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Ministerial visit to Belmont Hall, Antrim

Briefing and Case Study

About SuDS

Sustainable urban Drainage Systems (SuDS) fall into two categories – 'hard' and 'soft'. Both address the same problem – slowing rainwater run-off from developments, which would otherwise put strain on watercourses and increase the risk of flooding.

Hard SuDs involve hard engineering – such as oversized storm drainage pipes and/or concrete attenuation tanks to store and slow run-off. Soft SuDS involve more natural storage, through landscaped channels and detention basins.

Confronting Northern Ireland's Wastewater Crisis

In June 2025, the Wastewater Infrastructure Group (WWIG) led by CEF, NIFHA and NI Chamber published their position paper on the addressing the wastewater infrastructure deficits in Northern Ireland. The position paper detail 5 key actions that could collectively change the trajectory of the shortfall in wastewater infrastructure.

One of the key actions included supporting SUDs as proposed in the forthcoming Water, Flooding and Sustainable Drainage bill. SUDs will only apply to drainage on new housing sites. It will take many decades before this, and this alone, would have any meaningful impact on the challenge we face – it is, however, part of the solution.

The Issue

As was noted in DFI's recent consultation on SuDS, there are currently no formal arrangements for approving or agreeing ownership and management responsibility for nature based / soft SuDS.

This strongly incentivises developers to pursue hard-engineered solutions, to avoid delay and uncertainty.

Case Study – Belmont Hall

A residential development of 393 homes on the edge of Antrim town, developed by Antrim Construction Company (ACC). Built near the Six Mile Water floodplain, drainage was a sensitive issue from the outset.

When originally approved in 2018, the plans proposed concrete stormwater storage tanks. However, from late 2016, ACC began exploring moving to a soft SuDS approach, delivering greater storage capacity and a better outcome for the natural environment.



Proposals were developed between Antrim Construction and its engineers (Marrac Design). However, due to the novelty of the proposals in Northern Ireland, approval was taken on by the Storm Water Management Group (SWMG) – a group of representatives from NI Water, DFI Roads and Rivers, and the NIEA.

The developer and its consultants were in regular contact with the Storm Water Management Group from Nov 2022 until approval of the design in December 2023. The applicant submitted a planning application for the SuDS in March 2024 (LA03/2024/0178/F), which was granted in July 2024.

Today, the SuDS basins are active, well-established and working effectively. A hydrobrake controls the rate of outflow from the basins into the Six Mile Water, and the basins themselves are an attractive area, providing visual amenity and habitat.

However, the basins are currently fenced off due to safety concerns raised by the Council, relating to times when standing water may be present. We argue that these safety concerns are easily addressed, and that the result has been to deprive residents of access to these potentially valuable areas.

Furthermore, as the Planning authority didn't consider the detention basins to function as public open space, ACC were required to create a community garden on the opposite side of the Mill Race to offset the perceived loss. It was fortunate that ACC were in possession of this land and were able to deliver 'compensatory' open space. The majority of new residential developments would not have the space to take this approach, so this could be a very significant constraining factor on the integration of soft SuDS across the region if not addressed.



Aerial view of one of the SuDS basins, showing landscaping and the Six Mile Water

Advantages of a Soft SuDS Approach



Biodiversity and Amenity

Soft SuDS can be incorporated into the landscape plan of the development, delivering valuable amenity for residents. In addition, by planting species that will thrive in the environment of the ponds or basins, it's possible to create habitat, delivering biodiversity gains.

At Belmont Hall, the planting scheme was very carefully considered and includes a mixture of damp meadow mix for low lying areas and a species rich seed mix, augmented by native species tree and shrub planting to the slopes of the basins. The planting scheme is now an important habitat and food source/foraging area for local wildlife.



Mimicking Natural Processes

As well as providing storage to allow the flow rate from the site to be reduced, soft SuDS also allow surface water to infiltrate into the ground and evaporate from the surface. This allows a reduction in discharge volume in addition to a reduced rate of discharge.



Maintenance

Soft SuDS are much easier to maintain than hard SuDS, meaning there are fewer blockages or other constraints during heavy rain.



Cost / Capacity

Soft SuDS approaches can deliver very high volumes of storage much more cost-effectively than hard SuDS, improving the viability of schemes.

Our Asks



Streamline the Process

We are calling for the creation of a dedicated approvals and regulatory process for soft SuDS. It would seem practical and logical to us that DfI Rivers would become the approving body for Soft SuDS as an extension of the role they already perform in assessing the efficacy of drainage assessments and flood risk assessments.



Allow SuDS to count towards Open Space

Guidance in other jurisdictions – for example from Scottish Environmental Protection Agency – is that SuDS basins should be multi-functional spaces and can, where appropriate form part of open space requirements. DfI should issue guidance encouraging the adoption of this approach.



Clear Guidance

In order to promote the use of SuDS and facilitate a practical and economic approach, clear guidance must be introduced within the planning and approval processes. This must accommodate a range of site characteristics – one size does not fit all.