Infill and gap sites in the Northern Ireland countryside

A plain-English guide for landowners, buyers and families: what counts as an infill or gap site, how councils apply the tests, how to measure a frontage, and what to check before you buy or apply.

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Gap sites | Ribbon development | Countryside housing | All 11 councils

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THE SHORT ANSWER

A small gap in a built-up row of buildings, for no more than two houses.

In planning terms, an infill or gap site in the Northern Ireland countryside is a small gap within an otherwise substantial and continuously built-up road frontage, big enough for a maximum of two houses. New buildings that create or add to a ribbon of development are normally refused, but this kind of small gap is an exception.[1] A space between two houses is **not** automatically an infill site. Many gaps are meant to stay open, and many apparent gap sites do not meet the tests.

Who this guide is for

- Landowners with a gap between houses along a road or lane.
- Buyers considering a roadside site in the countryside.
- Families hoping to build beside existing relatives' homes.
- Anyone who has been told a site is "an infill" and wants to check.

Three things to know up front

- **The policy starts with a refusal.** Ribbon development is refused; infill is a narrow exception to that rule.[1]
- **Your council matters.** Six councils have adopted their own Plan Strategy; the other five still use PPS 21.[2,3]
- **Measure before you buy.** Count the buildings and compare the gap with the plot widths along the road.

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Please note: this guide is general guidance, not legal advice, and it does not replace advice on your own site. It reflects legislation, policy and council positions as we found them in November 2026. Every application is decided by the council on its own merits. Numbered references point to the sources on page 10.

SECTION 1 · THE POLICY

What counts as an infill or gap site?

Where PPS 21 (Sustainable Development in the Countryside) applies, the relevant policy is **Policy CTY 8, Ribbon Development**. Policy CTY 1 lists it as one of the cases in which an individual house in the countryside can be acceptable: "the development of a small gap site within an otherwise substantial and continuously built up frontage in accordance with Policy CTY 8".[1]

> "Planning permission will be refused for a building which creates or adds to a ribbon of development. An exception will be permitted for the development of a small gap site sufficient only to accommodate up to a maximum of two houses within an otherwise substantial and continuously built up frontage and provided this respects the existing development pattern along the frontage in terms of size, scale, siting and plot size and meets other planning and environmental requirements." PPS 21, Policy CTY 8[1]

The policy adds that a substantial and built-up frontage **includes a line of three or more buildings along a road frontage without accompanying development to the rear**. The supporting text explains that a road frontage includes a footpath or a private lane.[1]

Why ribbon development is resisted. PPS 21 says ribbon development is detrimental to the character, appearance and amenity of the countryside. It creates a built-up appearance along roads and lanes, can sterilise back-land, can make access to farmland difficult and can cause road safety problems. A ribbon does not need a neat building line: buildings set back, staggered or at angles, with gaps between them, can still be a ribbon if they share a common frontage or are visually linked.[1]

PPS 21 also recognises that many frontages have gaps between houses that provide relief and visual breaks and help maintain rural character. Those gaps are not meant to be filled. That is why the gap must be **small**, and the frontage either side **substantial and continuous**.[1]

More likely to fit the policy

- A row of houses along a road with one plot-sized gap
- A gap no wider than about two of the plots either side
- New plots matching the neighbours in size and siting

Grey area: get advice

- Frontages made up partly of sheds or outbuildings
- Buildings set well back from the road
- A lane or field gate breaking the row

Unlikely to fit the policy

- Only two buildings fronting the road
- A gap that could take three or more plots
- A site at the end of a row, extending it

These examples are general illustrations only. Whether a particular site qualifies is a judgement for the council on the facts.

SECTION 2 · THE TESTS

The CTY 8 tests explained

A gap site has to pass every one of the following tests. Failing any one of them is normally enough for a refusal.

1 A substantial and continuously built-up frontage

There must be a frontage that is already substantially and continuously built up. The policy says this includes a line of **three or more buildings** along a road frontage without accompanying development to the rear. Councils look at the buildings that genuinely front onto the same road or lane, and whether together they read as a continuous built-up frontage. Buildings tucked behind others, or set well back, may not count.

2 A small gap, sufficient only for up to two houses

The gap must be small and big enough for a **maximum of two houses**. The policy does not give a figure in metres. In practice the gap is usually compared with the plot widths along the rest of the frontage. A gap that could fit three or more plots of the size typical of the row is unlikely to qualify, even if only one or two houses are proposed.

3 Respecting the existing development pattern

The new house or houses must respect the pattern along the frontage in terms of **size, scale, siting and plot size**. PPS 21 says it will not be enough simply to show that two houses could physically fit; applicants must take full account of the existing pattern and produce a design that integrates the new buildings.[1]

4 Meeting other planning and environmental requirements

The usual countryside tests still apply, including safe access and visibility splays, drainage, and sewage disposal where there is no mains connection (Policy CTY 16).[1]

Integration and rural character: CTY 13 and CTY 14

CTY 13 (integration and design). A new building is unacceptable where, among other things, it is a prominent feature in the landscape, the site lacks long-established natural boundaries or cannot provide a suitable degree of enclosure, it relies primarily on new landscaping for integration, or its design is inappropriate for the site and locality.[1]

CTY 14 (rural character). A new building is unacceptable where it is unduly prominent, results in a suburban-style build-up of development when viewed with existing and approved buildings, does not respect the traditional pattern of settlement, or creates or adds to a ribbon of development.[1]

> **What that means in practice.** A gap site can meet the CTY 8 tests and still struggle if the house would be prominent, too large for its neighbours, or reliant on new planting to screen it. Siting, ridge height, plot size and retention of existing hedges matter as much as the gap itself.

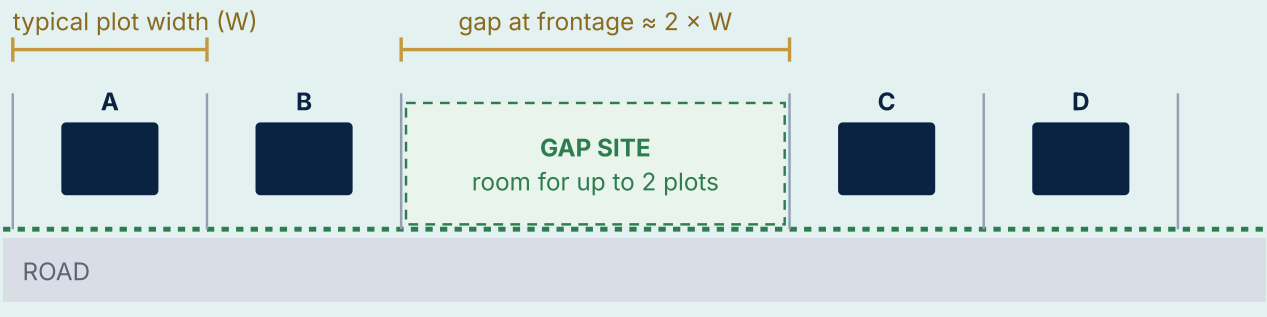
The policy also allows, in certain circumstances, an appropriate small-scale economic development proposal on such a gap. This guide deals with houses only.[1]

SECTION 3 · MEASURING

Measuring the gap and the frontage

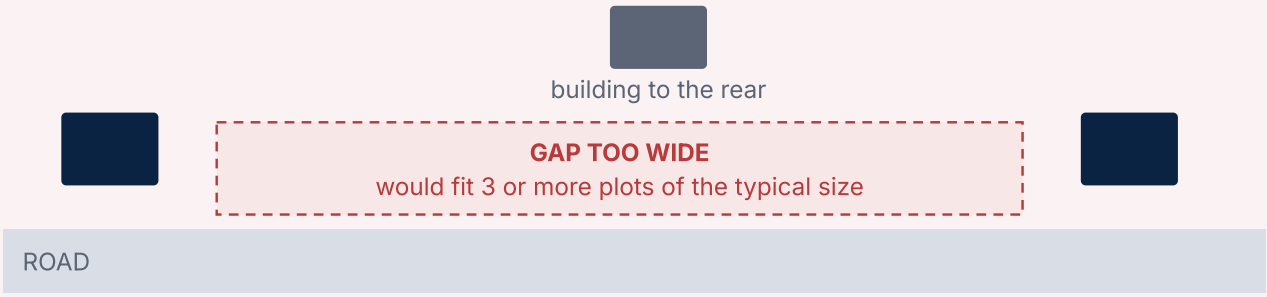
Before anyone spends money on drawings, a simple desktop and on-site check will tell you a lot. The diagrams below are illustrations only, not to scale.

Example 1: more likely to fit the policy



Four buildings share one frontage, with nothing behind them: a substantial, continuously built-up frontage.

Example 2: unlikely to fit the policy



Only two buildings front the road, with development behind: unlikely to be an infill site.

How to measure, step by step

1. **Map the frontage.** On an up-to-date map, mark every building with frontage onto the same road or lane on both sides of the gap.
2. **Count the buildings.** Is there a line of three or more buildings without accompanying development to the rear? Note which are houses and which are outbuildings.
3. **Measure the plots.** Measure the road-frontage width of each existing plot and work out the typical width.
4. **Measure the gap.** Measure both the distance between the buildings on either side and the width of the gap at the road frontage. Compare each with the typical plot width.
5. **Check the pattern.** Note house sizes, ridge heights, building lines and plot depths along the row.
6. **Walk the road.** Look at the gap from both directions. Does it read as a small gap in a row, or as an open break in the countryside?

Councils make an overall judgement on the facts. There is no single measurement that decides a case, so treat these checks as a guide to the risk, not an answer.

Why gap sites are refused, and which policy applies

Common reasons for refusal

- **Not a substantial frontage:** only two buildings, or buildings that do not share a common frontage.
- **Gap too large:** the gap could take more than two plots of the typical size along the road.
- **An important visual break:** the gap provides relief in an otherwise rural stretch of road.
- **Extending a ribbon:** the site sits at the end of a row rather than within it.
- **Out of keeping:** plot size, house size or siting does not respect the neighbours.
- **Poor integration:** a prominent site, no established boundaries, or reliance on new planting (CTY 13).
- **Rural character:** a suburban-style build-up of development (CTY 14).
- **Access:** the required visibility splays cannot be achieved on land the applicant controls.

Most of these points can be identified before an application is made. If a refusal does happen, we usually look first at whether a revised scheme or a different policy route is the better option.

Which policy applies in your council area?

Under the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS), retained policy such as PPS 21 ceases to have effect in a council district once that council adopts its Plan Strategy, whether the application was received before or after that date.[2]

Council	Position (November 2026)	Infill / ribbon policy used
Antrim and Newtownabbey	Plan Strategy adopted 3 July 2025	The council's own countryside housing policy in its adopted Plan Strategy. The approach is often similar in purpose to CTY 8, but the wording and criteria differ, so the council's own policy text must be read.[3]
Belfast	Adopted 2 May 2023	
Derry City and Strabane	Adopted 10 July 2025	
Fermanagh and Omagh	Adopted 16 March 2023	
Lisburn and Castlereagh	Adopted 26 September 2023	
Mid and East Antrim	Adopted 16 October 2023	
Ards and North Down; Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon; Causeway Coast and Glens; Mid Ulster; Newry, Mourne and Down	No adopted Plan Strategy	PPS 21 Policy CTY 8, with CTY 1, CTY 13, CTY 14 and CTY 16, read with the SPPS and the existing area plan. A published draft Plan Strategy may carry some weight, depending on its stage.[2]

This position can change as councils adopt new plans. Check the current position with the council, or ask us to confirm it as part of a site appraisal.

SECTION 5 · PROCESS

Step by step: from idea to application

This is the sequence our team usually follows for a gap site. Skipping the early steps is the most common reason money is wasted.

1. **Check the council and the policy**
   Confirm which council the site is in and whether PPS 21 or the council's own Plan Strategy applies (page 6).

2. **Map and measure the frontage**
   Count the buildings, measure the plots and the gap, and check the development pattern (page 5).

3. **Check the planning history**
   Search the planning register for the site and neighbouring plots, including refusals and any recent decisions on the same road.

4. **Check access, drainage and constraints**
   Confirm the visibility splays can be achieved on land you control, how foul and surface water will be dealt with, and any designations such as an AONB or flood risk.

5. **Decide on outline or full**
   Many gap site applications are made in outline to test the principle first; a full application can give more certainty on sensitive sites. Reserved matters normally have to be applied for within three years of an outline permission.[4]

6. **Prepare the application**
   Site location plan, block plan showing the frontage and plot widths, a design that respects the neighbours, access details, and a short statement explaining how the policy is met.

7. **Submit and respond**
   Lodge the application on the planning portal, respond promptly to consultee comments, and agree any amendments with the case officer.

8. **Discharge conditions**
   If permission is granted, deal with any conditions (for example access, landscaping or ridge height) before and during construction.

If you are buying, make any offer **subject to planning permission** where you can, and make sure the land needed for visibility splays is included in the sale.

SECTION 6 · CHECKLIST

Practical site checklist

Print this page and work through it on site. Every box you cannot tick is a risk to discuss before you commit.

The frontage

- [ ] Three or more buildings front the same road or lane
- [ ] No accompanying development to the rear
- [ ] The buildings read as one continuous built-up row
- [ ] The site is within the row, not at the end of it

The gap

- [ ] The gap could take no more than two plots of the typical size
- [ ] Distance between buildings measured and recorded
- [ ] Gap width at the road frontage measured and recorded
- [ ] The gap does not form an important visual break

Pattern and design

- [ ] Proposed plot sizes match those along the row
- [ ] House size and ridge height in keeping with neighbours
- [ ] Building line and siting follow the existing pattern
- [ ] Existing hedges and trees can be retained

Access and services

- [ ] Visibility splays achievable on land you will control
- [ ] Safe access position away from bends and junctions
- [ ] Mains water and electricity available
- [ ] Sewage disposal option identified (mains or treatment system)

Policy and history

- [ ] Council identified, and PPS 21 or Plan Strategy confirmed
- [ ] Planning history of the site checked
- [ ] Recent decisions on neighbouring plots reviewed
- [ ] No designations that would add extra tests (AONB, flood plain, listed buildings)

Ownership and purchase

- [ ] Title boundaries match what is on the ground
- [ ] Rights of way for any shared lane confirmed
- [ ] Offer made subject to planning permission
- [ ] Site appraisal obtained before exchange of contracts

SECTION 7 · QUESTIONS

Frequently asked questions

How many buildings make a built-up frontage?

Under CTY 8, a substantial and built-up frontage includes a line of three or more buildings along a road frontage without accompanying development to the rear. Whether a particular group qualifies is a judgement for the council.

How big can an infill gap be?

The policy does not set a figure in metres. The gap must be small and sufficient only for up to two houses, and the new plots must respect the size, scale, siting and plot size of the existing frontage.

Can I infill a gap on a private lane?

Potentially. PPS 21 says a road frontage includes a footpath or private lane, so the same tests apply to buildings along a lane.

Do farm sheds and outbuildings count?

The policy refers to buildings, not only houses, but councils look closely at whether each building has a genuine frontage and contributes to a continuous built-up frontage. This is a common point of debate.

Is an infill site the same as a cluster site?

No. Infill under CTY 8 is about a small gap in a continuous road frontage. A cluster site under CTY 2a is about a defined group of buildings around a focal point or crossroads, with different tests.

Can I get permission for two houses on a gap site?

The policy allows up to a maximum of two houses where the gap is sufficient only for that number and the plots respect the existing pattern. It is not enough simply to show that two houses could fit.

Does PPS 21 still apply to my gap site?

Only in the five councils without an adopted Plan Strategy. In the other six, the council's own countryside policy applies (page 6).

Should I apply in outline first?

Often, yes, to establish the principle before detailed design. But the outline conditions (such as ridge height and siting) will shape the house you can build, so get them right.

SECTION 8 · TALK TO US

Not sure whether your gap qualifies?

Most gap site questions can be answered quickly once we have seen the frontage. We will tell you honestly whether the site appears to meet the policy that applies in your council area, what the main risks are, and what an application would need.

Site appraisal

A desk and site review of the frontage, plot widths, planning history and the policy that applies.

Applications

Outline, full and reserved matters applications, with drawings and a supporting statement.

Conditions

Discharging access, landscaping and other conditions once permission is granted.

INITIAL CHAT

Book a free, no-obligation initial chat with our team

Send us the site address or a map and a few photographs of the frontage, and we will come back to you with a clear view of the next step.

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Sources and further reading

All sources were checked in November 2026.

1. Department for Infrastructure, Planning Policy Statement 21: Sustainable Development in the Countryside, Policies CTY 1, CTY 8, CTY 13, CTY 14 and CTY 16. infrastructure-ni.gov.uk
2. Department for Infrastructure, Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland, Edition 2 (December 2025), transitional arrangements, paragraphs 1.7 to 1.10; and Retained planning policy page. infrastructure-ni.gov.uk
3. Council Plan Strategy adoption statements: Belfast, Fermanagh and Omagh, Lisburn and Castlereagh, Mid and East Antrim, Antrim and Newtownabbey, Derry City and Strabane. See also our free guide, The 11 NI Councils and Their Development Plans.
4. Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, sections 61 to 63 (duration of planning permission). legislation.gov.uk
5. Department for Infrastructure, Building on Tradition: A Sustainable Design Guide for the Northern Ireland Countryside. infrastructure-ni.gov.uk

Disclaimer. This guide is general guidance on the planning system in Northern Ireland, current as of November 2026. It is not legal advice and does not replace advice on your own site. Policy and council positions change; check the current position before relying on it. No outcome can be guaranteed: every application is decided by the council on its own merits. NI Planning Permission Ltd · Company No. NI648144.