

# INDEPENDENT SPECIALIST ADVICE TO UNDERTAKE A DETAILED URBAN CAPACITY STUDY TO INFORM THE BELFAST LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2020-2035

## 1. Introduction

Belfast City Council is currently preparing a new Local Development Plan (LDP) for the City. The Plan will set out development proposals for the 15-year period to 2035. As part of this the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) for Northern Ireland requires that an Urban Capacity Study (UCS) is completed to “assess the potential for future housing growth within the urban footprint and the capacity for different types and densities of housing.” In addition, the SPPS requires that “LDPs should identify previously developed land within settlements for potential economic development” with the need to “offer a range and choice of sites in terms of size and location.” This brief has been prepared for the preparation of an UCS to inform the preparation of the LDP and this will be published as a technical supplement to the draft Plan.

## 2. Background

On 1 April 2015, Belfast City Council assumed responsibility for a number of functions previously carried out by Government Departments, including statutory planning and local economic development responsibilities. Alongside this, new Community Planning responsibilities were also introduced as part of the comprehensive Local Government Reform programme.

The Council is now responsible for the majority of planning functions for Belfast, including local development planning – the preparation of a new plan which will set out a clear vision of 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. 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.

### Local Development Plan

The transfer of planning responsibilities to the Council coincided with significant reforms and improvements to the planning process introduced through the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 (the 2011 Act) and associated subordinate legislation. Part 2 of the Planning Act provides for the preparation of a Local Development Plan (LDP) by a Council for its district, which will (when adopted) replace current development plans produced by the Department of the Environment (DOE).

The LDP 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.

The new LDP will comprise of two development plan documents:

- **Plan Strategy** – The strategic policy framework for the plan area as a whole, setting 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 the City. It will contain 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.

Work on the LDP has commenced through the publication of a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) and Timetable in June 2016 and the publication of the Preferred Options Paper (POP) in January 2017. The POP is intended to promote debate on issues of strategic significance which are likely to influence the preparation of the new LDP and represents a key opportunity for the public to shape the future plan. The feedback from the POP consultation will help to inform the preparation of the Plan Strategy, in the first instance, which will in itself be subject to public consultation and independent examination before adoption.

### **Linkage between the LDP and Community Plan**

The City’s first Community Plan – known as the Belfast Agenda – was also published for consultation in December 2015. The Belfast Agenda was created by a partnership of key city partners, residents and community organisations and sets out a joint vision and long-term outcomes and ambitions (by 2035) for Belfast’s future, as well as outlining our priorities for action over the next four years.

The Local Government Act introduced a statutory link between the LDP and the Council’s Community Plan, in that the preparation of the LDP must take account of the Community Plan. It is intended that the LDP will be the spatial reflection of the community plan and that the two should work in tandem towards the same vision for the Council area and its communities and set the long term social, economic and environmental objectives for an area.

### **3. Existing Evidence Base**

It is crucial that the LDP is based on a comprehensive and reliable evidence base. A significant volume of research has been completed by the Council to date to help inform the Preferred Options Paper. This includes a series of thematic Topic Papers and the commissioning of a number of specialist preparatory studies to inform policy development and help justify the ‘soundness’ of the LDP documents.

Of particular relevance to the preparation of the UCS, the evidence base published alongside the POP, includes:

- **Belfast Housing Growth Options Report** – The Belfast housing growth options report considers the future population and housing growth of Belfast, with a reasonable range of potential population and household growth scenarios presented.
- **Assessing Employment Space Requirements Report** – The Assessing Employment Space Requirements document considers how the demand for employment space is likely to be affected by forecast employment growth in Belfast.
- **Sustainability appraisal (Incorporating Strategic Environmental Assessment) Interim report** – The interim report consists of the SA scoping report and using the SA Framework, undertakes an assessment of reasonable alternatives to enable the determination of options in the POP.
- **Topic Papers** – A series of 18 Topic Papers have been prepared to inform the POP, including papers relating to Population, Housing, Employment and economy, and Belfast city centre and retailing.

As a result of this research, the POP identifies a growth strategy based on the creation of 46,000 additional jobs and 66,000 additional residents, requiring the provision of 37,000 additional houses between 2014 and 2035. It seeks to identify land for additional homes in accordance with the priorities outlined in preferred option LP1, which would see an increase in density of housing in appropriate locations, prioritising brownfield land and restricting housing development in the open countryside.

In relation to employment land, preferred option VE1 seeks to identify sufficient land for between 486,400-608,000 sq m of B-class floor space to 2035, through an allocation of land based on the qualitative nature of supply across different growth sectors of the economy. It identifies eight strategic employment locations that will form the focus of a review to identify the necessary land for economic development.

In addition, the Council maintains a comprehensive database of housing land through its annual housing monitor function. As of April 2015, the Housing Monitor shows that Belfast has the potential to accommodate up to 24,726 new dwellings through existing zoned land and the potential to implement existing residential development consents. A similar database of employment land is currently being developed. This monitoring information is expected to form the basis of future UCS work.

#### **4. Research Requirements**

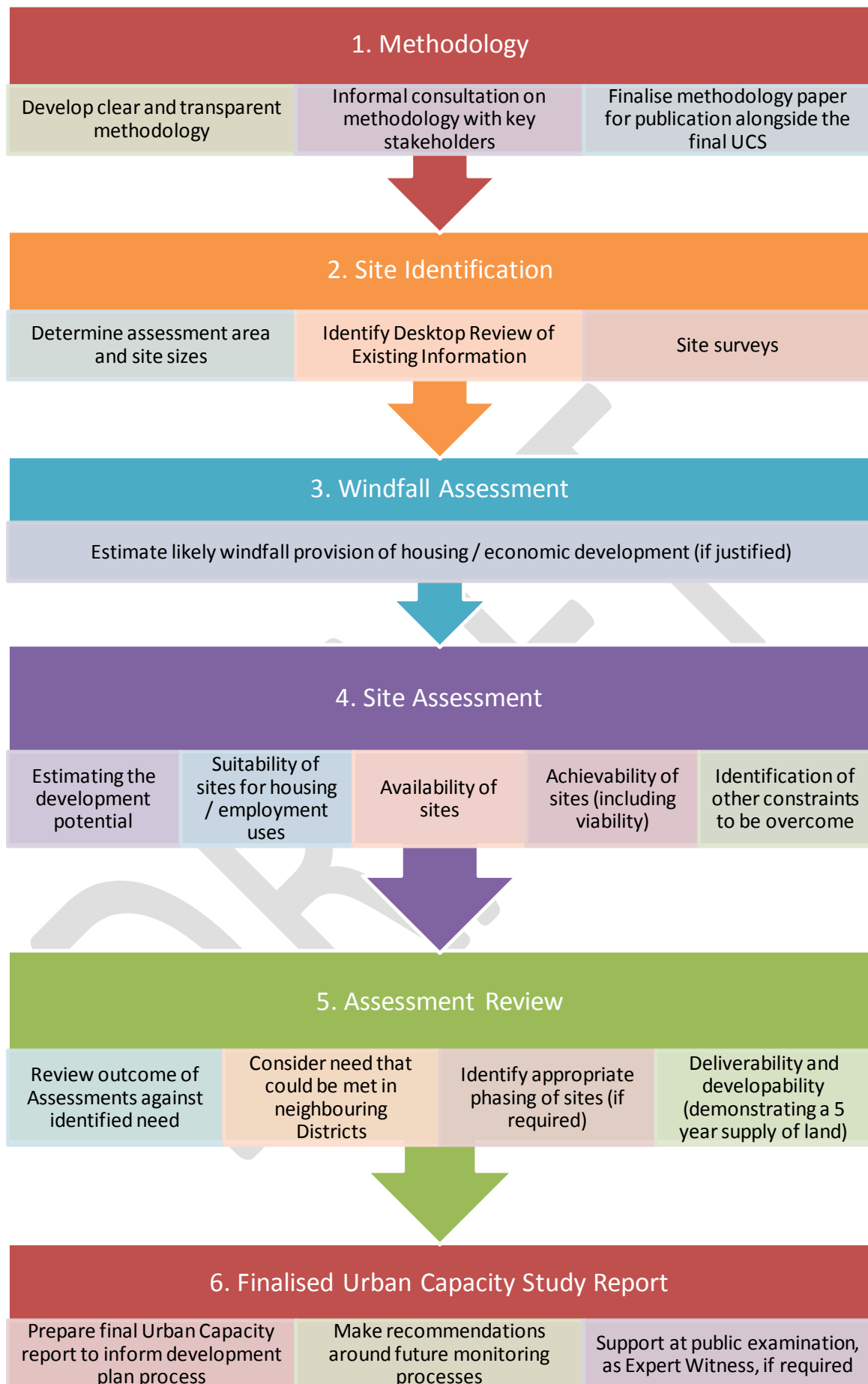
The Council requires suitably qualified expert advisors to undertake six key tasks as part of this commission. This outline process is summarised in the diagram on the following page.

##### ***Task 1: Methodology***

Although the SPPS requires that an Urban Capacity Study is completed to inform the allocation of housing land, there is little guidance given as to the methodology and process that should be used for this. Although standard methodologies exist for the preparation of an UCS, policy development elsewhere in the UK has already moved beyond this initial assessment of capacity to a more sophisticated methodology that considers the suitability, availability and viability/achievability of sites alongside the development potential.

Given an anticipated need to explore the potential for the re-zoning of any surplus employment land for housing development, the Council wish to expand the UCS methodology to assess employment land in parallel to housing land, perhaps more closely aligned with the broad methodologies now used for the completion of Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessments (HELAAAs). A suitable bespoke methodology therefore needs to be developed that builds on the local policy requirements, information requirements from the Council and best practice taken from HELAAAs, Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessments (SHLAAAs) and Employment Land Reviews (ELRs) undertaken elsewhere in the UK.

As a minimum, the SPPS requires that the process assess “the potential for future housing growth within the urban footprint and the capacity for different types and densities of housing” and that it considers opportunities relating to “previously developed land, infill sites, conversion of existing buildings and possible changes to land use”. It also needs to apply similar tests to sites in relation to employment uses so that the LDP can “offer a range and choice of sites in terms of size and location” for potential economic development.



To help avoid challenges at later stages, we anticipate that the UCS would be strengthened by gaining buy-in from key stakeholders at the earliest opportunities. The development of the methodology should therefore also involve informal consultation with a number of key stakeholders,

such as the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), Department for Infrastructure (DfI), Invest NI and representative bodies from the construction industry.

To ensure an open and transparent process, the agreed methodology should be documented in a concise and accessible report for publication alongside the final UCS.

### **Task 2: Site Identification**

In accordance with the agreed methodology, the successful contractor should then identify appropriate sites to be included within the study. The Council's existing housing monitor and emerging employment land monitor can form a basis for site selection, based on existing Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) 2015 zonings and recent planning approvals. This could be supplemented through other data sources, such as land in public sector ownership (Council, NIHE land, INI land, etc.), sites identified in previous urban capacity studies, other sites currently being promoted for development, or other vacant or underutilised land or buildings.

Once sites are identified, we would expect a database to be established recording basic site information collated from desktop reviews and site surveys, such as type of site, site area, estimated capacity, data source, planning history, physical or policy constraints, previous uses, etc. All sites should also be plotted in GIS and subject to a unique identifier for cross-checking against records in the related database. GIS files should be provided to the Council in MapInfo table format.

### **Task 3: Windfall Assessment**

The SPPS advises that 'windfall' potential is central to the assessment of future housing land requirement and states that it should be a key element of the UCS. It advises that "the scale of the windfall housing allowance will vary from area to area and may depend on the approach taken to the urban capacity study." It also notes that "allowance can be made on the basis of examining past trends in windfalls coming forward for development and estimating likely future windfall potential."

The housing monitor has historically recorded all housing sites across the city that have resulted in at least 1 net additional residential unit. It should therefore be possible from historical data to estimate a likely 'windfall' allowance in relation to residential development should a size threshold need to be applied to the UCS methodology because of the number of smaller sites identified.

Where this is the case, a windfall allowance will need to be determined so that it can be factored into the Assessment Review at Stage 5. The SPPS recognises that there are a range of methodologies for calculating windfall and advises that the methodology used should be "robust" and that "care should be taken to avoid under-estimation." A summary windfall allowance report should be prepared for publication alongside the UCS to ensure openness and transparency.

### **Task 4: Site Assessment**

Each site within the study database should be objectively assessed against a series of pre-defined criteria to provide a consistent scored assessment of:

- **Development potential** of each site in terms of the number of units of housing or floorspace of employment land, taking into account both physical and policy constraints identified. Where sites have an extant planning consent, the actual approved figures can be used;
- **Suitability** of sites for a variety of housing / employment uses, including mixed use developments and the potential for different types and tenures of development;
- **Availability** of sites for development, including an indication of the likely timescales for delivery. This should allow sites to be phased into short (1-5 years), medium (5-10 years) and long-term (10-15 years) timescales for delivery that will allow the work to inform the assessment of the 5-year land supply; and
- **Achievability** of sites, for development, including consideration of the viability of sites over the short, medium and long-term. This element should also consider the need to align delivery with wider infrastructure investment required to enable developments to be brought forward. Depending on the agreed methodology, it may be necessary to analyse

viability in more detail for key sites, such as those that have scored highly on the potential, suitability, availability and achievability assessments.

As outlined in Task 1, the criteria for the site assessments should be tailored to the local context and should provide a sense of objectivity and uniformity. At the end of this stage, it is expected that a 1-page summary of the capacity, suitability, availability and achievability of each site could be provided, with recommendations as to their future status within the Local Policies Plan.

#### **Task 5: Assessment Review**

Following the site assessments, the outcomes should be reviewed for robustness and the results amended if necessary. The results should then be used to provide a conclusion on the deliverability and developability of each site and the housing potential/ floorspace capacity of each site to determine a potential land supply and indicative housing trajectory which sets out how much housing can be provided and at what point it is likely to be developed.

This should then be brought together with the windfall estimates and compared to the identified need for the District to identify any shortfalls in land supply over the plan period, and the 5-year supply of housing and employment land. If any shortfalls are identified, recommendations should be made in relation to steps that could increase the speed of delivery, such as earlier investment in supporting infrastructure or relaxing of policy constraints, if appropriate, as part of the new LDP. In addition, consideration should be given to the potential for excess supply to be met within neighbouring districts. This assessment should also consider any need to phase the release of land to encourage development of more difficult sites.

#### **Task 6: Finalise UCS Report**

Following the full review, a final Urban Capacity Study Report should be produced, summarising the outcomes of the commission as a whole. This will help to inform the development plan process and will form a key part of the evidence base to be published alongside the draft development plan documents.

The final report should also make recommendations around the future monitoring of land supply and timescales for review of the UCS and a final copy of the UCS database and GIS files should be provided to help inform the on-going monitoring processes.

Given that the report will form an integral part of the LDP's evidence base, an appropriate representative from the consultancy team should be available, if required, to act as an expert witness for the Council during the preparation and examination of the Council's LDP Plan Strategy and Local Policies Plan.

## **5. Outputs**

The following outputs are required:

- **Tasks 1:** A concise and accessible UCS Methodology report for publication alongside the final UCS.
- **Task 2:** Database of housing sites established and all sites plotted in GIS.
- **Task 3:** A summary Windfall Allowance report should be prepared for publication alongside the UCS.
- **Task 6:** Final Urban Capacity Study Report for publication as part of the LDP evidence base. The final UCS database and GIS files should be made available to the Council to help inform future monitoring processes.

## **6. Timescales**

Tender submissions should provide a detailed breakdown of the key dates of the outputs listed above and should be aligned to be completed prior to the publication of the Plan Strategy in accordance with the published LDP Timetable. At present it is envisaged that the commission should commence in May 2017 and a draft of the final UCS report be completed by the end of August 2017, allowing its findings to be available to inform committee consideration of the Plan Strategy, which is currently anticipated to take place in mid-September.

## **7. Management & Reporting Arrangements**

The Council will establish a project Steering Group comprising senior Council officers, the Principal Planning Officer and relevant professional and technical experience from elsewhere in the Council. Appropriate representatives from key external stakeholders, such as NIHE or DfI, may also be invited to attend meetings as required.

Suppliers will be required to submit progress updates to the Project Manager (frequency to be negotiated with successful contractor) and will be required to attend regular Steering Group meetings and any other relevant internal and external meetings as needed.

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