



Fermanagh & Omagh
District Council
Comhairle Ceantair
Fhear Manach agus na hÓmaí

FERMANAGH AND OMAGH DISTRICT COUNCIL

Position Paper Five

Environmental Assets

May 2015

Environmental Assets of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council

Purpose: To provide members with an overview of the existing environmental assets in the district and how these are protected.

Content: The paper provides information on:

- (i) the regional policy context for the protection, conservation and enhancement of the built, natural and landscape heritage;**
- (ii) the statutory framework and interrelationship with the local development plan; and**
- (iii) an overview of the built, natural and landscape heritage within our Council area.**

Recommendation: That the Planning Committee notes the contents of this paper and the obligations of protecting the various assets compiled within.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 This is one of a series of position papers being presented to the Planning Committee as part of the preparatory studies aimed at gathering the evidence base for the new local development plan. This particular paper is aimed at:

- informing members of their European protected site obligations and potential implications; and
- furthering awareness of the link between the built, natural and landscape heritage and the local development plan function.

1.2 In Fermanagh and Omagh, the evidence of our past can be seen in archaeological and historic features such as tombs and forts, castles and churches, townhouses and farmhouses, grand architecture and vernacular buildings, industrial features and planned parklands. These physical survivals of our past are to be valued and protected and provide an important link to our understanding of both the present and the past. They are also important economic assets providing revenue to the economy through environmental activities, tourism and recreation.

- 1.3** The richness of our natural heritage, both in terms of landscape, natural environments and biodiversity is recognised in the significant number of international and regionally designated important sites. As custodians of our district, it is our responsibility to protect them for future generations. At many levels, development can potentially adversely impact on our environment and it is therefore important that all those involved in the planning process ensure that any potential environmental impacts, whatever the scale, are identified to enable effects to be considered, avoided or mitigated for.
- 1.4** The development plan process will play an important role in identifying key features and assets of the countryside and balancing the needs of rural areas/communities with protection of the environment. This is facilitated by the preparation of Countryside Assessments which will normally include the following interrelated strands:
- an Environmental Assets Appraisal;
 - a Landscape Assessment;
 - a Development Pressure Analysis; and
 - a Settlement Appraisal.
- 1.5** This paper provides the first strand of the countryside assessment of the plan area incorporating an overview of nature conservation resources and historic, architectural and archaeological resources. It also provides a background to the environmental statutory and policy framework for preparing a local development plan. This information is summarised in associated appendices. The paper also provides an overview of the main landscape character areas of the council area and the variations between them are also identified based on the Northern Ireland Landscape Character Assessment 2000. This strand will be further explored in a later paper which will also include the development pressure analysis.

2.0 Regional Planning Context

- 2.1** The Regional Policy Context is provided by the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) 2035 and regional planning policy statements. A summary of these documents as they pertain to plan making and the built heritage, natural heritage and landscape protection is provided.

(a) Regional Development Strategy

- 2.2** The RDS 2035 aims to protect and enhance the environment for current and future generations. It recognises that Northern Ireland's environment is one of its greatest assets which has benefits in terms of the economy and quality of life. Regional Guidance seeks to conserve, protect, and where possible, enhance our built heritage and our natural environment (RG11). The built heritage of the Region is viewed as a key tourism and recreational asset as well as contributing to our sense of place and history and it is important to:-

- Identify, protect and conserve the built heritage, including archaeological sites and monuments and historic buildings;
- Identify, protect and conserve the character and built heritage assets within cities, towns and villages;
- Maintain the integrity of built heritage assets, including historic landscapes.

2.3 The natural environment directly supports all life and is an asset to society and in promoting sustainable development and well being. It is therefore important to:

- Sustain and enhance biodiversity;
- Identify, establish, protect and manage ecological networks;
- Protect and encourage green and blue infrastructure within urban areas;
- Protect and manage important geological and geomorphological features;
- Protect and enhance and manage the coast;
- Protect, enhance and restore the quality of inland water bodies;
- Recognise and promote the conservation of local identity and distinctive landscape character;
- Conserve, protect and where possible enhance areas recognised for their landscape quality;
- Protect designated areas of countryside from inappropriate development (either directly or indirectly) and continue to assess areas of designation; and
- Consider the establishment of one or more National Parks.

(b) Regional Planning Policy Statements

2.4 Planning Policy Statement 2 (PPS 2) Planning and Nature Conservation, PPS 6 Planning, Archaeology and the Built Heritage and PPS 6 Addendum, Areas of Townscape Character (ATC) set out the current regional policy for the protection of conservation interests. PPS 21 Sustainable Development in the Countryside and the Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland contain current regional policies in relation to the environment including protection of rural landscapes and the coast.

2.5 These documents will be replaced by the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS), a Draft of which was issued for consultation in February 2014. The policy objectives of the planning system for archaeology and built heritage are to:

- secure the protection, conservation and, where possible, the enhancement of our built and archaeological heritage;
- promote sustainable development and environmental stewardship with regard to our built and archaeological heritage; and

- encourage the link between conservation and economic prosperity.

2.6 In preparing LDPs, councils should take into account the implications of local policies and proposals on all features of the archaeological and built heritage and their settings, and the implications of proposed land use zonings, locations for development and settlement limits on natural heritage features within or adjoining the plan area. LDPs should identify the range of built and archaeological heritage features within the plan area and bring forward policies or proposals for their protection and conservation and enhancement. These include the following:-

- **Archaeological Sites and Monuments** (State Care, scheduled and other)
- **Areas of Archaeological Potential** – areas within settlements where archaeological remains are likely to be encountered during development
- **Historic Parks, Gardens and Demesnes** – a register of parks, gardens and demesnes of special historic interest is held by NIEA (DOE)
- **Conservation Areas (CAs)** – Areas of special architectural or historic interest
- **Areas of Townscape or Village Character** – areas of unique identity within settlements (designated through the plan process)
- **Local Landscape Policy Areas (LLPAs)** – features or areas within and adjoining settlements considered to be of greatest amenity value, landscape quality or local significance (designated through the plan process)
- **Listed Buildings** – buildings designated as being of ‘special architectural or historic interest’(NIEA responsibility)
- **Community Listed Buildings** (local listing) – buildings which maybe important to local communities but due to insufficient architectural or historic interest do not warrant statutory protection as listed buildings (council responsibility)

2.7 The policy objectives for natural heritage are to:

- seek to further the conservation, enhancement and restoration of the abundance, quality, diversity and distinctiveness of the region’s natural heritage;
- further sustainable development by ensuring that biological and geological diversity are conserved and enhanced as an integral part of social, economic and environmental development;
- assist in meeting international (including European), national and local responsibilities and obligations in the protection and enhancement of the natural heritage;
- contribute to rural renewal and urban regeneration by ensuring developments take account of the role and value of biodiversity in

supporting economic diversification and contributing to a high quality environment;

- protect and enhance biodiversity, geo-diversity and the environment; and
- take actions to reduce our carbon footprint and facilitate adaptation to climate change.

2.8 LDPs should seek to protect and integrate certain features of the natural heritage when zoning sites for development through the use of 'key site requirements' (KSRs) and identify and promote green and blue infrastructure. Natural heritage features and designated sites should be identified as part of the plan-making process and where appropriate, policies brought forward for their protection and/or enhancement. A hierarchy of designations is available under European and local legislation and designation is primarily the responsibility of NIEA (see Appendix 1 for list of legislation). Generally sites are selected for their rarity value or for the diversity of species and habitats they contain, or as a representative example of their habitat type on a local, national or international scale. Some designations are brought forward under the LDP process. The range of designations includes:

(i) *International*

- **Special Protection Areas (SPAs)** – sites selected under the Birds Directive (EC) as being important areas for breeding, over wintering and migrating birds
- **Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)** – areas of certain natural habitats protected under the Habitats Directive. Collectively known as 'Natura 2000' sites.
- **Ramsar Sites** – wetlands listed under the Ramsar Convention to protect those of international importance.
- **World Heritage Sites (WHS)** – designated under the UNESCO World Heritage Convention of 1972 which links the concepts of nature conservation and the preservation of cultural properties. (The Giant's Causeway and Causeway Coast World Heritage Site is the only WHS designated in Northern Ireland)

(ii) *National*

- **Areas of Special Scientific Interest** - sites which are of special interest by reason of their flora, fauna, geological and/or physiographical features are designated under the Environment (NI) Order 2002 (as amended)
- **Nature Reserves and National Nature Reserves** – managed by the DOE or by agreement with another Department, a District Council or a voluntary conservation body;

- **Marine Conservation Zones** – designated by the DOE to protect, conserve and manage its priority marine features (habitats, species, natural features)
- **Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty** – designated by the DOE primarily for their high landscape quality, wildlife importance and rich cultural and architectural heritage.

(iii) *Local*

- **Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) and Wildlife Refuges** – LNRs can be provided by District Councils under powers conferred on them under the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. Wildlife Refuges are provide for under the Wildlife Order.
- **Sites of Local Nature Conservation Importance** – identified through the LDP process with policies provided in the plan for their protection and /or enhancement.

(c) **Other Relevant Strategies**

2.9 The EU Biodiversity Strategy seeks to halt the loss of biodiversity and ecosystems services by 2020 and this is reflected in both Priority 3 of the Programme for Government (PfG) and the RDS. Furthermore, the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 places a statutory duty on every public body to further the conservation of biodiversity. The Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy 2002 sets the framework for biodiversity action. The Biodiversity Strategy describes the main features of biodiversity in Northern Ireland, identifies the main factors affecting it and proposes a number of measures to support biodiversity conservation up to 2016. A new biodiversity strategy is being prepared to help halt the loss of biodiversity and degradation of ecosystems up to 2020.

2.10 Biodiversity is the total variety of all living things – of wildlife habitats, wild plants and animals. At the larger scale, biodiversity relates to the variation in landscapes and habitats and at the smallest scale to genetic differences in plants and animals. Biodiversity is vital to the health of the planet and to quality of life. The enhancement of biodiversity will be one of the most powerful indicators of progress towards sustainability.

2.11 It is important to recognise the biodiversity significance of Northern Ireland’s habitats in the British Isles and beyond. As one of the most westerly outliers of Europe, many of our communities of plants and animals represent extreme oceanic (mild and wet) examples.

2.12 The Biodiversity Strategy initially identified 40 habitat types as priorities for conservation action in Northern Ireland. This was later revised to 51

in April 2010. The Fermanagh and Omagh District has examples of 30 priority habitats such as upland heathland, blanket bog, mesotrophic lakes, Parkland, mixed ashwoods and oakwood.

- 2.13** NI Priority species requiring conservation action are also identified and the list now stands at 481 species, an increase of 271 on the 'old' list when the NI Biodiversity Strategy was being prepared. These include species of bees, beetles, birds, butterflies, crustaceans, fish, fungi, lichens, liverworts, mammals, molluscs, mosses, moths, reptiles and vascular plants. Of the 481, 119 occur in the Council area. From time to time the lists of Northern Ireland priority habitats and species are updated.

Further information on these habitats and species is contained in the Appendix 2 Fermanagh and Omagh District Council Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP) Audit 2014.

- 2.14** The range of priority habitats and species listed through the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy will be protected from development and proposals that could harm their integrity, continuity, links or ecological relationships.

- 2.15** The most common form of conserving biodiversity is designation, protection and management of the best sites of nature conservation importance. While areas of international and national nature conservation importance are already protected from development through other statutory designations, conservation of biodiversity is enhanced through the Plan by designating **Sites of Local Nature Conservation Importance (SLNCIs)**.

- 2.16** In addition to the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy, LDPs should also have regard to any Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAPs) which have been prepared for the district council area. LBAPs aim to conserve biodiversity through local partnerships, taking into account both national and local priorities by involving local people and local organisations through practical delivery of biodiversity conservation. The Omagh and Fermanagh LBAPs were both published in 2008 and a new LBAP covering the new district council area is due for release in summer 2015. The Council's Local Biodiversity Action Plan Audit 2014 (Appendix 2) highlighted a number of significant threats to biodiversity including habitat loss and fragmentation; development; non-native invasive species; environmental crime; climate change; vandalism and insensitive management.

(d) Key Legislation for a Local Development Plan

- 2.17** Combined with the comprehensive coverage of European Directives, is a legal requirement on any planning authority to ensure that plans, programmes and projects likely to have significant effects on the

environment are made subject to an environmental assessment, prior to their approval or authorisation. Consultation with the public is a key feature of environmental assessment procedures. The level of environmental assessment is proportionate to the scale of the plan, programme or project proposed.

- 2.18** The Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 now places a statutory duty on those planning authorities producing a LDP to undertake a **Sustainability Appraisal (SA)**. This incorporates the principles of sustainable development when preparing such plans and assesses not just the potential environmental impacts of the plan but any economic and social impacts as well.
- 2.19** To assess the environmental implications, the SA will incorporate a **Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)**. European Directive 2001/42/EC 'on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment', commonly referred to as the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Directive, is transposed into Northern Ireland law by the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations (NI) 2004 (EAPP (NI) 2004). The objective of SEA is to provide for a high level of protection of the environment and to contribute to the integration of environmental consideration into the preparation and adoption of plans and programmes with a view to promoting sustainable development.
- 2.20** SEA must be carried out in conjunction with, and parallel to, the development of any plan and integrated with the plan process. Under the provisions of the SEA Directive and the Regulations, an Environmental Report is published with the draft plan and must be taken into account before the adoption of the LDP.
- 2.21** Under the provisions of the **Habitats Regulations**, plan-making authorities are required to undertake an **Appropriate Assessment** for any development plan (or development proposal) which either individually, or in combination with other plans or projects, is likely to significantly affect a European Site such as a SPA or SAC.
- 2.22** The purpose of an Appropriate Assessment is to assess the impacts of a land-use plan against the conservation objectives of a European site. The purpose of an appropriate assessment is to ascertain whether the plan is likely to adversely affect site integrity. Where significant negative effects are identified, alternative options should be examined to avoid any potentially damaging effects.
- 2.23** The Shared Environmental Service (Mid & East Antrim Borough Council) will provide advice to the Council to support the preparation of Local Development Plans and will carry out Habitats Regulations Assessments of these plans. However, the undertaking of SA incorporating a Strategic Environmental Assessment, will be the responsibility of the Council.

3.0 THE ENVIRONMENTAL ASSETS OF FERMANAGH AND OMAGH

3.1 Our Council area is one rich in built, natural and landscape heritage. Development at whatever scale has the potential to adversely impact on our environment. There is therefore a significant responsibility on all involved in the planning process to ensure that any potential environmental impacts, whatever their scale, are identified to enable effects to be considered, avoided or mitigated.

3.2 As the planning authority, we must pursue our economic and social priorities while simultaneously being aware of our legislative obligations in relation to our environmental assets. Therefore, in this section, we have provided a summary of the built, natural and landscape assets which pertain to Fermanagh and Omagh.

Archaeological and Built Heritage Features within our Council Area

3.3 Our council area contains:

- 19 State Care Monuments
- 410 Scheduled Monuments
- 2455 Unscheduled Monuments
- 16 Historic Parks, Gardens and Demesnes
- 674 Listed Buildings
- 3 Conservation Areas
- 18 Areas of Townscape Character or Village Character
- 235 Local Landscape Policy Areas (LLPAs)
- 2 Areas of Significant Archaeological Interest
- 3 Areas of Archaeological Potential

It should be noted that there are no Areas of Townscape Character or Local Landscape Policy Areas designated in the Omagh Area Plan 2002 as these types of designations were introduced after that plan was adopted. However, the Omagh Area Plan did designate a small number of Landscape Policy Areas based on areas of especially high amenity or local significance such as dominant hill tops or ridges, and areas of woodland or river banks. These are distributed across the four towns and three of the villages. As part of the plan preparation process, all existing LLPA and LPA designations will be reviewed and any additional LLPAs identified. Any additional ATCs will also be identified.

Nature Conservation Designated Sites within our Council Area

3.4 Our council area contains:

- 8 RAMSAR sites
- 20 Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)
- 3 Special Protected Areas (SPAs)

- 117 ASSI's
- 17 National Nature Reserves
- 1 Local Nature Reserve

Further details of the above archaeological, built and natural heritage features can be found in Appendix 3 and Maps 4A to 4C of Appendix 4. All current environmental designations are available on the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) website www.doeni.gov.uk/niea

Landscape Character within our Council Area

- 3.5** Our Council landscape provides a rich resource of productive agricultural land, settlement sites for nature conservation and archaeological and historical features and remains which illustrate ways in which the land has provided for human occupation and activity in the past. It also provides for many recreational needs and has the potential to become an increasingly important tourist asset.
- 3.6** Landscapes of national importance have merited designations as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). A significant part of the Sperrin AONB (designated 2008) lies within the District. The purpose of designation is to protect and conserve the scenic qualities of the area and promote their enjoyment.
- 3.7** All of the NI landscape has been classified by the Northern Ireland Landscape Character Assessment 2000 (NILCA 2000). This uses accepted systematic methods of landscape character assessment. The NI landscape has been subdivided into 130 different landscape character areas, each with a distinctive character, based upon local patterns of geology, land form, land use, cultural and ecological features. The Fermanagh and Omagh District contains 26 Landscape Character Areas, some of which are shared with neighbouring districts (see Map 4E, Appendix 4). It is recognised that some types of landscapes have a greater ability to absorb development than others. This will be examined in more detail in a later paper as part of the rural development pressure analysis. On 28th April 2015, NIEA published for consultation a draft Northern Ireland Regional Landscape Character Assessment (NIRLCA) which covers 26 regional landscape character areas. This will form a framework for updating of local-scale assessments that could replace the NILCA 2000.
- 3.8** The district's landscapes include part of the Sperrin Mountains which form a backdrop to much of the district in the north east, the mountain valleys of the Glenelly and Owenkillew rivers lying below an expanse of open moorland, the Strule Valley, numerous drumlin features, the scenic and valued resource of the Lakelands, dramatic cliffs and mountains such as Cuilcagh, lowlands such as Arney, Garrison and

Camowen Valley, areas of lowland raised bog and rolling farmland. There is a particular remoteness and a wilderness element to many of these portions of the District.

- 3.9** The Northern Ireland Character Assessment 2000 (NILCA) also identified **Areas of Scenic Quality** and defined them as landscapes of regional or local importance for their scenic quality, i.e. important landscape resources in their own right, regardless of location or setting. They represent a second tier (below AONBs) in the hierarchy of landscape classifications. There are four Areas of Scenic Quality in the district located at Bessy Bell, Lough Melvin, Derrin Mountain and Colebrooke Estate. The landscape assessment as provided by the NILCA series will, in conjunction with the pressure analysis, help to identify areas of landscape that are particularly vulnerable to any development and which are of high scenic value with the view to designating them as Special Countryside Areas (see below).
- 3.10** The district has the distinction of having the first UNESCO European Geopark in the United Kingdom and Ireland when the Marble Arch Caves Global Geo-Park was designated in 2001. It also carries the distinction of being the world's first International Global Geopark, since the inclusion of an extension to the park to incorporate parts of west Cavan at a joint meeting of UNESCO and the European Geopark Network in September 2008 (See Map 4D, Appendix 4).

Special Countryside Areas

- 3.11** The Islands Countryside Policy Area as identified in the Fermanagh Area Plan 2007 changed in title to Special Countryside Area (SCA) following the introduction of PPS 21. SCAs are regarded as exceptional landscapes such as mountains, stretches of the coast or lough shores and certain views or vistas. The quality of the landscape and unique amenity value is such that development should only be permitted in exceptional circumstances. As part of the Countryside Assessment, it may be necessary to identify additional areas and designate them as SCAs with local policies brought forward to protect their unique qualities.
- 3.12** The council area also contains a wealth of remains of industrial heritage, all of which are reminders of economic development in the area. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency record and update data containing industrial heritage. Industrial heritage sites would include former mills, factories, bridges and railway fixtures. The Ulster Canal which runs from Fermanagh through Counties Monaghan and Armagh constitutes an important industrial heritage feature. The Fermanagh Area Plan (FAP) 2007 seeks to protect the Ulster Canal

from any development which could prejudice its future development or restoration.

Areas of Constraint on Mineral Development

- 3.13** Due to their nature, scale, location and duration of operation, mineral developments often impact more severely on the environment than other forms of development. They may damage or destroy nature conservation sites and structures and remains of historic and archaeological interest that are of importance. The special landscapes of Fermanagh contain areas which require protection from the effects of further mineral extraction. The FAP therefore identified Areas of Constraint on Mineral Development (ACMDs) to safeguard the most valuable and vulnerable areas from such detrimental development. Their identification takes account of nature conservation interest, the man-made heritage, scenic quality and visual prominence, amenity value and geological interest.

Loughs and Rivers

- 3.14** The district contains the second-largest lake system in Northern Ireland and the fourth largest in Ireland. The lakes that compose Lough Erne are widened sections of the River Erne which rises in the Republic of Ireland and flows north-westerly before draining into Donegal Bay at Kildoney Point. Upper Lough Erne is an SAC and SPA and many of its tributaries including Colebrook, Tempo and Swanlinbar are designated Salmonid under the Freshwater Fish Directive.
- 3.15** A small portion of Lough Melvin lies in the north west of the district and it supports important fish populations including Arctic charr, Atlantic salmon and three distinct sub-species of trout – sonaghen, gillaroo and ferox.
- 3.16** The River Strule is the upper main spine of the Foyle catchment, originating in Omagh at the confluence of the Camowen and Drumragh rivers. It is fed by two major tributaries, the Owenkillew River located north of Gortin, and the Fairy Water, north west of Omagh. The Rivers Strule and Camowen along with Owenreagh, Quiggery and the Fairy Water are of international importance for Atlantic Salmon, along with other important fish species such as Sea Trout, Brown trout, European Eel, Pike and Perch.

4.0 Conclusions and Recommendation

- 4.1** This paper has described the range of environmental assets, both built and natural which are to be found within our council area. It has also set out the statutory obligations which a local authority must meet when

preparing a local development plan. The local development plan will need to balance development with the protection of the environmental assets already identified at international, national and regional level. There are also many sites which are currently not identified and are of local importance. Therefore, in the process of preparing the LDP, sites of local nature conservation importance, areas of archaeological potential, local landscape policy areas and areas of townscape character will be identified. It will also bring forward policies or proposals for the protection, conservation and enhancement of the natural and built heritage.

- 4.2** It is recommended that the Planning Committee notes this summary and the legal requirements for the protection of the various assets as part of the plan preparation process.