community, as well as from the planning professionals.

4.3 Alongside this, a **project management team** will also be set up comprising senior council officers, the Principal Planning Officer and representatives from the key statutory/government departments. The purpose of the team is to ensure key consultees are able to contribute to and co-operate in the plan making process. The project management team will be consulted on, and act as an initial scoping group for the SA, including SEA.

Member Involvement

4.4 Progress on the Belfast City LDP 2035 will be reported to the Council's Planning Committee on a regular basis. In addition, there are a number of critical dates for Members involvement:

- Members of the Planning Committee will be involved in a series of thematic workshops at the outset of the process to help examine the core issues for consideration within the LDP and identify available options for inclusion within the Plan Strategy. Informal workshops will then be held at appropriate stages with elected Members as the POP, Plan Strategy and Local Policies Plan are developed.
- The Preferred Options Paper will be presented for Member agreement prior to the 12 week public consultation.
- The findings from the public consultation exercise, including the Sustainability Appraisal Scoping (incorporating SEA Determination) and Equality Screening, will be presented to Members prior to publication of the Public Consultation Report.
- The draft Plan Strategy will be presented for Members agreement prior to publication for a 12 week public consultation period.
- Member's authorisation will be sought following the consultation on the draft Plan Strategy to forward the Plan, with any representations, to the central Government to request an Independent Examination. Any counter representations will be forwarded after a further eight week public consultation period, following Member approval.
- Member's authorisation will be sought on whether to accept or rebut the representations and submissions made to the Independent Examination for the Plan Strategy by a date set out by the independent examiner appointed to conduct the inquiry.
- Following examination, the Binding Report from central Government will be presented to Members alongside the final Plan Strategy for adoption and publication.
- The draft Local Policies Plan will be presented to Members for authorisation to publish for a formal 12 week public consultation period.
- Member's authorisation will be sought following consultation to forward the draft Local Policies Plan, with any representations, to central Government to request an Independent Examination. Any counter representations will be forwarded after a further eight week public consultation period, following Member approval.
- Member's authorisation will be sought on whether to accept or rebut the representations and submissions made to the Independent Examination for the Local Policies Plan by a date set out by the independent examiner appointed to conduct the inquiry.
- Following the examination, the Binding Report from central government will be presented to Members alongside the final Local Policies Plan for adoption and publication.

Resourcing

4.5 The Council has established a dedicated Local Development Plan team within the Belfast Planning Service, under the leadership of the Director of Planning and Place and the Development Planning and Policy Manager. The LDP team will carry out policy writing, sustainability appraisal, equality appraisals, consultation and evidence collection predominantly in-house to reduce resource expenditure. Staffing resources from other parts of the Council will also be used to produce documents and supporting evidence.

4.6 The team will be supplemented as required through the procurement of specialist advice and consultancy support where specific technical evidence, such as population growth projections or economic forecasting, is necessary. The costs associated with preparing the LDP will continue to be provided as part of the Council's on-going financial planning processes.

Risks

- 4.7 The Timetable outlined within this document is challenging and there are a number of risks that could slow down the production of the LDP. In order to manage risk, a Risk Register will be established for the project and risks identified managed in accordance with the Council's Risk Management Strategy. Appendix A sets out the key risks identified in relation to the overall project plan and proposed mitigation measures to be implemented in order to ensure that sound documents are prepared in a timely manner.

5 Monitoring and Review

- 5.1 An annual monitoring report will be produced by the council to inform Members and the Department on progress in meeting the Timetable and on the land availability for housing and employment. If progress on plan production has slipped, the Timetable will need to be revised and agreed with the Department in accordance with the Development Plan Regulations.

Appendix A: Risks Associated with the LDP Timetable

Issue	Risk	Mitigating Actions
Volume of work – LDP programme too ambitious	The scale and uncertainty of the content new LDP presents potential risks to its deliverability. Failure to deliver against the key milestones could be damaging to the Council’s reputation and the absence of up to date planning policies will hamper the realisation of the Council’s vision.	<p>Robust scoping of work required.</p> <p>Sound project planning with realistic and flexible timescales.</p> <p>Careful monitoring of progress against programme objectives and re-prioritise as necessary.</p> <p>Use of additional resources through corporate partnership working.</p>
Competing work Priorities (e.g. emerging planning issues require interim policy response – i.e. Supplementary Planning Guidance)	The Council is involved in a wide range of spatial policy work that may require input from the LDP team. Additional work being identified on a particular development or the production of supplementary guidance to address emerging issues risks diverting staff time away from the LDP Programme.	<p>Continued corporate commitment to adequately resourcing the LDP work.</p> <p>The LDP will continue to be recognised as a high priority and it is recognised that at certain times other work may take a lower priority.</p> <p>Robust management of staff resources and cross service and partnership working.</p>
Lack of specialist resources	Certain elements of the LDP will require specialist technical skills and there is a risk that some of this work cannot be progressed in house. This could lead to delays to the LDP programme or could impact on quality & ‘soundness’ of planning documents.	<p>Robust scoping of work to identify technical skills required.</p> <p>Develop staff skills and competencies through training initiatives.</p> <p>Close working with partners who have the necessary skills.</p> <p>Use of external consultants to support LDP team.</p>
Staff turnover	The council is going through a period of transformation. Loss of experienced staff could impact on the production of LDP.	<p>Ensure that sufficient staff resources with the necessary experience and expertise are available for the production of the LDP.</p> <p>Recruit to vacant posts.</p>
Financial resources	Sufficient financial resources are required to prepare local development documents including for consultancy, consultation and the examination process.	Ensure the LDP Timetable informs the Council’s Short and Medium-Term Financial plan.
Consultation – i.e. the level of public interest causes delays	The number and the nature of representations received during consultation are not predictable. It is possible that issues may arise in consultation that lead to longer response times by the council and longer examination and reporting time.	<p>The Timetable takes into account the likely time required to process responses to consultation.</p> <p>Resources can be drawn from across the Council if required at key stages to ensure representations are effectively processed.</p>

Issue	Risk	Mitigating Actions
Lack of capacity of statutory agencies to respond as part of engagement/ involvement activity.	Given that a number of important place shaping functions are within the remit of government departments and agencies (e.g. transportation, housing, infrastructure, etc.) there will be a need for effective and timely involvement from key stakeholders to minimise the risk of delays to the programme. Statutory agencies will need to be adequately resourced to ensure there is capacity to engage with and respond to multiple LDP preparation processes across the region.	<p>The LDP Timetable provides forward notice of the Council’s LDP programme to help inform resource requirements within statutory partners.</p> <p>Front loading of engagement with statutory partners to ensure issues are identified and discussed at an early stage.</p> <p>Maintain contact with key stakeholders to minimise prospect of slippage.</p> <p>Need for effective and timely engagement raised at a regional level with Senior Officers.</p>
Securing political consensus on elements of the LDP	Belfast City Council has a broad range of political representation and there are likely to be divergences in views on some elements of the LDP, particularly when considering specific site allocations as part of the Local Policies Plan. This could lead to delays in securing political support for all or elements of the LDP at key stages.	<p>Sound project planning ensures key milestones outlined in the Timetable allow sufficient time to secure the necessary political consensus and approvals.</p> <p>Cross-party political representation on the Project Steering Group to help aid political buy-in for proposals.</p> <p>Project to allow for a wide variety of Member engagement throughout the LDP process, including workshops with Members at key stages, including Planning Committee and Area Working Group, regular reporting to committees and briefings for party leaders/party groups throughout to build consensus.</p>
Changes to regional policy, legislation or guidance during the preparation of the LDP	Unforeseen changes in regional statutory or non-statutory policy guidance and advice could affect the content and direction of local policy preparation and decisions may cause delays LDP programme. Similarly, changes to planning legislation and/or subordinate regulations could introduce amendments to the plan making process, introducing new obligations and necessitating additional work. Unforeseen additional work may also be required as a result of new emerging evidence at a local or regional level.	<p>The Council will carefully monitor changes to regional policy and legislation and give priority to managing any impacts on the key milestones set out in the LDP Timetable.</p> <p>Early and consistent engagement with central government and the PAC and ongoing legal advice from within the Council in relation to the plan making process.</p>
Delays associated with the public inquiry and subsequent Binding Report	The timescales associated with the Soundness Based Independent Examination are beyond the control of the Council and could vary considerably depending on the capacity of the Planning Appeals Commission, the scale and complexity of the LDP for Belfast or the level of public interest. This could result in prolonged timescales associated with both the holding of public examinations and the subsequent issuing of the Binding Reports.	<p>The LDP Timetable provides forward notice of the Council’s LDP programme to help inform resource requirements from DOE and PAC.</p> <p>Early notice will be given to the DOE and PAC/Independent Examiner (20 weeks) of the request to hold a public examination.</p> <p>Close liaison with the DOE/PAC to highlight any potential issues/problems at an early stage.</p>

Issue	Risk	Mitigating Actions
Tests of soundness	There is a risk of the LDP documents being found unsound, which could result in major delays to the implementation of the policies or an inability to adopt the LDP.	<p>Effective scoping of work and development of a robust evidence base to provide evidence to support the soundness of the LDP.</p> <p>Continuous soundness self assessment to be carried out throughout the process.</p> <p>Consultation with DOE/PAC before and during publication of a development plan documents.</p>
Legal Challenge	There may be a risk of legal challenge to the process undertaken for the production of the LDP. This could impact on work programme through the creation of additional work or delays to adoption.	Ensure LDP production is compliant with planning legislation, regulations and guidance.