



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

Local Development Plan 2030 Draft Plan Strategy

Addendum to Sustaining Rural Communities

January 2020

Background Paper to Dispersed Rural Communities and Rural Community Areas

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 At the special R&C meeting on the 22nd October 2019 Members sought additional workshops be held in relation to a number of issues including the Settlement Hierarchy, existing Dispersed Rural Communities (DRCs) and proposed policy RCA01 Rural Community Areas.
- 1.2 This paper contains extracts from Position Paper 16-Sustaining Rural Communities (Appendix A attached), presented to the Planning Committee in February 2016, and other papers which have been presented to Members in the course of discussions in relation to the LDP. It provides the background context to DRCs within Northern Ireland and more specifically in relation to the policy approach within FAP 2007 and why the policy for RCAs was introduced in the draft Plan Strategy.

2.0 Regional Planning Policy Context

- 2.1 The Regional Policy Context is provided by the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) 2035 and the Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland (SPPS): Planning for Sustainable Development.

The Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS)

- 2.2 For the purposes of the SPPS the countryside is defined as land lying outside of settlement limits as defined in Local Development Plans. It is important to differentiate between 'the countryside' in the context of Local Development Plans and 'rural areas' as understood in the RDS and Rural Development Programme.
- 2.3 The SPPS reiterates that the RDS recognises that to sustain rural communities, new development and employment opportunities are required which respect local, social and environmental circumstances of the countryside. It directs that policy approaches to new development in the countryside should therefore reflect the differences within the region, be sensitive to environmental issues including the ability of settlements and landscapes to absorb development. The role and function of rural settlements and accessibility to services and infrastructure is an important consideration. DRCs are not provided for within the SPPS.

3.0 The Origin and Purpose of Dispersed Rural Communities in Northern Ireland

The Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland (PSRNI)

- 3.1 The concept of DRCs was first introduced into policy in Northern Ireland in the Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland (PSRNI) in 1993. It recognised that the opposing pressures of the continued development of a dispersed rural pattern were at odds with the need to reduce costs of providing services to the community. SP 5 Dispersed Rural Communities sought to identify and

designate dispersed communities in certain rural areas and establish criteria for their future development. It sought to identify those areas displaying symptoms of economic and social disadvantage containing communities with a strong sense of identity. In order to promote rural regeneration, Planning Service would, in consultation with District Councils and the Department of Agriculture, identify and designate such communities in development plans.

- 3.2 As set out under Policy HOU 7 (Housing in Dispersed Rural Communities) in PSRNI, criteria for the identification of a dispersed rural community included:
- association with a traditional focal point with a physical sense of place and convincing evidence of local community activity serving a wide rural area (e.g. a church, school, community centre or sports club),
 - other facilities or services, such as a shop, public house or sewage treatment works;
 - a strong community identity.

DRCs would provide a location for single houses or small groups of houses (no more than 6), associated with the existing settlement pattern. The PSRNI gave discretion for the identification and designation of a DRC in the development plan. In the absence of such a designation, the PSRNI did not apply.

Dispersed Rural Communities in the Fermanagh Area Plan 2007

- 3.3 The Fermanagh Area Plan 2007 (FAP 2007) identified and designated 11 Dispersed Rural Communities. The intention in designating the DRCs was to promote rural regeneration and to provide scope for some additional residential development either at the focal points or in the surrounding townlands. Designation would also allow flexibility for small scale enterprise schemes. Within these areas, it was accepted that the rural character and traditional settlement pattern was one of individual houses scattered throughout the countryside together with clustering around one of more focal points. Therefore, the FAP policy S5 draws a distinction between potential for consolidation of existing focal points and secondly, the scope for additional dwellings in the wider area subject to the constraints of avoiding (1) alteration of the particular rural character of the DRC, and (2) the creation of a build-up of development. The DRCs vary in size with Boho being the largest, and Aghakillymaud and Knocks amongst the smaller areas.
- 3.4 Within DRCs, favourable consideration would be given to: -
- individual dwellings;
 - small groups of up to 6 houses located at one of the existing focal points;
 - a small shop to meet the needs of the local community;
 - small scale appropriately designed industrial or tourism enterprises on suitable sites.

In common with the PSRNI policy, DRCs would not be defined by limits of development, in order to maintain their dispersed rural character.

- 3.5 Proposals for all new development in DRCs were to comply with the policies of the FAP and strategic and regional planning policies. The policy context for assessing planning applications for development within DRCs changed over time. However, the core principle through the PSRNI, the FAP 2007 and PPS 21 was to enable rural regeneration. With the introduction of PPS 21, Policy CTY 2 reflected a similar provision to the FAP policy in regard to small groups of houses, appropriate economic development enterprises and new social or community facilities. Proposals for individual dwellings or social/affordable housing schemes in DRCS would be assessed against other provisions of PPS 21. An examination of planning approvals in the DRCs indicates that the majority of planning approvals have been for single houses with only a small number of applications relating to business/commercial development or small groups of houses.

4.0 The Settlement Pattern of Our Rural Area

- 4.1 The traditional rural settlement pattern of the Fermanagh and Omagh area (outside of the two main towns) is dispersed in nature comprising a small number of local or small towns, a large number of villages and small settlements (see Table 1) alongside numerous, scattered single houses in the countryside, many of which are linked to family members wishing to remain on, or close to, the home farm.

Table 1: Breakdown of settlement type by Fermanagh and Omagh Area Plans.

Settlement Type	Fermanagh Area Plan	Omagh Area Plan	LDP Settlement Hierarchy
Main Town	1	1	2
Local Town	2	3	5
Village	39	9	29
Small Settlement/Hamlets	0	24	44
Total Number	42	37	79

- 4.2 Whilst recognising that many of the designated small towns, villages and small settlements have significantly reduced service provision in recent years, it is as a result of the geographical spread of settlements across the Fermanagh and Omagh District that most parts of the countryside are within a reasonable travel distance of basic services such as a local shop.

5.0 Sustaining Our Rural Communities – Rural Community Areas

- 5.1 It is recognised that sustaining rural communities goes beyond access to services, such as a local shop or bank in a village. Instead, facilities which enable a rural community to gather and interact are equally important. Such a facility has a sense of community and place and is at the core of the community. These facilities are an important part of the fabric of the countryside and act to support rural communities through the provision of necessary community infrastructure.
- 5.2 A sustainable rural settlement pattern protects the functions of the countryside in terms of maintaining the quality and character of the rural landscape. It also means that development in the countryside should not be at a level that creates infrastructure demands which are disproportionate to the population within the rural area. However, what is key to this is the sense of belonging individuals and a community have to a place. Often, within the countryside this is a community facility such as a community hall or recreational facility.
- 5.3 For the rural communities within Fermanagh and Omagh to be sustained and to function well there is a need to maintain strong community infrastructures, such as a community hall and where a need arises, to locate new community infrastructure alongside these. Rural Community Areas (RCAs) have been taken forward within the draft Plan Strategy in response to the need to sustain rural communities outside settlements and in response to the representations received to the Preferred Options Paper and following discussions with Members at workshops in February and April 2017. As a policy approach, they share similarities to DRCs but their purpose is no longer to tackle regeneration but rather to sustain these already thriving rural communities. The emphasis is therefore in ensuring community-based facilities can still be provided, and if required, there is scope for a small-scale rural start-up project. Scope for some residential development still remains as the other policies in Housing in the Countryside would apply.
- 5.4 Therefore, from a planning perspective, RCAs are a natural successor to DRCs in meeting today's needs to sustain these rural communities. This is the main intention in bringing forward policy RCA01. The dPS did not identify RCAs on a map as it was considered that this would be done at the Local Policies Plan stage when a full assessment had been undertaken to identify potential RCAs in the district. However, the eleven Dispersed Rural Communities previously identified in the Fermanagh Area Plan 2007 will be recognised as Rural Community Areas based on their main focal points, with immediate effect upon adoption of the Plan Strategy. These areas are: Aghadrumssee; Aghakillymaud; Boho; Cashel; Coa; Cooneen;Corraney; Derrygannon; Knocks; Mullaghduin; and Mulleek.