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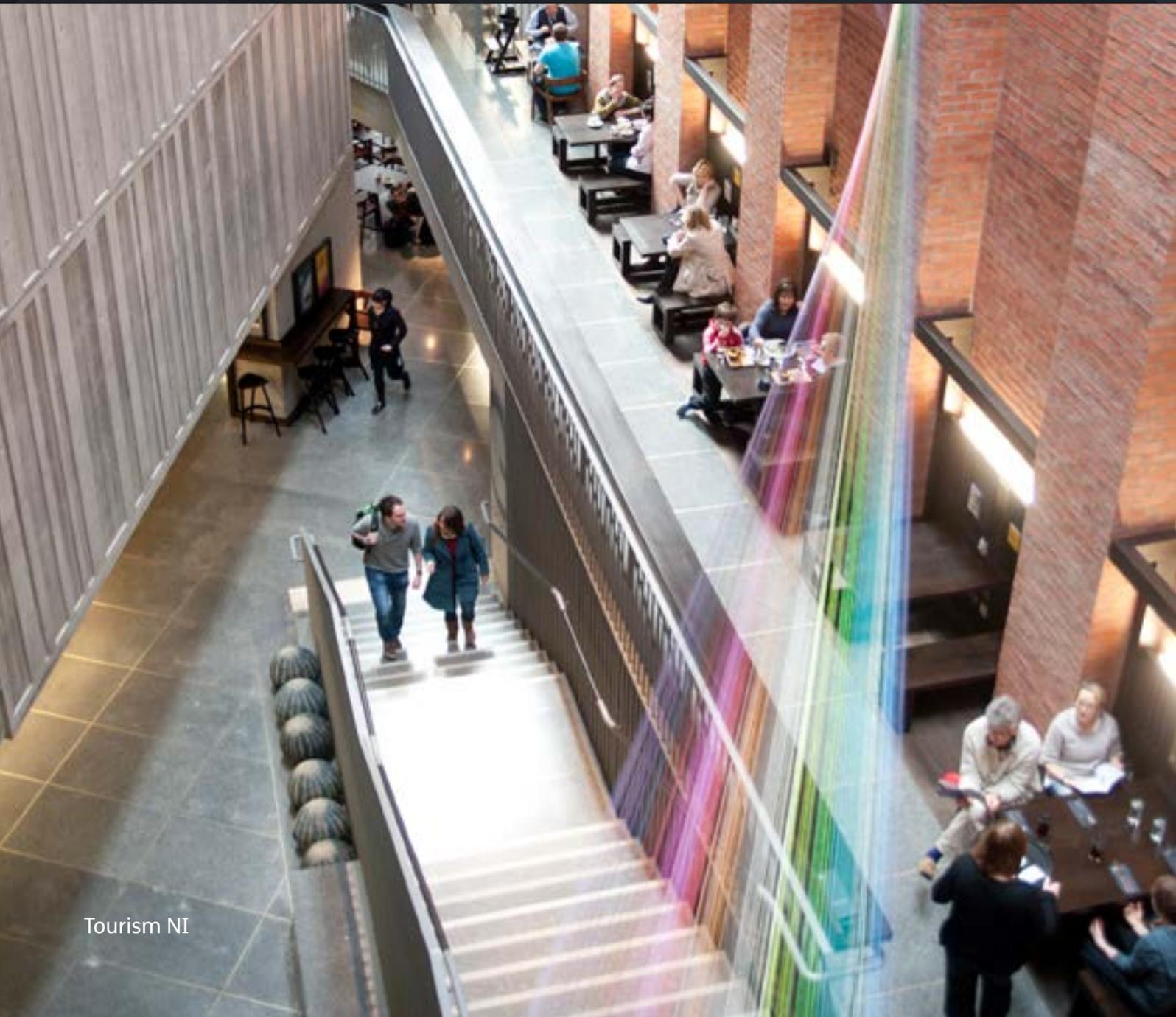
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MINISTERIAL ADVISORY GROUP
ARCHITECTURE AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Briefing and Design Reviews

January 2021





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Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at:

Email: magsecretariat@communities-ni.gov.uk

This publication is also available to download from our website at www.communities-ni.gov.uk

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Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre, Photograph by Hufton and Crow

Guide to Briefing and Design Reviews

Introduction

Decisions in respect of the commissioning and design of buildings, spaces and places have a profound and long-lasting effect on society; buildings spaces and places provide shelter and meet other requirements of accommodation and function, but they also impact on our individual and collective sense of well-being and indeed our shared opportunities for happiness - **good design is about well-being.**

Qualitative criteria in respect of buildings spaces and places can be complex and need particular expertise to assess yet the hard evidence confirms that investment in good design contributes to improved social, economic and environmental outcomes - **good design adds value.**

Cost and time dominate conversations around development but tend to ignore the very significant lifetime costs involved in all investments in the built environment. We may perceive non-essential attributes to be unaffordable but in reality, poor design may well cost more in the medium and long term - **good design is good value.**

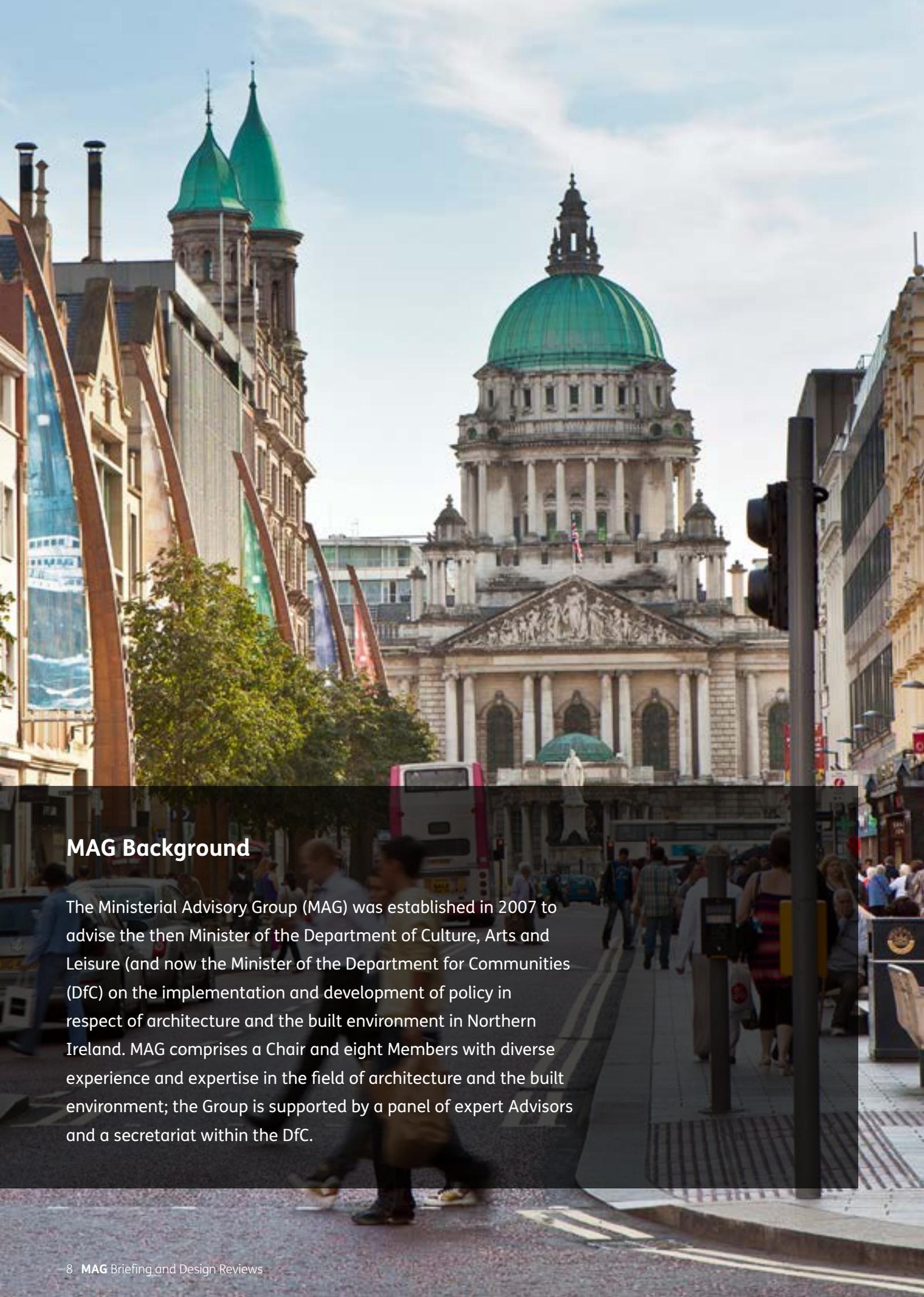
“good design is about well-being, good design adds value, good design is good value, good design is ethical.”

The places we inhabit matter - the setting for our unique and diverse cultural inheritance and our future development. We have a responsibility to future generations to make informed and equitable decisions about our heritage and resources. Good design is about the balancing of often complex and competing criteria to evolve efficient, balanced, equitable, sustainable solutions for this society - **good design is ethical.**

The Policy on Architecture and the Built Environment seeks to **ensure real value from public expenditure** by advocating excellence in design quality, promoting civic stewardship, supporting excellent briefing and associated capital investment decisions that will enhance the built environment and visual landscape thereby improving the lives of everyone in Northern Ireland now and in the future.

Our vision is that all communities in Northern Ireland would enjoy and benefit from exemplary, sustainable, and well-designed spaces, places, and buildings.





MAG Background

The Ministerial Advisory Group (MAG) was established in 2007 to advise the then Minister of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (and now the Minister of the Department for Communities (DfC) on the implementation and development of policy in respect of architecture and the built environment in Northern Ireland. MAG comprises a Chair and eight Members with diverse experience and expertise in the field of architecture and the built environment; the Group is supported by a panel of expert Advisors and a secretariat within the DfC.

MAG Vision, Objectives and Strategies

The vision is that all communities in Northern Ireland would enjoy and benefit from exemplary, sustainable, and well-designed spaces, places, and buildings; this is pursued through the following objectives:

1. Identification and promotion of best practice in the design of our urban and rural landscapes through strategic advice into spatial policy making
2. Identification and promotion of best design practice in landscape, urban, and building design, with particular reference to the climate crisis
3. Identification and promotion of procurement models that recognise the qualitative value of good design
4. Identification and promotion of best practice in design-review procedures to ensure design quality is ultimately delivered through individual design proposals
5. Identification and promotion of civic stewardship as an integrated concept ensuring the sustained viability of well-designed spaces, places, and buildings.
6. Promotion of design as a creative approach to places with widespread potential benefit for this society.

The objectives are advanced through the following strategies:

- Alliances, Collaborations and Partnerships;
- Advice;
- Briefing Workshops
- Briefing Reviews;
- Design Reviews;
- Symposia and Seminars;
- Papers;
- Toolkits;
- Networking

Design in Architecture and the Built Environment

Design is a form of creative thinking; at its simplest it might be thought of as the ambition to improve on an existing situation. Design in architecture and the built environment impacts directly on society, affecting our personal and communal sense of well-being, our use of resources, our economy, our heritage, and our sense of being of and from a place. All of us make design decisions in our daily lives but some of us have particular responsibility for the quality of design in architecture and the built environment.

“timely input of informed, independent, expertise into the initial decision making and later design process”

MAG Reviews – Briefing and Design

Briefing and Design Reviews are an established and effective way of promoting excellence in design in architecture and the built environment and have been successfully used in England (Design Council), Wales (Design Commission for Wales) and Scotland (Architecture + Design Scotland). Essentially processes of engagement, they allow for the **timely input of informed, independent, expertise into the initial decision making and later design process** in order to promote design excellence. Underlying the process is a conviction (based on evidence), that design excellence ultimately delivers tangible and sustainable value for the project’s promoters, end-users, and society; design excellence is a positive attribute, not a cost.

Briefing Reviews

All development projects evolve through cumulative decisions (one decision building on earlier decisions), so initial strategic decisions may constrain the ultimate quality and performance of built projects. The Briefing Review is the process of engagement at project inception stage which assists in the **identification of the potential within a project beyond those issues that might be immediately apparent to the project's promoters**. As such the Briefing Review is distinct from, but parallel to, the typical feasibility study and/or business plan. The Briefing Review seeks to go beyond the immediate question of viability and looks to the opportunity potential of the project in its wider sense.

The subject matter of the Briefing Review may include suitability of site, composition of skills needed in a design team, identification of stakeholders and potential synergies and a framing of relevant criteria by which the project might be assessed beyond immediate functionality– in other words where real value might be in the project.

Briefing Workshops

MAG has found that the earliest strategic decisions such as setting a project's aims, considering its location, establishing the brief and commissioning consultants often have a profound impact on the urban or rural environment and on the community that the development is being created to serve. The briefing workshops that take place early in the process can, therefore, take into account the wider social, economic and environmental context and help set the strategic ambition for a project.

A briefing review held at the early stage of the project can be informal and workshop-like. It is usually a ‘round-the-table’ conversation, with drawings and sketches laid out and discussed among the parties to the review. It is often the case that looking beyond the ‘red line’ of the site boundary to the broader context, and encouraging collaboration between stakeholders at an early stage, is in everyone’s interest. The importance of the role of designers and spatial thinkers, particularly at this early stage, is increasingly being understood and appreciated. By the time a project has been developed to the level of a planning application, the opportunity to modify proposals is more limited.

“The importance of the role of designers and spatial thinkers, particularly at this early stage, is increasingly being understood and appreciated”

Design Reviews

Design is a complex collaborative process involving competing criteria, functionality, aesthetics, problem solving through synergies, matching of time and resources, all to be creatively resolved into a holistic integrated proposal. While check lists are useful and have their place, good design is more than the sum of individually acceptable decisions. The Design Review is a collaborative **non-adversarial platform which supports the design process through timely expert independent inputs**. These inputs will constructively challenge assumptions and identify further potential within design strategies.



Design Responsibilities

The primary design responsibility rests with the appointed design team who must have the appropriate skills and talents to deliver integrated holistic design solutions that synthesise often competing criteria. This is a skilful, increasingly complex, and essentially creative task, whereby successful built outcomes are only possible through meaningful client and stakeholder involvement, coordinated by the design team leader.

It is the client/promoter's responsibility to appoint a competent design team; it is the design team responsibility to appropriately support and resource the design and management of the project. The Briefing and Design Review process does not replace or duplicate this professional responsibility, rather it provides an independent platform to give assurance to all parties that the potential for design excellence within a project has been recognised and grasped.

Status of Design Reviews

The Briefing and Design Review process provided by MAG has no statutory status within the planning process. The process and consequent advice are advisory, expert, independent, and consistent with **Architecture and the Built Environment for NI Policy**, in respect of design the Architecture and Built Environment Policy for NI, and are based on UK and international best practice. The MAG report will be restricted to the Project Team for their consideration. MAG will not place this report in the public domain or copy to Planning Officials. However, when a project is referred to MAG for Design Review by the Planning Authority, they may decide to treat the report as a material consideration.

Initiators of Briefing and Design Reviews

Projects may be referred to MAG for consideration by:

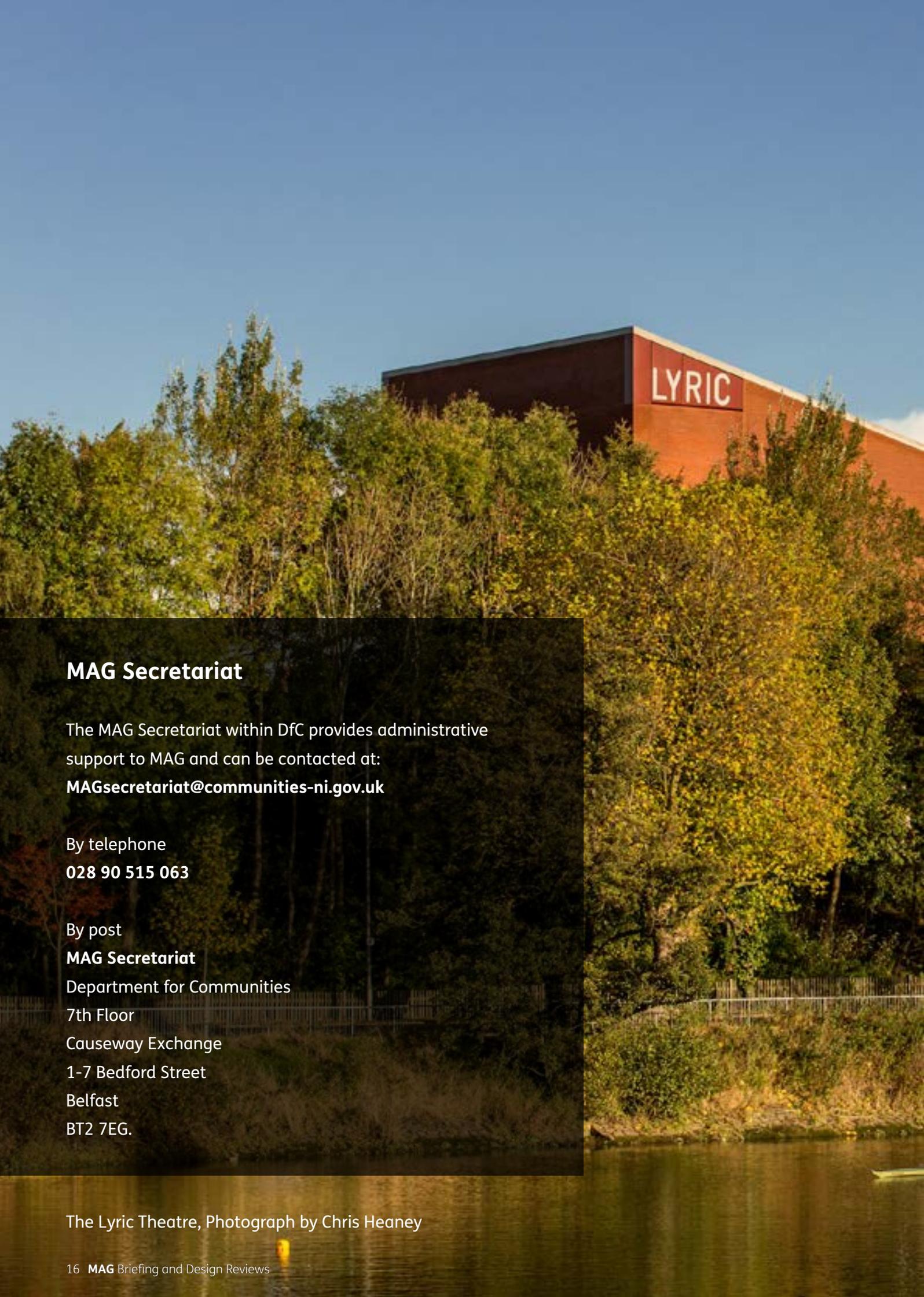
- Developers / Promoters / Project Teams
- Design Teams
- The Planning Authority within the District Councils
- The Planning Authority within the Department for Infrastructure.

Additionally, planning authority staff involved in pre-application discussions with project teams may encourage engagement directly with MAG when the application stage is reached.

Conduct of Reviews

The Reviews are chaired by a MAG Member or Advisor, generally following the procedures outlined in the Procedures section of this document; the conduct is professional and constructive. Attendees will vary depending on the nature (Briefing Review, Briefing Workshop, or Design Review) and the stage of the project but typically include the promoter and the design team; Planning Officials from the Councils and representatives from DfI also attend where the Review is sought by the planning authority. A written report summarising the views and recommendations of the panel is completed by the Design Review Chair and issued to the client after the review.

Briefing Workshops are collaborative occasions distinct from the presentation and response format of the Briefing and Design Reviews; a less formal procedure will apply where the parameters of the project are evolving. In these instances, MAG recommends an initial informal conversation to tease out an appropriate procedure, attendances, useful documentation, and the timing of a site visit.



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MAG Secretariat

The MAG Secretariat within DfC provides administrative support to MAG and can be contacted at:

MAGsecretariat@communities-ni.gov.uk

By telephone

028 90 515 063

By post

MAG Secretariat

Department for Communities

7th Floor

Causeway Exchange

1-7 Bedford Street

Belfast

BT2 7EG.

The Lyric Theatre, Photograph by Chris Heaney



Review Procedures

Application and Registration

Development involves significant resources, one of which is time. Hence MAG, its Secretariat and panel will respond promptly to applications for Reviews. Applications should be submitted using the standard form which is available from the attached link [Ministerial Advisory Group Design Review Application | Department for Communities \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](#). MAG will assess the application and advise project teams of the presentation requirements for the review. In the event of MAG declining to review a project, it will advise the applicant giving its reasons.

Required Documentation

Documentation is required one week in advance of the Review to enable the MAG review panel to understand and consider the scheme and its context in advance of the meeting. This informs MAG's site visit and facilitates the later constructive and detailed discussion at the Review. The material and information provided will reflect the stage of development of the project; MAG understands that design proposals may remain fluid and subject to change. The material should be concise but sufficient to allow for a full understanding and assessment of the scheme and should include:

- Promoter's briefing statement/documents, relevant feasibility studies, i.e. that which positions the project within the promoter's strategic vision

- Drawings, model photographs, and other information sufficient to illustrate the existing physical context, development potential, and proposals and in a suitable digital format and resolution to allow panel members to prepare for the review
- The names, positions and disciplines of the Project Team attending.

To support the Review the following hardcopy material will be required by noon of the working day preceding the Review meeting:

- A1 size drawings (not boards) - sufficient to illustrate the existing physical context, development potential, and proposals. These will be pinned to display stands in the meeting room to be used by both the Project Team and the Design Review Panel during the design review meeting. Unless otherwise advised, these should be delivered to: Causeway Exchange, 1-7 Bedford St, Belfast, BT2 7EG.
- Drawings are the preferred presentation medium. However, if the Project Team wishes to use a PowerPoint presentation in addition to drawings, they should so advise in advance.

In respect of Design Reviews MAG anticipates creative, coherent and holistic proposals from design teams that indicate a potential to synthesise the (often competing) issues and criteria particular to the project. The level of resolution within a proposal presented for Design Review is a function of where the project is in its evolution; in general terms the range of issues MAG would typically foresee include (but are not limited to) the following:

(1) Site Analysis

- The Built and Natural Context
 - Site location, land-use, connectivity and linkages with adjoining areas, physical form, the built and natural heritage

- Development Constraints and Opportunities
 - The key characteristics of the site and adjoining areas, which could enhance or restrict development, for example adjoining land containing conservation areas, areas of townscape or other distinctive character, listed and historic buildings, archaeology, natural or wildlife habitats.
- The Planning Context
 - Strategic development plans in the wider area affecting the development area.

(2) Design Drivers

The design brief, aspirations and vision in relation to the following:

- Spatial planning and Place-making;
- Built and Natural Heritage;
- Sustainable development including response to climate change;

In particular the client / project team's approach to:

- Natural features such as waterways;
- Protection of the natural heritage and wildlife habitats;
- Mixed use and density;
- Street pattern and hierarchy;
- Legibility and permeability within the development and connections to the wider area;
- Shared and private space;
- Pedestrian and vehicular movement within the site;
- Energy generation, water conservation and alternative modes of transport;
- Heights and massing of buildings, public open and green space;
- Character and interconnection of spaces between buildings;
- Treatment of car parking; and
- Activity, vibrancy, public realm and amenity areas

As design concepts emerge the MAG panel will be interested in:

(3) Option Appraisal

An explanation of how a preferred proposal evolved in response to the site analysis and constraints and opportunities, and the key design drivers.

Later as design approach is firmed up the MAG panel will be interested in the:

(4) Development Standards

The design principles and quality standards controlling new construction relating to:

- The built form, (aesthetics, height, mass, skyline, materials etc),
- Amenity areas, spaces between buildings, landscape, public realm,
- Energy, water and waste; and transport

(5) Good Design is Holistic

Design excellence (as distinct from adequacy and compliance) results in a coherent integrated proposal synthesizing spatial, material, and architectural strategies; spatial as distinct from the purely organisational, material as in the tactile, architectural as in form, shape, massing, and cultural artefact.

MAG supports ambitions for design excellence in architecture and the built environment and appreciates that design is an iterative, non-linear process rather than the sum of individual optimisations. The ambition for design excellence requires a shared purpose involving critical design team leadership, an enlightened client/promoter, an engaged design team, and ultimately a committed construction team.



Photograph by Urban Villages Initiative



Review Attendees

- The Project Team
- The MAG Review Panel
- Planning Officials (Only in attendance if application made from Planning Officials)
- MAG Secretariat

The project team should be represented by the design team leader and other relevant design team members including architects, landscape architects and urban designers, and the client/project promoter. The MAG design and briefing review panel will be multi-disciplinary and comprises MAG members and / or experts drawn from the call-off list of Expert Advisors. The aim is to select the most appropriate panel for each project to be reviewed, matching the experience of MAG members with issues relating to each project, and taking account of the following:

- The particular expertise which a panel member could bring to the evaluation;
- Any real or perceived conflict of interest which prospective panel members declare with the project being evaluated;
- Any acquaintance with the presenting team which may be a barrier to complete openness and expression of opinion;
- Prospective panel members' availability.

Normally a panel of 3 members plus chair is required for any one panel meeting. Panel members are required to be completely independent of and unconnected to the project's promoters and decision makers.

Where projects are referred to MAG by a planning department, the officials will be encouraged to attend design review meetings as observers. They do not contribute to the presentations or discussions but occasionally may be invited to provide factual clarification. DfC has robust protocols for observers that apply for all projects, especially where teams have requested confidential, pre-planning application consultation. However, at the discretion and subsequent agreement of the MAG panel chair and the Project Team Leader, other independent observers may attend the Design Review. Members of the general public are not present at Design Review meetings and no third party representations can be made.

The Review Itself

MAG will endeavour to complete its evaluation within the space of 1 to 1½ hours depending on the complexity of the project. Review panel members being experienced practitioners focus quickly on issues raised by the proposals.

The conduct of the review is based initially on the model developed by the Design Council and adapted by Design Commission for Wales (DCfW) and Architecture and Design Scotland (A+DS) and later modified by MAG following experience gained from reviewing projects in Northern Ireland.

- The Chair of the Review Panel welcomes the Project Team and introduces the Review Panel and Observers. (2-3mins max)
- The Project Team introduce the project. They present in outline, the motivation and design development considerations that led to the design outcome.
 - Where appropriate the project promoter outlines the

project commissioning and the brief, aims and objectives
- no longer than 2-3 minutes - before handing over to the architect or designer.

- Presentations are likely to be more effective if made by the lead designers (maximum 3 persons).
 - The Project Team will be encouraged to provide option appraisal diagrams or similar to illustrate the *raison d'être* which informed the outcome.
 - The presentation should take about 15 minutes.
-
- The Chair invites Review Panel members to ask questions of clarification and to seek further information with specific reference to the stated intentions of the project and the presentation material.
 - The presenting team responds to each point of clarification with further discussion. The panel members refrain from making judgements or comments but may as part of the discussion pursue their inquiry further.
 - The Chair guides the discussion to ensure that there is a productive exchange and further understanding of the proposals. This section of the Design Review will be afforded 20 minutes.
 - The Chair invites each of the panel members to give their views on the merits, opportunities and aspects of the proposals that would benefit from further development. Individual members address the salient issues that are relevant to their expertise.
 - The Chair summarises the panel members' comments and introduces or elaborates any points that seem to the chair to be of particular importance.
 - In the case of a workshop for a project in its early stages, the panel response will be in a discussion format and individual members will not be asked to make final comments. The chair will provide a closing summary of the discussion.
 - Occasionally, the Project Team may be asked by the chair to leave the room for a few moments while the Design Review

Panel discusses and agrees a summary of comments which will form the basis of the Design Review Report. The Project Team is then invited back into the room. The Panel Chair delivers the summary.

- After the Review concludes, the Review Panel Chair writes the Report which will be formally issued by MAG Secretariat on behalf of the Review Panel Chair who has final editorial responsibility for its content.

Return of Presentation Material

Project Teams will be notified when material they submitted can be collected. Usually, drawings can be taken away immediately after the Review. Occasionally MAG may request permission to retain certain material.

Review Feedback

The written report, summarising the view and recommendations of the panel, will normally be issued within 14 working days of the meeting. This response will constitute the view and advice of the MAG review chair and panel. The report will be issued to the primary contact for distribution to all those who attended the meeting.

If the scheme is referred to MAG by Planning Officials only then will the report be issued to the Planning Authorities of the District Council or the DfI as appropriate and copied to the agreed contact within the project team for information.

When a project is referred to MAG for Design Review by the Planning Authority, the Review Panel's response recorded in the report will be treated as a material consideration, to

be weighed by the case officer in conjunction with other considerations. In all other cases the MAG report will be restricted to the Project Team and the MAG panel will comply with the Project Team's wishes concerning the distribution of the report. It will not be placed in the public domain or copied to the Planning Officials.

While the report will be classed as 'Restricted' DfC will consider whether disclosure should take place in response to any Freedom of Information requests or Environmental Information Requests. Where appropriate, DfC will consult the MAG before finalising its decision on disclosure.

Subsequent Reviews and Follow Up

MAG may offer further advice or a further review of any scheme, which is subsequently revised in response to MAG's advice. If a scheme is submitted for a subsequent MAG review, wherever possible, panel members from the first meeting will attend in order to offer consistency of advice. Evidence exists that a pattern of early and subsequent reviews has resulted in better outcomes.

DfC wishes to ensure that its advice on the commissioning, briefing and design of schemes is of maximum value to everyone it works with, and therefore a DfC official from the MAG Secretariat will contact the Project Teams who have recently taken part in a Review to invite their views on its effectiveness and how it could be improved.



“MAG Supports ambitions for design excellence in architecture and the build environment and appreciates that design is an iterative, non-linear process rather than the sum of individual optimisations.”

Diagram of Review Process



Invitation to Submit Commissioning / Briefing / Design Proposals

1. EMAIL on behalf of the Chair of MAG

<Date>

Dear

Invitation to Submit Commissioning / Briefing / Design Proposals to MAG for Advice
Research has indicated that early and continuing Design and Briefing Review is one of the most effective and efficient ways to improve the quality of places for people and to embed the principles of equality, social inclusion and the relief of impoverishment, which are fundamental aspects of humanity.

The prospect of review by one's peers raises expectations and ambition in the commissioning, briefing and design of places. It also promotes learning by actively encouraging excellence in the continuing stewardship of places, thereby creating knowledge, and honing skills in their management and use which feed directly into better briefing for designers and better outcomes, further developing the very stewardship which started the virtuous circle.

MAG is the Ministerial Advisory Group which advises on the architecture and the built environment policy for NI. MAG wishes to comment on the scheme and invites you to present your proposals to a design and briefing review panel which it chairs.

Please contact the MAG Secretariat at your earliest convenience to discuss further and arrange a suitable date (telephone 02890 515026 or 02890 515034). A draft timetable and request for information will subsequently be issued. If you have any questions regarding the design and briefing review process that you wish to discuss prior to meeting, the MAG Secretariat will endeavour to provide a satisfactory answer.

Yours sincerely

MAG Chair

Reference Precedents and Sources of Further Information

Architecture and Built Environment Policy for NI

<https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/pgn-0218-design-quality-government-construction-procurements>

<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/strategic-planning-policy-statement>

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