



Local Development Plan

Implications of Covid-19 for the draft Plan Strategy

March 2021

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The spread of Covid-19 is a global health crisis like no other, with a devastating loss of life and significant economic, social and environmental impacts. As of the 10th February 2021, 11,004 people have tested positive for covid-19 in Mid Ulster. This equates to 7,459 positive tests per 100k of the population, the highest rate of any of the 11 LGD districts. At the same date, 179 people from Mid Ulster have died after testing positive for Covid-19, the fifth highest in Northern Ireland.¹
- 1.2 This short paper has been prepared to explore the long-term implications that Covid-19 will have on our Local Development Plan (LDP) and what steps the LDP can take to addressing some of the fallout from the pandemic. In mid Ulster and cross the world, people find themselves living and working in very different ways. The implications of Covid-19 on our future living patterns will last long after the pandemic has passed. Whilst it is not possible to say exactly for how long these implications will last, it is clear that people will be more fearful of future diseases and the spread of associated infection.
- 1.3 This will mean that people will want the option of socially distant living and working. It does not mean that group activities will completely stop but at the same time, people will seek the possibility of lower density experiences when it comes to living and employment and increased access to services will also be of even greater importance. Furthermore, it is also clear that ICT will have an accelerated role in our new ways of working and living.

2.0 Future Implications for Housing

- 2.1 In Northern Ireland, The Regional Development Strategy 2035 (RDS) acknowledges that housing is a key driver of physical, economic and social change and emphasises the importance of the relationship between the location of housing, jobs, facilities, services and infrastructure. The RDS sets a regional target of 60% of new housing to be located in appropriate 'brownfield' sites within the urban footprints of settlements with a population greater than 5,000 and this has been reflected in the local housing indicators included as part of the draft Plan Strategy.
- 2.2 The ongoing pandemic has brought to light a new downside to high density living, and there is an acute awareness that people may need more space. One aspect of this is the idea that rural living, which is extremely common in Mid Ulster with 40% of our households being located in the countryside, is no longer something to be viewed in a negative light.
- 2.3 Accordingly, our draft Plan Strategy will continue to support our rural communities who wish to live and raise their families in their rural communities. SPF 6 of the draft Plan Strategy states that we will accommodate development within the countryside that supports the viability and vitality of rural communities. Policy CT2 brings forward policy, which allows for a range of

¹ All figures taken from Dept Health Covid-19 Dashboard on 12/2/21

additional scenarios where dwellings in the countryside will be granted planning permission.

- 2.4 Similarly, calculations carried out in both the local housing indicators and our associated urban capacity study, have used relatively low housing densities of around 15-25 units per hectare. Therefore, our assumptions of future housing supply are lean more credibility because they are based on assumptions which do not plan for overtly high density living in Mid Ulster.

3.0 Future Implications for Economic Development and Town Centre growth

- 3.1 The pandemic has undoubtedly resulted in the concept of working from home becoming a reality for many workers across the District. This is something which is expressly recognised in our draft Plan Strategy objectives where it says that we “recognise the importance of self-employment and home working, particularly in rural locations.” Mid Ulster has a large number of self employed people and entrepreneurs and the ability of these people to work from home has been accommodated in policy ECON 2 which allows for small workshop accommodation of no more than 100 sq. metres floor space for self-employment, forming part of the existing curtilage of a dwelling.
- 3.2 Likewise, whilst we are not a destination for key office based industries in the same way as other more urban districts such as Belfast, we will still have a drive for lower density based office accommodation.
- 3.3 The main thrust of employment in Mid Ulster is undoubtedly through manufacturing and construction. The NISRA Census for Employment 2014 shows that we are well above the Northern Ireland average in terms of representation of jobs amongst these sectors. Whilst construction is certainly capable of implementing socially distant and covid secure measures, this may be more problematic in the manufacturing sector. To this end, the figure of 50 jobs per Ha. which we have used in calculating our land requirement for 8,500 jobs over the plan period is appropriate, given that it is at the lower end in terms of density (the existing average density for jobs in mid Ulster being around 65-75 jobs per Ha). Land calculations based on lower density jobs are wholly appropriate for accommodating a more socially distant working environment in the coming years
- 3.4 In terms of town centre growth, it is clear the growth of our town centres is unlikely to be based solely around comparison goods, as the already growing shift towards online retail continues due to the forced closure of retail on our high streets. Town centre growth will therefore need to be considerate of other avenues such as recreation, leisure, cultural and the night time economy. Therefore, as stated in policy RE 1, cultural, community, leisure, entertainment and business uses will be appropriate within the town centre in order to increase the vitality and viability of our town centres.

4.0 Future Implications for Transport

- 4.1 Due to the pandemic, there has been a huge demand for hospitals, and fast access to these services are so important right now. Our ambulance response/wait times and travel times to A&E services are significantly greater than the Northern Ireland average². Travel times from some parts of Mid Ulster to an A&E hospital are over 50 minutes, making the need for improved roads and infrastructure a significant priority. Therefore, it is a significant priority that we have fast access to emergency and health services in our District to ensure the health and welfare of our residents.
- 4.2 Our approach for transportation is to facilitate a strategy that suits the needs of Mid Ulster as a rural District. The main aim is to improve connectivity for both rural and urban dwellers.
- 4.3 The draft Plan Strategy will adopt a protected route policy. Safeguarding protected routes will improve connectivity between the main hubs, local towns and the rural hinterland. Rural dwellers will have two elements to their journey to hospital; the journey to the main transport network and the journey on the main transport network. A protected route policy will ensure the optimum journey time on the main transport network and this will reduce journey times to hospital services.

5.0 Conclusion

- 5.1 Our LDP, with particular emphasis on the draft Plan Strategy, can play a key role in helping to accommodate the changes to our way of life that have arisen since the onset of the covid-19 pandemic. In line with the RDS, the DPS will ensure growth is focussed on our main urban centres but will also allow for those who wish to live in traditional rural communities with lower housing densities and more distant populations, to do so. We will also bring forward planning policies to enable working from the home. There has been a very noticeable shift towards the practice of homeworking throughout the pandemic and our policies will enable it to continue throughout the plan period, as well as planning for lower density jobs in the post pandemic era.
- 5.2 The strategic aim of ensuring speedier access to urban hubs and the services that are located therein is also something that has been brought into sharp focus during the pandemic where access to health services has been so vital. Mid Ulster is a very rural district with access to services from the more remote areas being a genuine problem. Our transport strategy seeks to facilitate optimum travel times and accordingly increase access to key services for all in our community.

² <https://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/Theme.aspx?themeNumber=134>

