



## Ten Years from Transfer: Taking Stock

This time ten years ago, the biggest transformation of the public sector for over 40 years took place here in Northern Ireland. The Reform of Local Government was the final strand in the Review of Public Administration, which began in 2002 and involved an extensive review of the arrangements for the accountability, development, administration and delivery of public services in Northern Ireland. It was an historic day on 1st April 2015, as 26 councils transitioned to 11 larger councils and powers were transferred from central to local government, of which planning was the most significant. It was widely recognised that the scale and complexity of the changes were unprecedented in the Northern Ireland public sector.

We will all have our different memories of what our working environment was like in the years leading up to this major transformation of the planning system and the public sector. Extensive public consultation and collaboration was ongoing across the planning community and wider public sector, with a whole machinery in place including Transition Committees and Working Groups to co-ordinate the necessary changes. Negotiations took place on legislation and policy changes, HR terms and conditions, the transfer of assets and finance, and the introduction of a new power of community planning to be led by councils. Communicating these changes to the wider planning community, and the Northern Ireland community, was vital to ensure as smooth a transition as possible to our new ways of working.

There have been many challenges over the last ten years as we have worked through the implementation of these changes, and it is important to reflect on what we can learn. The Annual Planning Conference on 10th September will offer us a chance to take stock of where we are and what is next for us as a profession and the planning system in Northern Ireland. While there is still much work to do and challenges to work through, we can lean on the resilience we have gained by continuing to strive to deliver for citizens here, our skills in collaborative working and negotiation, and our professionalism as planners.

*Catherine McKinney, Nations Trustee*



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Potential articles and images are welcome. The Editor reserves the right to amend articles as necessary.

The opinions expressed are contributors' own, unless otherwise stated. The RTPI is not responsible for statements made or views expressed in this Journal.

## NI Executive Committee 2025

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<b>Junior Vice Chair:</b>	Diane O'Neill
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<b>Student / Licentiate:</b>	Emily Wray Robert McDonald
<b>Co-Opted Member:</b>	Victoria Travis

## Welcome to the spring edition

Welcome to the first edition of planIt for 2025

My first year at the RTPI has flown by and I've had the most fantastic time. Thank you to everyone who has been a part of it. I've made new, and strengthened existing, relationships with so many amazing people who are passionate about making the world a better place. After all, that's why we became planners.

Despite having been involved with the RTPI as a volunteer in the past, I've learnt a huge amount in the last twelve months about the vast amount of work the RTPI does on behalf of our members to promote the planning profession. All via a small but brilliant team and a host of wonderful volunteers who sit on committees, policy fora, judging panels, speak at events or with sponsorship. The RTPI really does punch above its weight.

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A big thank you to all our contributors. Please contact us if you would like to contribute content for our next edition.

*Mark Hand, Editor*

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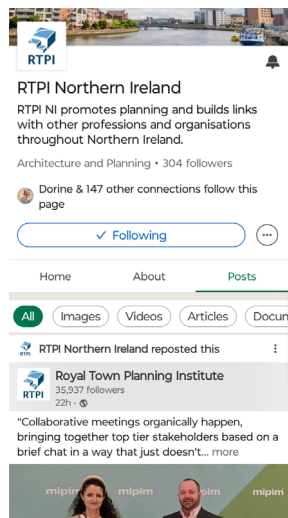
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## NI Linkedin Page

Have you seen our new LinkedIn Showcase page for RTPI Northern Ireland?

This page will keep you updated with everything from our local CPD events, policy and research activities and young planner events.

If you aren't already following us then please do.



## Chief Executive visit to NI

Dr Victoria Hills recently visited Northern Ireland to meet with members and officials.

Victoria attended our Executive Committee, Policy Forum and Consultants Forum meetings and Annual Dinner as well as meeting with the Permanent Secretary and staff at Department for Infrastructure





# NI Annual Dinner

Our Annual Dinner was held on 6 March 2025 on HMS Caroline. We would like to thank our headline sponsors, Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council for their support. Thank you also to our drinks reception sponsor, TSA Planning, to Clyde Shanks and Turley for each sponsoring a table for RTPI Students and MCL Consulting for their continued support.

Following the handover of the Chain of Office from our Outgoing Chair, Chris Bryson to our Incoming Chair Emma Aldridge, guests sat down to a tasty three course meal supplied by Yellow Door Catering and some entertainment from local magician Caolan McBride.



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# NI Annual Dinner





# Empowering a Net-Zero Future: Pioneering Solar Energy Solutions in Belfast and Beyond - *Justin McHenry*

Amid growing climate challenges, solar photovoltaic (PV) energy has gained global attention. In the UK, this was underscored by the formation of the UK Solar Taskforce in 2023 and their upcoming Solar Roadmap Plan in 2024. Northern Ireland's Energy Strategy, The Path to Net Zero (2021), initially set a target for 70% renewable electricity by 2030, later increased to 80% through the Climate Change Act (2022).

In line with these goals, Belfast City Council and the Department for the Economy NI commissioned GIA to assess solar PV potential across Belfast using advanced 3D modelling, along with expertise in daylight, energy and financial modelling, setting a new benchmark for solar energy analysis.

After a small-scale pilot assessing 60 government properties, the project expanded to cover a 3km<sup>2</sup> urban area, encompassing over 5,200 properties with diverse land uses and a mix of existing and planned developments. These factors play a key role in determining the effectiveness, suitability, and financial viability of PV installations.

The rationale for the project was to create a vital evidence base as to the potential contribution that urban solar PV across brownfield assets could make towards the renewable technology mix necessary to achieve net zero in Belfast; the NI local authority with the the highest annual consumption of electricity per year. This evidence was then used to support renewable action planning, property retrofit programmes, including those aimed at addressing fuel poverty, asset decarbonisation programmes, local area energy planning, incentivisation scheme modelling and network upgrade planning.



Justin McHenry is ESG & Solar PV Consultant at GIA Surveyors and an RTPI Licentiate member in Northern Ireland

Find out more about GIA by visiting the website [www.gia.uk.com](http://www.gia.uk.com)

The innovation of this project lies in the precision and scalability of its results. We achieved up to 97.5% accuracy in our PV performance estimates compared to real-world installations. This success is due to our rigorous analysis, which calculates the net usable roof or open space for each property, the performance potential of every individual panel, and accounts for contextual factors like shading, local climate data, and surrounding developments.

## **Lessons for Scotland and Other Regions**

Our work highlights key learnings that Scotland and other regions can leverage to advance toward net-zero:

1. Urban solar PV can make a significant contribution to localised and national targets. The Belfast project evidenced that the existing building stock of circa 5,200 properties within a 3km<sup>2</sup> could provide:

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- 68,743kW of solar PV systems.
- 196,409 solar panels – all individually modelled and assessed for their electricity generation potential, carbon savings, revenue generation, contribution to self-sufficiency per property and payback.
- 39,270,180kWh/year of renewable energy production, with many areas demonstrating the potential to become almost fully self-sufficient, including fuel poverty areas.
- a payback period for the combined systems around 9.5 years with some as quick as 6 years.
- 14,565 tonnes co2e savings per year.
- 10% of the city centre's total energy demand and 3% of Belfast's entire electricity demand using a renewable source.

This demonstrates that urban scale PV can and should play a significant role in the composition of renewable technology strategies addressing climate change targets and wider fuel poverty goals.

2. Collaborative working between central and local government, distribution network operators, the private sector and communities is crucial to effectively move projects from technical feasibility to implementation.

3. The development of large scale, interactive, urban technical assessments, such as that undertaken by us in Belfast, represents a fundamental starting point for any city, country or asset manager to understand how they can maximise their decarbonisation gains through PV while optimising financial investment. Scotland's Draft Energy Strategy and Vision for Solar includes a commitment to deploy between 4-6GW of PV by 2030; a commitment that requires the development of strategic and localised plans for commercial, domestic and utility-scale roof and ground-mounted solar. GIA's approach and the lessons learnt from Belfast demonstrate exactly how urban environments can help achieve these targets. Considering

can help achieve these targets. Considering GIA evidenced that just 3km<sup>2</sup> of Belfast's urban environment could produce approximately 10% of the city centre's entire electricity demand annually, imagine the contribution possible both locally and nationally to decarbonisation targets should Scotland take a similar approach across their towns and cities existing building stock where, for example, Glasgow currently consumes 2,402.4GWh of electricity per year, Edinburgh 2,021.5GWh/year and Aberdeen 938GWh/year as three major Scottish cities. Accurate, interactive, evidence bases are crucial to planning the renewable transition and mix of technologies required.

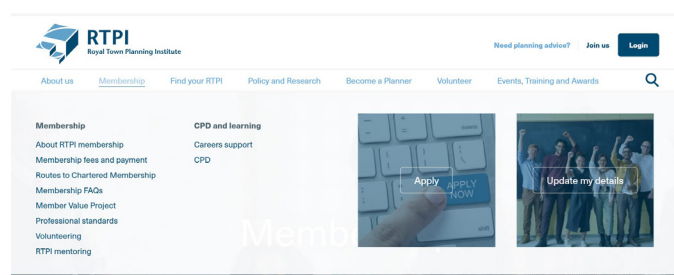
## Are your details correct?

Remember to keep your details updated.

We won't bombard you with emails but it ensures that we can contact you with current news, CPD events and policy updates.

Did you know that you appear on name badges and delegate lists as your current employer on our system so it's worth updating to avoid issues at the registration desk!

You can keep your record updated by logging into the your RTPI Profile and updating your contact and employment details.



# Avoiding “Duff” Decisions: Advice for Elected Members

*Maria O’Loan*

A recent decision by Northern Ireland’s most senior judge serves as a stern reminder to elected representatives when making planning decisions. The case was brought by Mr. Duff, who challenged the granting of planning permission for a single rural house near Limavady. The permission had been approved by councillors despite contradicting the recommendation of professional planning officers.

In her ruling, Lady Chief Justice, Dame Siobhan Keegan, quashed the decision and highlighted the risks involved when elected representatives disregard professional advice. She emphasised the importance of grounding decisions in planning policies, stating, “This case exposes many issues in relation to rural development, not least the danger if elected representatives proceed against the recommendations of experienced planning officials and planning officer reports without good reason.” This makes it clear that political representatives must provide solid, evidence-based justifications when departing from professional advice. Politically expedient or populist decisions will no longer be sufficient.

The Lady Chief Justice also emphasised the crucial role of planning policies in her judgment in Duff. She stated, “This judgment should reiterate the point that planning policy exists to protect the rural environment and should not be underestimated or considered in any relaxed way.” This reinforces the importance of adhering to planning policy and ensuring that decisions do not compromise environmental protection.

Over the years, several high-profile decisions have been made by elected members that contradicted the recommendations of both the independent Planning Appeals Commission and professional planning officers. One such case was former Minister Nichola Mallon’s refusal for the arc21 Energy from Waste project at Hightown Quarry, Mallusk. The decision was challenged by a Judicial Review on the grounds that the minister misinterpreted the Department’s waste

planning policies. The Department ultimately had to concede the challenge, underlining the importance of following professional guidance.

Recent climate change litigation is further shaping planning and development decisions. Landmark rulings, such as Coolglass in the Republic of Ireland and No Gas Caverns in Northern Ireland, underscore the need to consider statutory climate change targets when evaluating development applications.

In the \*No Gas Caverns\* case, which involved the approval of gas storage caverns under Larne Lough before the Climate Change Act, the Lady Chief Justice once again stressed the importance of justifying any decision that diverges from climate obligations. She said, “It seems logical to us that given the climate commitments now enshrined in our law, decision-makers on large-scale projects such as this will have to consider and rationalise any convergence or divergence with those standards set in law.” This ruling indicates that decision-makers must provide clear reasons when their decisions do not align with binding climate change commitments.

The Coolglass wind farm case in the Republic of Ireland is particularly relevant. The Irish High Court ruled that An Bord Pleanála’s refusal of planning permission for a wind farm, citing visual impact and local development plan designations, was flawed. The applicant argued that climate considerations should take precedence over these concerns, under Section 15(1) of the Climate Act, EU law, and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). The Court concluded that Section 15 requires a broad interpretation, reflecting the need for “rapid, far-reaching, and unprecedented changes to all aspects of society and the economy” to meet ambitious climate targets. Although the decision is likely to be appealed, it sets a clear framework for how public authorities should interpret climate obligations in planning decisions.

It is unclear whether Northern Ireland will adopt this approach, but there are similarities with sections of the Climate Change Act



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(Northern Ireland) 2022, which mandates that departments must exercise their functions in line with statutory climate targets. This duty will also apply to upcoming sectoral plans covering energy, waste management, transport, agriculture, infrastructure, and fisheries. The question arises: Will this result in departments having a positive obligation to approve development schemes that contribute to binding climate commitments?

Government Departments and planning authorities in Northern Ireland will be required to consider and justify projects with reference to binding climate change commitments. The extent of this duty is still being clarified through cases currently before the courts. However, cases like No Gas Caverns already signal that elected representatives and planning officials will need to align their decisions with legal obligations on climate change. This may include showing how proposed projects contribute to, or conflict with, statutory climate goals. The increased legal emphasis on climate considerations means

that decisions based solely on short-term political interests, without due regard to long-term climate targets, could face judicial review.

Ultimately, the integration of professional planning officers’ expertise, adherence to robust planning policies, and consideration of climate change obligations are crucial to ensuring sustainable and legally sound development decisions.

*Maria O’Loan is Head of Environmental and Planning Law, Tughans LLP and a Legal Associate of RTPi*

## NI Consultants Forum

The purpose of the Forum is to bring together the expertise and knowledge of its membership to help shape the future of the Northern Ireland Planning System by actively engaging with its planning partners and other stakeholders.

Planning Consultants operating across Northern Ireland recognise that through a collective voice, they can engage in greater collaboration and contribute positively to informing the skills, knowledge and behaviours of those working in NI’s planning system to shape our thinking on how we each contribute to creating places that deliver well-being, sustainable homes and inclusive growth.

If you are a local Planning Consultant and would like to get involved in our hybrid meetings please contact Julie Sullivan

## NI Young Planner Committee

The RTPi NI Young Planners Committee is seeking four new members to join our team. This is a fantastic opportunity to get involved and support early-career planners across the region. Whether you’re looking to help organise social and CPD events, champion the voice of young planners, or develop new skills, we’d love to hear from you. Being part of the committee is rewarding, sociable, and a brilliant way to promote the profession – thank you for considering getting involved!

If you are interested in finding out more about what is involved or would like to join, please contact [northernireland@rtpi.org.uk](mailto:northernireland@rtpi.org.uk)



## Mark Hand, My First Year in Post *(continued from page 1)*

Since starting in post, I have met:

- Minister O'Dowd, senior DfI officials including the Deputy Permanent Secretary and Chief Planner, and the PAC;
- six of the 11 Council planning teams (Antrim & Newtownabbey, Ards and North Down, Causeway Coast & Glens, Fermanagh and Omagh, Mid & East Antrim and Mid Ulster), the Heads of Planning at Belfast City Council, as well as attending the Heads of Planning NI quarterly meetings;
- five consultancies (Capita, GIA, Gravis, RPS and TSA) plus attendees at the RTPI NI Planning Consultants' Forum;
- five sister built-environment professions (CIH, CIHT, RICS, RSUA) as well as attending Construction Professions Council NI;
- four third sector organisation (Climate First, Community Places, NILGA, RSPB-NI);
- students and teaching staff at QUB and UU.

These meetings have provided a great opportunity to discuss all things RTPI and planning in Northern Ireland as well as seeing some of the projects you've been involved in throughout Northern Ireland. Our Executive Committee chair Emma Aldridge and I will be meeting Minister Kimmins in June.

If you would like me to meet your team, please get in touch.

My five priorities for 2025 are:

1. To ensure that Members in all sectors of the planning profession in Northern Ireland are, and feel like they are, represented, supported and heard. I will continue to seek meetings with the remaining five Council Planning teams, planning consultancies, the DfI and PAC as well as ongoing engagement with the Heads of Planning NI and successful operation of the Planning Consultants' Forum;
2. To promote excellence in planning in NI and to increase the sense of pride in the profession;
3. To meet all Executive Committee and Planning & Research Forum volunteers to ensure their time spent volunteering is worthwhile and that they feel like they're making a positive difference;
4. To grow membership in Northern Ireland and to support measures to grow the planning profession;
5. To seek to maximise the RTPI's influence in shaping policy and practice.

I look forward to working with you all over the coming year. We have some great events planned for the year, and you can now get regular updates on our activities from our new LinkedIn showcase page RTPI Northern Ireland.



Looking forward: (re-)imagining planning futures

10-12 September 2025, Ulster University, Belfast

For full details about the conference, visit: <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/conference/prc2025>



# NI Annual Conference

Our Conference this year will take place on 10 September 2025 at Europa Hotel, Belfast and will focus on ten years since planning powers were transferred. We'll look at what lessons we can learn and what the next ten years will bring to planning in Northern Ireland including a session on AI in Planning.

We have the Suzy Lamplugh Trust coming over to provide delegates with a session on personal safety and lone working whilst at work specifically tailored to planners in Northern Ireland and will look at a variety of issues including conflict de-escalation management and diffusion-techniques

**Planning for the Future –  
From a Decade of Change**

**10 September 2025**

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**RTPI Northern Ireland**

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**Book via our website by**

**Monday 1 September 2025**



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