

# Media Release



## A Strategic Review of the Planning Appeals Commission

Significant backlogs and long delays within the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC), together with insufficient accountability arrangements and strained relationships, are contributing to constraints on the wider planning system's ability to support Northern Ireland's economic and environmental development. That is the conclusion of a report published today (Thursday 21 May 2026) by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Dorinnia Carville's report on 'A Strategic Review of the Planning Appeals Commission' examines PAC delivery over recent years and the impact this has had on planning outcomes. It sets out the important role of the PAC, which is responsible for hearing and deciding on planning appeals, conducting public inquiries and hearings, and reporting on some of the most complex and economically significant development proposals.

The report notes delays across all PAC workstreams, particularly in relation to regionally significant applications referred to the PAC for public local inquiry or hearing (known as Hear and Report) and which are typically the most complex and significant developments in Northern Ireland. As of August 2025, there were 20 live major cases of which almost half had been referred to PAC more than two years earlier<sup>1</sup>.

The report also identifies substantial weaknesses in governance and accountability arrangements. The PAC has no statutory or formal targets for processing times and has no direct accountability for its performance to the Assembly given its status as a tribunal non-departmental public body. This differs from other jurisdictions, where planning bodies operate within clear accountability frameworks.

The report concludes that, while the PAC's operational independence of decision making must be respected, it is essential that this is balanced with the introduction of specific and measurable time-bound key performance indicators and improved oversight and accountability arrangements.

In addition, the review found that strained relationships and limited effective engagement with other parts of the planning system, including

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<sup>1</sup> One of these cases was subsequently completed in November 2025, after the period covered by the NIAO review.

the Department for Infrastructure and local councils, have contributed to avoidable delays.

Commenting on the report, Dorinnia Carville said:

*"Previous Northern Ireland Audit Office reports have highlighted weaknesses in efficiency, effectiveness and collaboration within the planning system. This report identifies similar themes, but its findings are particularly concerning given the PAC's pivotal role in progressing projects with such significant potential to create economic benefit for local communities. The PAC has not been delivering value for money, and prolonged delays and backlogs risk making Northern Ireland a less attractive place for investment."*

*"Fully recognising the importance of the PAC's independence in decision-making, public confidence in the planning system also depends on robust oversight and effective strategic leadership. This report therefore recommends an immediate strengthening of the Department of Justice's oversight and governance of the PAC within its statutory remit, ahead of a more fundamental review of the Commission. It also highlights the need for the PAC to develop and publish plans to address existing backlogs and, along with the Department of Justice and the Department for Infrastructure, significantly improve engagement and collaboration across the planning system."*

Today's report acknowledges some recent improvements in the speed of PAC decision-making on planning appeals, while also highlighting the impact that resourcing challenges have had on delivery. The PAC has experienced significant staff turnover in recent years, including the loss of experienced commissioners alongside a high number of new appointments. This, it advises, has affected its capacity to progress more complex Hear and Report cases. The report also identifies limitations in current cost-recovery arrangements and recommends a review of the current appeal fees and charging regime.

ENDS

### **Notes for Editors**

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). She and the NIAO are totally independent of Government. The C&AG certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. She has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. Her reports are published as Assembly papers.

THIS STATEMENT IS ISSUED ON THE STRICT UNDERSTANDING THAT IT IS NOT FOR PUBLICATION OR BROADCAST BEFORE 00.01 hrs ON THURSDAY 21 MAY 2026

2. The scope of the review focused on the Planning Appeals Commission. It did not examine the performance of the Department for Infrastructure, which was the subject of a Northern Ireland Audit Office report on 'Planning in Northern Ireland', published in 2022.
3. The Planning Appeals Commission is an independent Tribunal Non-Departmental Public Body and is one of a very small number of such bodies in the UK. It receives financial and administrative support from its sponsor department, the Department of Justice, through the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service ('NICTS') and is accountable to it for the proper spending of the financial support given to it. However it is wholly independent of NICTS in respect of its decision-making and the operation of the appeals and hearings, inquiries and examination processes, as well as its operational performance.
4. The report will be available on the Audit Office website at [www.niauditoffice.gov.uk](http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk) and is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on Thursday 21 May 2026.