

Fields in Trust Standards

Creating great spaces for all

Planning Policy Context for

Northern Ireland



Introduction

This Planning Policy Context note for Northern Ireland accompanies the Fields in Trust Standards (the ‘FIT Standards’). It sets out the planning policy context for Northern Ireland and explains how to use the FIT Standards when preparing planning applications for new developments or as part of the community-led planning process.

Introduction to the Planning System

The Department for Infrastructure of the Northern Ireland Executive is responsible for creating the laws and regulations that set the rules for the planning system in Northern Ireland, but local government administers much of the planning system, including preparing the local development plan for an area and determining most planning applications. This two-tier planning system commenced with the transfer of the responsibility for the majority of planning functions from central government to district Councils in 2015. The Councils are in the process of producing local development plans, with transitional arrangements in place until each Council adopts its local development plan.

The planning system in Northern Ireland is ‘plan-led’. This means that proposals for new development must be determined in accordance with the development plan for an area unless ‘material considerations’ indicate otherwise.

Relevance of the Fields in Trust Standards in Planning

National planning policy in Northern Ireland recognises the importance of providing accessible, high quality open spaces to achieve sustainable development. The FIT Standards are recognised across the UK as a common approach for delivering accessible, high quality open space, sport and play provision in line with national planning policy. Using the FIT Standards from the beginning of the planning process embeds a focus on achieving better design outcomes from the start, and by incorporating benchmarks on quantity and accessibility as well as using the framework of 6 themes can help drive a broader agenda of quality and functionality.

Fields in Trust also work with developers, planners and community planning groups to assess and analyse current provision levels and identify where this does not currently meet the FIT Standards.

Planning Applications and Appeals

The FIT Standards can be used to help developers and consultants in securing planning consent for new developments through demonstrating compliance with local policy requirements for open space, sport and play provision. Following the FIT Standards is a policy requirement in many council areas in Northern Ireland when integrating open space into new developments. In some council areas guidelines and standards on open space in local policy are a derivation of the FIT Standards and in local council planning authority areas where no guidelines are in place, the FIT Standards are a useful tool to demonstrate appropriate levels of open space are being provided.

The FIT Standards can also be used as part of negotiations with local council planning authorities to determine the level and standard of provision required cognisant of the local context and other facilities.

The FIT Standards can also provide a robust basis for decision-takers in planning appeals to assess the provision of open space where it is a material consideration in an appeal.

Local Development Plans

The FIT Standards have been developed to be directly referenced in Local Development Plans setting out the types of open space, outdoor sports and play spaces (quantity, accessibility and quality) that should be provided for different scales of new development.

Community-led Planning

The FIT Standards can be used by local communities to help identify the appropriate level of open space, sports and play provision for an area to be set out in the Community Plan.

The FIT Standards can also be used to help identify suitable open spaces to protect and enhance. There is no specific designation for local green space in Northern Ireland but enhanced protection of green spaces for public recreational use can be achieved through Fields in Trust and a [Deed of Dedication](#) in partnership with the landowner. The FIT Standards can assist in defining the role of such spaces in meeting open space needs within the local community.



Pioneer Play, © Macgregor Smith

Policy Context

National Policy

Regional Development Strategy

The [Regional Development Strategy](#) (RDS) provides an overarching strategic planning framework for Northern Ireland. It sets out a spatial framework and guidance for the long term development of Northern Ireland, with a focus on achieving sustainable development.

One of the eight aims of the RDS is to “Promote development which improves the health and well-being of communities”, including through easy access to appropriate services and facilities.

Strategic Planning Policy Statement

The [Strategic Planning Policy Statement](#) (SPPS) sets out the Department for Infrastructure’s policy on important planning matters that should be addressed across Northern Ireland.

The SPPS places sustainable development at the heart of the planning system in Northern Ireland and states that planning authorities should permit sustainable development, unless the proposed development will cause demonstrable harm to interests of acknowledged importance.

The SPPS sets out core planning principles, including ‘Improving Health and Wellbeing’ and ‘Creating and Enhancing Shared Space’ which recognise the importance of protecting existing and providing new, quality open space to promote health living and tackle inequality through facilitating play and sporting activities as well as other activities and interaction with others. It sets out a requirement for councils to assess existing provision of open space as part of preparing their local development plan and encourages the integration of new public open space in new development where feasible.

Planning Policy Statement 8 - Outdoor Space, Sport and Outdoor Recreation

As part of the transitional arrangements following creation of the two-tier planning system, Local Council planning authorities are required to apply existing policy previously adopted by the Department, including Planning Policy Statement 8 (PPS8).

PPS8 sets out policy on the protection of open space and the provision of public open space in new residential development in Northern Ireland. The FIT Standards are referenced in PPS8 as the guidelines to follow for the provision outdoor playing space.

Regional and Local Policy

Local Development Plans

Local Councils in Northern Ireland are currently producing LDPs which will set out local planning policy. They will set out the vision and framework for future development of the area, addressing local needs and opportunities as well as setting safeguards for the local environment.

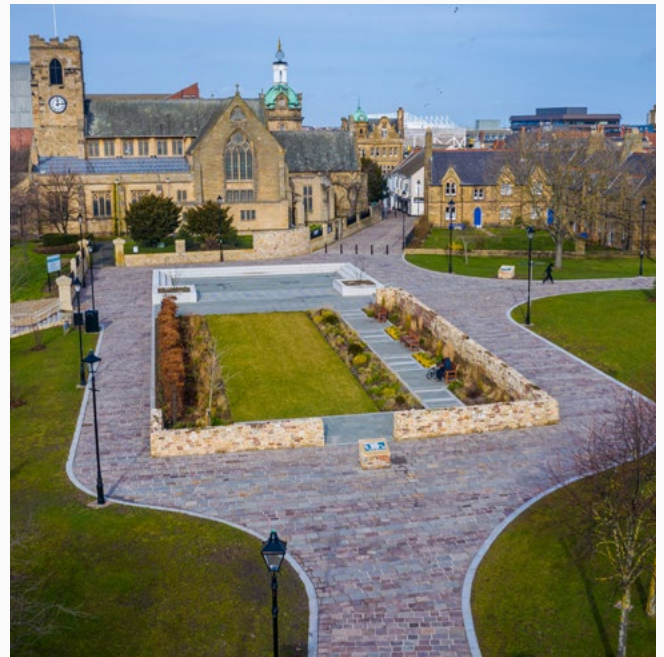
Until adopted, the Departmental development plans prepared by the former Department of the Environment will remain operational. The FIT Standards are referenced in policy in many of these development plans as the parent Standard for developers and consultants to follow when integrating outdoor space within new developments.



Sustainable drainage, Northstowe, Cambridgeshire

Community Plans

Community Plans set out the future direction for development within a council area. They identify the long-term priorities for improving the social, economic and environmental well-being of districts and the people who live there. The Local Councils lead the process of producing Community Plans for their area, working together with the statutory bodies and local community.



Minster Park, Sunderland. © Sunderland City Council

Open Space, Sports and Play Provision in New Developments

In Northern Ireland, open space, outdoor sports and play provision is secured through national and local policy requirements, with the FIT Standards providing minimum guidelines for provision.

Local planning authorities use planning conditions and/or planning obligations to ensure that any agreed open space provision is delivered.

Planning Obligations

Under [Section 76 of the Planning Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2011](#), developers in Northern Ireland may be required to provide planning obligations. Section 76 agreements are legally binding agreements entered into to secure planning obligations. Planning obligations are an important mechanism used by local planning authorities to ensure that certain work and/or financial contributions required to reduce or mitigate the impact of the proposed development are carried out, for example securing the required open space provision. The FIT Standards provide a basis for design discussions with the local planning authority regarding the open space provision to be secured.

Supporting biodiversity

Another key consideration for new developments is the enhancement of biodiversity. In Northern Ireland, the [Wildlife and Natural Environment Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2011](#) places a statutory duty on every public body to further the conservation of biodiversity and the SPPS sets a regional strategic objective to “ensure that the provision of new open space areas and sporting facilities is in keeping with the principles of environmental conservation and helps sustain and enhance biodiversity”. There may be opportunities to create space for nature that also provides other recreational benefits - where properly designed and considered, recreational benefits can be a key wider benefit of the enhancement of biodiversity. The 6 themes in the FIT Standards are designed to help drive a broader agenda of multifunctional green spaces.



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