Reference	BOT21/MAY/26C
Date	Wednesday, 26th May 2021

Board of Trustees

RTPI NORTHERN IRELAND UPDATE

Report from the Director of Wales, Northern Ireland and Planning Aid England

FOR INFORMATION

The Board is asked to note the key updates from RTPI Northern Ireland (RTPI NI) as at May 2021.

1. Summary

This report provides an update of headline activities undertaken by RTPI NI since the last report to the Board in March 2020.

2. Policy

2.1. Call for Evidence on the Review of the Planning Act

In Northern Ireland, the planning system was fundamentally reformed in 2015 with the transfer of responsibility for most local planning decisions and plan making going to councils as well as significant reforms to the development management and plan making processes to introduce a plan-led system. The reforms represented the most fundamental change to the planning system in Northern Ireland in over 30 years. This also involved commencement of significant new primary legislation in the form of the Planning (NI) Act 2011, together with a raft of other supporting subordinate legislation, which all came into effect on 1st April 2015.

The Act requires the Department for Infrastructure to review and publish a report on the implementation of the Act no later than 3 years later, which is the basis for the current Call for Evidence.

Our response highlighted that the changes introduced as a result of the Planning Act represented a significant step forward in the design of the planning service to deliver sustainable development for and with communities. However, after six years, now is a good time to review how the system is being implemented and where improvements can be made. This does not mean that the planning system in NI is broken but, like any system or policy, review enables adaptation to changes which may have happened since the spatial planning system was first designed. Reflection is a positive activity.

The consultation focused on the legislation and, whilst there are changes which could usefully be implemented, other improvements which would add value do not require legislative or regulatory changes and these should also be explored. Planning is an important public service and, if properly implemented and resourced, can deliver positive outcomes across public services and reduce the negative impact of development. It is essential that planning, as a valuable public service, has the

confidence of the public and across all communities in Northern Ireland. We would welcome the opportunity to support the Department for Infrastructure and Councils, along with our members in Northern Ireland, to support the review of planning in NI.

The full response can be viewed here.

2.2. Draft Programme for Government

The 'New Decade New Approach' (NDNA) document set out the process and approach for developing the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government (PfG). The key points were that the Programme should be developed through engagement and co-design, using an outcomes-based approach; focus on prosperity and wellbeing for all; establish a shared and ambitious strategic vision for the future; and provide for accountable and transparent monitoring and reporting arrangements. The Executive's approach to the PfG begins with a draft Framework of Outcomes – statements of societal wellbeing which, taken together, are intended to capture the range of things that experience and research suggest matter most to people. It is these Outcomes and their Key Priority Areas which were consulted on in 2021.

In our response we drew attention to the fact that planning can support many of the key priority areas and deliver outcomes but planning as a valuable public service was not acknowledged. Our response can be read here in full.

2.3. NI Audit Office Review of Planning

The Director has been appointed as a Reference Partner to the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) Review of Planning in Northern Ireland.

In support of the review, RTPI NI held a workshop with members of the Executive Committee and Policy and Research Forum with the NI Audit Office to input into the review of the planning system.

3. Apprenticeships

A survey was conducted at the end of 2020, with members in Northern Ireland to gauge support for introducing an apprenticeship scheme for planners in Northern Ireland. There was support for such a scheme, however there are questions over funding and resourcing such a scheme. In Northern Ireland, only the private sector would receive financial support from the levy.

To coincide with Northern Ireland's Apprentice week (14th – 18th April 2021) we wrote to Economy Minister Diane Dodds MLA to explore the introduction of a degree-level planning apprenticeship.

4. Community Engagement Partnership

A key aspect of the reformed planning system introduced in Northern Ireland in 2015, was to improve community engagement in the planning process with a more inclusive and meaningful level of community involvement. At the end of 2020, the Minister for Infrastructure established the Community Engagement Partnership to look at how to enhance the quality and depth of community involvement in the planning process. RTPI NI is a member of this body and is represented by the Policy Officer.

The partnership held two workshops in March, supported by the RTPI NI Policy Officer; one focusing on Community Engagement in Development Management and a second focusing on Community Engagement in Forward Planning.

5. Historic Environment Group

The Director sits on the Historic Environment Group which brings together a cross-sector grouping of interests in the historic environment and is serviced by the Department for Communities. The Director is involved in a sub-group to discuss training and CPD for the sector.

6. Events

6.1. Webinars

Two webinars have been held, addressing specific needs identified as supporting planners in Northern Ireland.

- Tuesday 23rd March – Urban Design in Northern Ireland
- Wednesday 21st April – Rural Design in Northern Ireland

Both were well supported and have received positive feedback. A third webinar will be held on Thursday 20th May on Biodiversity in Northern Ireland.

6.2. Autumn programme

A programme is being developed for the autumn. This includes the Annual Conference – Planner Live NI in September and the Annual Planning Law Conference. Both of these can be either delivered face to face or on-line depending on the public health situation.

A Heritage event is being considered for November to be held at Hillsborough Castle. However if the pandemic does not allow for a face to face event, this will be postponed to 2022.

7. Careers Promotion

The Director has delivered a lecture to students at Ulster University on the Professional Planning and Ethics.

8. Health and safety implications

Any activities consider health and safety implications; at present all activities are being carried out virtually.

9. Equality and diversity implications

Events and activities all seek to address equality and diversity factors.

10. Resource implications

The activities are all funded via existing agreed budgets and staff and volunteer resources.

11. Governance implications

The work relates to activities in Northern Ireland and focuses on the devolved planning system. All activities are carried out within the data protection requirements.

12. Climate action

Climate Action considerations are built into activities undertaken, including policy positions.

13. GROWPLAN (Corporate Strategy)

Services are provided to members operating in Northern Ireland to ensure they are tailored to the devolved NI planning context and civic society to ensure the member proposition is appropriate supporting GROWPLAN and the Corporate Strategy.

14. Digital Transformation

None.

15. Communications Implications

All opportunities for promoting planning in Northern Ireland are taken and built into activities. The RTPI website and @RTPINI twitter are key tools for communicating.