NI Planning Permission

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FREE GUIDE · NORTHERN IRELAND

Buying a Home, Site or Farm: The Planning Checks

What to check before you sign: permissions, conditions, unauthorised works and development potential

A practical guide for buyers of houses, building sites and farms in Northern Ireland: how to read the planning history, spot unauthorised works, check designations and constraints, and judge whether the plans you have for the property are realistic.



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INTRODUCTION

Why planning checks matter before you buy

Planning issues rarely show up on a viewing. An extension built without permission, an expired site approval, an occupancy condition or a farm's planning history can all affect value, mortgageability and what you can do with the property later.

A house

Are the extensions, conversions and outbuildings lawful? Are there conditions or designations that limit future works?

A building site

Is there a live permission? What does it allow, when does it expire, and what conditions must be met?

A farm or rural land

What is the farm's planning history? Have sites been sold off? What does that mean for future dwellings?

In this guide

01 The key planning checks 3

02 Sites and farms: extra checks 4

03 Practical checklist and common pitfalls 5

04 How NI Planning Permission helps 6

05 Sources 7

PLANNING AND CONVEYANCING WORK TOGETHER

Your solicitor handles title and legal searches. A planning review looks at whether what is on the ground, and what you intend to do, fits the planning record and policy. The two should be joined up well before exchange.

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KEY CHECKS

The key planning checks

Check	What to look for, and where
Planning history	Search the public register on the NI Planning Portal for the address and neighbouring land (Mid Ulster uses its own portal). Read the decision notices and approved drawings, not just the description.
Conditions	Look for conditions that restrict occupancy, remove permitted development rights, require works (such as sightlines or landscaping) or limit use. Many need to be met before or during development.
Works on the ground	Compare what is built with the approved plans and with permitted development limits. Unauthorised works can be regularised by a retrospective application, or certified as lawful after five years with good evidence (ss.55, 132, 169). A section 169 certificate can also confirm, without waiting five years, that works were permitted development or did not need permission.
Listed buildings	Check the Department for Communities buildings database. Works to a listed building without listed building consent can be a criminal offence.
Conservation areas, AONBs	Permitted development is narrower in these areas, and demolition in a conservation area needs consent.
Flood risk	Check DfI's Flood Maps NI, the government's interactive viewer of the latest flood hazard information.
Development plan	Check whether the council has an adopted Plan Strategy and how the area plan zones or designates the land.
Use	Confirm the lawful use (for example a house, a flat, an HMO, a shop) and whether your intended use would need permission or a licence.

Certificates of Lawfulness

Where an existing extension, conversion or use has no permission but has been in place long enough, a **Certificate of Lawfulness of Existing Use or Development** under section 169 of the Planning Act (NI) 2011 gives formal confirmation. Where you plan future works that may be permitted development, a **section 170** certificate gives certainty before you start.

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SITES AND FARMS

Building sites and farms: extra checks

Buying a site with planning permission

- **Type and status.** Is it outline permission (needing reserved matters) or full permission? Check the time limits on the decision notice for submitting reserved matters and starting work.
- **Conditions.** Sightlines, access, landscaping, drainage and design conditions may require land you do not control or works that cost more than expected.
- **Policy basis.** A rural permission granted under a particular policy (for example a farm dwelling or an infill site) may carry specific requirements; if it lapses, a new application is assessed against the policy in force at that time.
- **Renewal.** An application to renew before expiry attracts one quarter of the normal fee, but it is still assessed against current policy.

Buying a farm or rural land

Issue	Why it matters (PPS 21, Policy CTY 10)
Active and established	A farm dwelling requires the farm business to be currently active and established for at least 6 years.
Sites sold off	No dwellings or development opportunities outside settlement limits may have been sold off from the holding within 10 years of an application (applies from 25 November 2008).
Once every 10 years	Permission for a farm dwelling under CTY 10 is only forthcoming once every 10 years.
Siting	A farm dwelling should be visually linked or clustered with an established group of farm buildings.

These criteria apply where PPS 21 is still in force (as of November 2026: Ards and North Down, Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon, Causeway Coast and Glens, Mid Ulster, and Newry Mourne and Down). In the six councils with an adopted Plan Strategy, the council's own countryside policies apply and may differ.

BUYING A SITE OFF A FARM?

The sale of a site can affect the seller's farm, not just your purchase. Equally, if you are buying the farm itself, a recent sale of a site by the previous owner may limit your own options for a new farm dwelling for several years.

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PRACTICAL CHECKLIST

Before you sign

- [ ] Planning register searched for the property and adjoining land
- [ ] Decision notices, conditions and approved drawings read
- [ ] Works on site compared with approvals and permitted development
- [ ] Building Control completion records requested
- [ ] Listed building and conservation area status checked
- [ ] AONB and other designations checked
- [ ] Flood Maps NI checked
- [ ] Council's Plan Strategy status and area plan zoning checked
- [ ] For a site: permission type, expiry dates and pre-commencement conditions confirmed
- [ ] For a site: sightlines and access within land you will own
- [ ] For a farm: business ID, farming history and any sites sold in the last 10 years
- [ ] Your plans for the property tested against current policy

Common pitfalls

- ✕ **Relying on the estate agent's description.** "Planning permission for a house" may mean an outline permission close to expiry.
- ✕ **Assuming an old extension is fine.** It may be lawful after five years, but a lender or buyer may still ask for a certificate.
- ✕ **Missing a condition.** Occupancy conditions or removed permitted development rights affect what you can do and who can live there.
- ✕ **Sightlines over third-party land.** If the required visibility splays are not in your control, the permission may be difficult to implement.
- ✕ **Buying land "with potential".** In the countryside, potential depends on strict policy routes. Test it before you pay a premium.

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HOW WE HELP

A pre-purchase planning review

A short planning review before exchange can save a great deal of time and money later. We report in plain English, with clear next steps.

1. **Record check.** We review the planning history, conditions and designations for the property and surrounding land.
2. **Site comparison.** We compare what is built with what was approved or permitted, and flag anything that may need regularising.
3. **Potential.** We give a frank view on whether your plans, such as an extension, a new house or a change of use, are realistic under current policy.
4. **Next steps.** We work with your solicitor on certificates, retrospective applications or conditions where needed.

PO

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Full Corporate Member of the Irish Planning Institute (MIPI). BSc Environmental Planning and MSc Urban and Rural Design, Queen's University Belfast (QUB). NI Planning Permission advises homeowners, farmers, landowners, investors and businesses on planning across all 11 council areas in Northern Ireland.

Buying a property, site or farm?

Send us the address or folio and what you plan to do with it, and we will tell you what to check and where the planning risks lie.

Request a site-specific assessment → niplanningpermission.co.uk/contact-us

Or call 028 9591 6888 · info@niplanningpermission.co.uk · Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

CONTACT NI PLANNING PERMISSION

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Important: This guide is general guidance on the planning system in Northern Ireland. It is not legal advice and does not replace advice on your own site. Planning law, policy and fees change; the content is believed correct at the date of publication (November 2026), and you should check the current position with the relevant council before relying on it. No outcome can be guaranteed: every application is decided by the council on its own merits.

SOURCES

Official sources used

All sources were checked in November 2026.

- **NI Planning Portal: public planning register**
  https://planningregister.planningsystemni.gov.uk/
- **Mid Ulster District Council: Planning (own online portal, property certificates)**
  https://www.midulstercouncil.org/planning
- **Planning Act (NI) 2011, s.55 (permission for development already carried out)**
  https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2011/25/section/55
- **Planning Act (NI) 2011, s.132 (enforcement time limits)**
  https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2011/25/section/132
- **Planning Act (NI) 2011, s.169 (certificate of lawfulness of existing use or development)**
  https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2011/25/section/169
- **Planning Act (NI) 2011, s.170 (certificate of lawfulness of proposed use or development)**
  https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2011/25/section/170
- **DfC Historic Environment Division: Buildings database**
  https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/services/buildings-database
- **nidirect: Finding a listed building**
  https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/finding-listed-building
- **nidirect: Conservation areas and advice**
  https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/conservation-areas-and-advice
- **DfI: Flood Maps NI**
  https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/topics/rivers-and-flooding/flood-maps-ni
- **Planning (General Permitted Development) Order (NI) 2015, Schedule Part 1 (dwellinghouses)**
  https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2015/70/schedule/part/1
- **PPS 21: Sustainable Development in the Countryside**
  https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/infrastructure/PPS21%20Sustainable%20Development%20in%20the%20Countryside.pdf
- **DfI: Planning Policy (SPPS transitional arrangements)**
  https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/articles/planning-policy
- **DfI: Retained Planning Policy (PPSs retained under the SPPS)**
  https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/retained-planning-policy
- **Planning (Fees) Regulations (NI) 2015, Schedule 1 (fee scales)**
  https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2015/73/schedule/1
- **DfI: Strategic Planning Policy Statement, Edition 2 (December 2025)**
  https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/strategic-planning-policy-statement

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