

Planning Policy Statement 15: Planning and Flood Risk

Background

The frequency of major flooding events across Europe during the last ten years, and the social and economic damage they have caused, has led governments to focus increasingly on the problems that changes in climate pose for the sustainable development of communities across Europe.

While the development sector is a key element in maintaining social and economic wellbeing, development itself affects the environment's natural capacity to cope with the impacts of extreme weather conditions.

In Northern Ireland, increasingly frequent instances of flooding, the uncertainties associated with climate change and the science of flood estimation served to expose a number of limitations to the effectiveness of existing planning policy on development at risk from flood. This, and the commitment set out in the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) 2025 to promote sustainable development required a new approach to dealing with flood risk. The replacement policy would need to recognise and take account of the scientific uncertainties in the system and facilitate a balanced approach to achieving the objectives of sustainable development while seeking to combat a low level of public awareness of the problem which was particular to Northern Ireland.

Approach

A detailed scoping exercise was undertaken to identify the diversity of impacts, the relevant statutory and other interests and the key objectives.

This also assisted in identifying relevant contemporary research into causes and effects of flooding. The research included comparison of approaches in other jurisdictions and formed the starting point for the development of key policy objectives and helped identify how the local circumstances fitted into the wider national and European picture. It also helped identify those statutory and other interests which could be affected by the introduction of new planning policies. This was used to help locate policy within the wider context of developing themes in national and European governance.

Early in the research period a key government stakeholders group was constituted and a meeting held to review/validate the research findings. Following identification of stakeholders planning peer evaluation contacts were nominated within Planning Service to review and advise from a professional land use planning perspective.

As the subject of flood risk has been increasingly closely linked with the impacts of climate change, preparation of the draft policy statement sought to acknowledge and build a pragmatic policy response to the findings of the UK

Climate Impacts Programme (UKCIP) and in particular the Scotland and Northern Ireland Forum for Environmental Research (SNIFFER) findings published in "Implications of Climate Change for Northern Ireland: Informing Strategy Development". It also sought to recognise and, where appropriate, complement the direction of existing strategic policy in this and related fields expressed by, for example, the Regional Development Strategy, the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy and The EC Water Framework Directive. The objectives of the draft evolved from this work and became, in summary, raising public awareness about flood risk and the factors which influence it; addressing the uncertainties posed by climate change and the process of flood estimation by introducing a precautionary approach to dealing with development and flood risk; acknowledging the importance of flood plains as a natural regulatory mechanism; providing a policy direction consistent with cross cutting government strategies and policies and recognising the nature of the responsibilities of other statutory interests.

Regular input was sought from stakeholders and planning peers and fed into an ongoing review of progress. There was involvement with other relevant work in the field of flood risk, for example, contributions to the Office of Science and Technology (OST) Foresight Research Programme on Future Flooding and Construction Industry Research and Information Association projects contributed to widening the understanding of the subject. Comparison with policy responses to flooding in other jurisdictions assisted in informing work on the draft and, combined with feedback from stakeholders and peers, resulted in the identification of a need for a regional specific policy response for Northern Ireland.

A public consultation draft was issued for wide ranging consultation among groups and individuals in both the public and private sectors. Following completion of a four month consultation period responses were assessed and the policy statement reviewed. To inform and add transparency to this process all consultation responses and the Agency's review of the consultations was published on the internet with the publication of the final Planning Policy Statement (PPS).

Outcome

The publication of a PPS on the subject of flood risk, which provides clearly articulated and robust policies on how the planning system will deal with development where flood risk is an issue (evidenced by an accumulating body of favourable planning appeal decisions). The PPS addresses the problem of flood risk in a manner which is both consistent with the broad approach of other national jurisdictions and specifically tailored to cope with the particular circumstances in Northern Ireland. The PPS has contributed to raising public awareness of the causes and impact of flooding. The PPS is consistent with and contributes to the goal of adopting the sustainable approach to development

expressed in the Regional Development Strategy and is in conformity with other relevant strategic initiatives such as the Water Framework Directive.

The PPS has addressed the significant problem of scientific uncertainty with the introduction of a precautionary approach to dealing with development proposals where flood risk exists. The PPS has developed out of close inter-agency co-operation and has contributed to the development of closer and on-going working relationships with those Agencies.

Lessons Learned

- Lessons learned include:
- Give the proper resources to scoping and research.
- Identify and involve key stakeholders at the earliest appropriate stage.
- Inter-agency relationships and involvement with a wide range of relevant interests allied to continuous review adds significant value to and confidence in the end product.
- Achieving the objective of informing public awareness and putting emphasis on the accessibility of the statement to a wide audience enhance the final document.
- Where uncertainty exists focus on ways of dealing with it as early as possible in the process.
- Maintain a pragmatic understanding of what the policy can deliver.
- Seek as wide a spectrum of public response as is appropriate to the subject.
- Stay open to criticism but remember the objectives of your policy.
- Transparency in the public consultation review process is essential even if this takes more time than envisaged.

Summary of Key Features of Policy Process

The PPS is precise in the outcomes it seeks. These are to ensure flood risk is not increased and to facilitate a sustainable approach to development in Northern Ireland. Its goals are founded in solid research base drawn from sound scientific and professional sources and it underlines the importance of the application of policy over the long term to meet the challenge of climate change.

The policy is explicit in its recognition of the need to take account of influencing factors beyond existing administrative and professional boundaries. It conforms

with the strategic principles embodied in the approaches of other jurisdictions while facilitating a tailored response to the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland. These factors, and the integration of peer group and other professional opinions into the evolution of the policy framework, give the PPS a strong evidence led base and an holistic foundation for the policy platform express by the PPS. The policy's adoption of a precautionary approach to dealing with development and flood risk underlines its ethical, moral and legal base.

Consultation across the wide ranging interests and a transparent process of addressing those consultation inputs offers evidence of the inclusive approach to policy preparation which was adopted.

Responses to the public consultation exercise complemented the comprehensive and accessible nature of the document reflecting a successful commitment to communicating the policy to the widest possible audience.

Evaluation of the policy during drafting and subsequent to its publication, has been facilitated by regular assessment of professional and legal challenges to its validity such as planning appeals and judicial reviews. Review is undertaken in much the same way although the PPS has explicitly acknowledged a requirement for review within five years to address the evolving scientific uncertainties which may impact upon the policy's ongoing efficacy.