



Northern Ireland
Audit Office

A Strategic Review of the Planning Appeals Commission

**Report by the Comptroller
and Auditor General**

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Dorinnia Carville *Northern Ireland Audit Office*
Comptroller and Auditor General 21 May 2026

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List of Abbreviations

ACP	An Coimisiún Pleanála (Republic of Ireland)
ABP	An Bord Pleanála (former Irish planning appeals body)
DfI	Department for Infrastructure
DoE	Department of the Environment (former)
DoJ	Department of Justice
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
IE	Independent Examination
KPIs	Key Performance Indicators
LDP	Local Development Plan
LPP	Local Policies Plan
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NDPB	Non Departmental Public Body
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
NICTS	Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service
NSIP	Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project
OFMDFM	Office of the First and Deputy First Minister
PAC	Planning Appeals Commission
PINS	Planning Inspectorate (England)
PIP	Planning Improvement Programme
PS	Plan Strategy
TEO	The Executive Office
WAC	Water Appeals Commission

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

Background

1. The Planning Act (NI) 2011 established the current two-tier planning system in Northern Ireland and, since April 2015, the responsibility for delivering most operational planning functions passed from central government to local councils. The Department for Infrastructure ('DfI') retained a central role under the two-tier system, with the responsibility for preparing regional planning policy and legislation, as well as monitoring and reporting on the performance of the councils in delivering their planning functions. DfI also retained responsibility for determining a small number of planning applications that are either Regionally Significant or that it calls-in, usually where the application raises issues of such importance that their impact is considered to extend to a sub-regional or regional level.
2. The Planning Appeals Commission ('the PAC') is an independent body which deals with a wide range of planning issues. The PAC hears and decides on all planning appeals made by applicants¹ against council planning refusals or non-determination cases (Hear and Decide). In these instances, the PAC is the final decision-maker, and its decisions on appeals can only be challenged on a point of law by way of a judicial review.
3. The PAC also makes recommendations on a range of cases referred to it by government departments or arising from proposed decisions of departments (Hear and Report). Many of these are Regionally Significant applications which have the potential to make a critical contribution to the economic and social success of Northern Ireland as a whole. These planning applications are processed by DfI and reach the PAC by one of two routes: DfI calls a public local inquiry; or DfI issues a notice of opinion to approve or refuse an application, and the applicant or local council requests an opportunity to appear before, and be heard before, the PAC or a person appointed by DfI for that purpose. Called-in applications are generally processed by the local council until DfI decides to call the application in for decision. In all instances, the PAC's report and recommendations are advisory. However, in making the final decision, DfI normally relies on the detailed recommendations of the PAC report.
4. Under the Hear and Report workstream the PAC also conducts Independent Examinations of councils' Local Development Plans ('LDPs'). Each council is required to prepare a plan which will guide future development, ensuring sufficient land is available for housing, employment and community facilities while protecting the environment. The PAC reports to DfI on each council's development plan, considering its contents and whether it has taken account of regional government policy and will advise DfI as to whether the plan is legally compliant and sound. It can also provide proposed amendments to make a development plan sound. DfI will consider the PAC report and based on this review it will issue a Direction as to whether the development plan should be adopted, modified, or withdrawn by the council.
5. The PAC is established in legislation and is classified as a Tribunal Non-Departmental Public Body ('NDPB'), a form of public body that has jurisdiction in a specialised area of law and operates independently of government ministers. The PAC is therefore operationally independent from any government department and the rest of the planning system. It operates under the supervisory jurisdiction of the courts, and its decisions are open to challenge on a point of law by application to the High Court for judicial review.

¹ Those seeking access to justice in appealing the decision made by the authority (council) are termed appellants, however this report uses the term 'applicants' in reference to Hear and Decide work, as only the applicant can appeal the council's decision in Northern Ireland.

6. The PAC receives financial and administrative support from its sponsor department, the Department of Justice ('the Department'), through the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service ('NICTS'). The PAC is wholly independent of NICTS in respect of its decision-making and the operation of the appeals and hearings, inquiries and examination processes, although it remains accountable to NICTS for the financial and administrative support it receives. In 2024-25, the PAC received £2.7 million of funding from NICTS. Despite this financial support, the PAC maintains complete autonomy over its operational performance and decision-making. It is not accountable for this to any part of government or the Assembly for its operational performance.

Key findings

There have been significant backlogs and delays within PAC workstreams

7. All elements of the planning system consistently struggle to meet performance targets, however the backlogs in respect of Regionally Significant applications are particularly serious. Many of these applications have been referred to the PAC for public local inquiry or hearing (Hear and Report) and are often the most complex and significant developments in Northern Ireland. They have encountered considerable delays with the PAC after having spent many years within the planning system prior to the PAC inquiry or hearing.
8. In August 2025, there were 20 'live' Hear and Report cases with the PAC which are listed in **Appendices 1 and 2**. The figure of 20 includes Regionally Significant applications, call-ins, water public inquiries and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) determination hearings, but excludes LDPs. On average these cases had been referred to the PAC over two years ago, however almost half had been referred to the PAC more than three years previously. We note that six of these cases relate to the Curriginalt project (Dalradian). None of the cases that DfI had referred to the PAC since 2021 were completed at the time of our review, some four years later. In relation to this the PAC had told DfI for a number of years that it did not have the capacity to deal with new cases but that cases had continued to be referred to it. We note that no new Hear and Report cases have been passed to PAC from DfI since September 2024.
9. DfI provided us with a list of Hear and Report cases that had been passed to PAC since 2016 on which decisions subsequently had been reached. Based on these figures, on average there were 107 weeks, or around two years, between DfI's initial referral and the PAC issuing its report and recommendations. However, it is important to note that when cases are passed by DfI to PAC, in some cases it can be several weeks or months before all information is actually received by PAC. The PAC told us that when this is taken into account the period between referral and the PAC report being published was actually 75 weeks.
10. Timescales for conducting Independent Examinations of LDPs are also significant, with examinations regularly taking several years to progress between councils, DfI and the PAC. Currently, six of the eleven local councils' plans have been through the process to produce and adopt their Plan Strategies. Total timescales for this ranged from 22 to 43 months, with a significant proportion of this time spent on the PAC independent examination process (between 16 and 28 months). The full LDP process, which involves councils, PAC and DfI, is unlikely to conclude until the mid-2030s, almost two decades after it started. We note that there is currently no LDP work with the PAC for consideration.

- 11.** Following a period of upheaval, including significant resourcing issues and the impact of the pandemic, considerable backlogs and delays accumulated in the Hear and Decide (appeals) workstream. Between 2016-17 and 2024-25, the number of appeals received by the PAC reduced from around 300 per year to just over 200. However, over the same period, decision-making timeframes increased substantially from an average of 23 weeks in 2016-17 to 73 weeks in 2024-25. At the peak, in 2022-23, 379 cases were in hand with the PAC at the year end. Actions taken by NICTS and the PAC to support improved delivery have resulted in improvements in this workstream and cases that were submitted in 2024 took an average of 25 weeks to be decided.
- 12.** Delays in decision-making are having major economic and environmental impacts. The planning system has the potential to make an important contribution to much needed development in Northern Ireland. We undertook a range of engagement with representatives from the business, renewable energy and local government sectors, all of whom raised significant concerns about the impact of delays on the regionally significant and called-in projects that are being held up in the PAC, as well as more generally across the planning system in Northern Ireland. Long delays and a lack of certainty around timescales make Northern Ireland a less attractive place for investment and development.

There is an urgent need to review and reform the PAC's governance and accountability arrangements

- 13.** The statutory structure of the PAC as a Tribunal NDPB means that it is the only part of the planning system that has no statutory or formal targets for processing times. NICTS told us that this significantly constrains its oversight of the performance of the PAC. Instead, the PAC appraises its own performance against self-determined priorities and objectives. None of the PAC's Corporate Plan objectives are specific and there are no targets for either the volume or timeliness of decision-making, so it is difficult to see how the performance of the PAC can be robustly assessed.
- 14.** We analysed Northern Ireland's planning appeal, public inquiry and hearing arrangements alongside those in both England and the Republic of Ireland, and while direct comparisons are difficult due to the different mechanisms, statutory structures and processes involved, we consider that lessons can be learned from how other jurisdictions structure and perform their work. Northern Ireland is the only jurisdiction where the body responsible for planning appeals, public inquiries and hearings is not an Executive Agency and therefore not accountable to either a Minister or the Assembly. Whilst we fully understand the need for the PAC's work to be conducted independently, the absence of meaningful, time-bound targets and adequate accountability mechanisms arising from its current statutory structure is not acceptable and needs to be resolved.
- 15.** In the context of the backlogs and delays, oversight of the PAC needs to be significantly strengthened. The Department has a key role as the sponsor department, through NICTS, in providing funding to the PAC. As the sponsor department it is responsible for ensuring that the PAC is delivering value for money in the same way as any other publicly funded body within its departmental boundary, while allowing the PAC to retain its independence in its operational decision-making.

16. NICTS pointed to the work it had undertaken with PAC, including the implementation of a new case management system, relocating the PAC to new premises, new recruitment processes for Commissioners and regular engagement with the Chief Commissioner as evidence of oversight. However, it also recognised that there have been issues with the PAC's delivery but considers that its oversight of the PAC's performance is constrained by the existing statutory structure and by the need to respect constitutional boundaries, given the PAC's status as a Tribunal NDPB.

A range of factors have contributed to backlogs and delays, but the PAC's resourcing has been a particular problem

17. The PAC has experienced a considerable period of upheaval, including the loss of a significant number of experienced Commissioners through retirement. Since 2017-18, eleven Commissioners have left the PAC, at all levels from Commissioner to Deputy Chief Commissioner.
18. Since 2021, there have been 17 new appointments to the PAC, including 14 new Commissioners. The PAC told us that it was difficult to expect people with limited or no background in a quasi-judicial role to undertake the work of Senior Commissioner from appointment, which has had implications for performance. This meant that significant delays built up in the Hear and Report workstream which could only be taken forward by experienced Senior Commissioners whilst new recruits had built up the capacity to undertake such work. In this context, the more complex work continues to be delayed, and the PAC told us it is likely to be 2026-27 before it expects to be fully operational.
19. Cost recovery is also a contributing factor. Fees are charged for appeals received by the PAC (under the Hear and Decide route) and are set by the Planning Fees (Deemed Planning Applications and Appeals) Regulations 2015. These regulations prescribe the fees to be charged for planning appeals and deemed planning applications, with both sets of fees having been uplifted once since 2015. The planning appeals fee is £150 per appeal, regardless of the scope and scale of the development. DfI is responsible for setting planning fees. Both the Department for Justice fees for appeals and deemed applications and DfI's planning fees have been uplifted by 19 per cent since 2019. DfI recently announced a further inflationary uplift of 2.1 per cent for 2025 and the Department has prepared a draft statutory instrument with a view to mirroring this increase, subject to the outcome of consultation.
20. There are no charges for any aspect of the Hear and Report work (including Regionally Significant, called-in and LDP independent examinations) referred to the PAC by DfI. DfI receives the planning fee for Regionally Significant applications, which can be considerable, but none of this is passed on to the PAC under the current arrangements. DfI does not receive a fee for work when an application is called-in from councils. The PAC told us that additional income from cost recovery would allow it to increase its Commissioner cohort and therefore lead to improved performance.

Poor relationships and a lack of effective engagement with other parts of the planning system are contributing to delays

- 21.** The relationship between DfI and the PAC is an important one, as the majority of Regionally Significant Hear and Report work comes from DfI, and the PAC relies on the quality and completeness of information to be able to conduct its hearings and inquiries efficiently and effectively.
- 22.** We found instances where a lack of communication and effective engagement between the PAC and DfI has contributed to public local inquiry and hearing delays and postponements. We also heard criticisms that the PAC has little engagement with other elements of the planning system, in particular local councils.
- 23.** Throughout our review and subsequent clearance process, the PAC has emphasised its independent role and contended that this requires it to have limited engagement with other parts of the planning system. While it is important that the PAC retains independence in its decision-making, it is a key part of the planning process and independence does not prevent structured engagement, information exchange, or clear governance arrangements. It is essential that the PAC better engages with and informs other stakeholders, especially in relation to Hear and Report work.

There have been recent improvements in some aspects of delivery, but challenges lie ahead

- 24.** The PAC acknowledges that its delivery has not been at the required level for the last number of years but has implemented a range of changes aimed at improving delivery. Cumulatively, these changes are beginning to make an impact, particularly on Hear and Decide caseloads. In the PAC's view, its issues have only been due to resourcing, and it considers that it has taken all relevant action to progress cases, however we have identified a range of other issues which have contributed to poor delivery, including our concerns with communication, effective engagement, governance and statutory structure arrangements.
- 25.** Due to the ongoing performance and resourcing issues of the PAC, there have been repeated calls, including from the PAC itself, for DfI to use its powers under the Planning Act 2011 to appoint individuals outside of the PAC to conduct inquiries and hearings to help clear the backlog of cases referred by DfI. In March 2025, the Infrastructure Minister announced £3 million funding from the Transformation Programme which will be used to help address pressures within the planning system. This funding will allow DfI to appoint its own independent inspectors to undertake major Hear and Report work as an alternative option to the PAC. This project is in the early stages, and it is not yet clear what impact the appointment of these new inspectors will have on the work of the PAC.
- 26.** While progress has been made on the appeals backlog recently, significant challenges remain, especially on the Hear and Report workstream. The PAC told us that it has planned and profiled this work to commence in early 2026-27, however a range of issues may impact its ability to progress this work, the majority of which are outside of its control. These include the implementation of new workstreams with no associated resources and the increasing complexity of cases, particularly in relation to environmental issues. Processes need to be put in place to deal with these issues to ensure that the improved delivery on appeals is maintained and that Hear and Report caseloads progress as planned. This may include the need for legislative changes which would also be outside of the Commission's control.

Disagreement with the Planning Appeals Commission

27. The Chief Commissioner of the Planning Appeals Commission has challenged our report conclusions on the basis of Article 8 of the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987. We are satisfied that the issues we have identified and reported on relate to the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the Commission in accordance with the statutory remit of the C&AG.

Conclusions and recommendations

28. A well-functioning planning system is vital to facilitating economic growth and instilling confidence in potential investors. The PAC is a key part of the planning process in Northern Ireland, providing access to justice and independent expert advice and recommendations to decision-makers including DfI. However, due to a range of factors, the PAC is now seen as another key barrier to the development and progression of significant projects which could encourage investment, create jobs and improve local communities in Northern Ireland. The PAC has not been delivering value for money. In its current form, the governance, accountability and resourcing arrangements are not sufficient to ensure the PAC can consistently meet the needs of the planning system.



Recommendation 1

The Department of Justice should urgently arrange to carry out a fundamental review of the PAC including its status, statutory structure and associated governance, oversight and accountability arrangements. In doing so it should liaise closely with key stakeholders.

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29. We recognise that a fundamental review of the PAC is likely to take some time to complete and deliver change. In the interim, a range of actions to drive improvements in delivery, communication and accountability should be implemented.



Recommendation 2

More certainty and confidence around the timescales for delivery of PAC caseloads is essential. Pending the outcome of a fundamental review, we recommend that the PAC should develop and publish detailed plans to clear the long-standing cases in each workstream. These plans should include timelines for clearing backlogs and regular monitoring by NICTS.



Recommendation 3

Pending the outcome of a fundamental review, we recommend that the PAC, working with the Department and Dfl as appropriate, should carry out a review of the current appeal fees and charging regime, alongside performance reporting and monitoring, with a view to improving cost recovery.



Recommendation 4

While it is important that the PAC retains its independence in decision-making, it is a key part of the planning process and a shared commitment to improving delivery is urgently required. Pending the outcome of a fundamental review, we recommend that:

- The PAC, the Department and Dfl should work together to ensure the operational delivery of new work allocated to the PAC is assessed and adequately resourced ahead of its introduction.
- The PAC and Dfl should agree processes to ensure that administrative issues with the potential to delay or frustrate a public local inquiry or hearing are fully understood and resolved before the inquiry or hearing commences.
- The PAC should put in place a process of regular engagement with other parts of the planning system, including Dfl and councils, to provide it with an early indication of issues in the planning system so that workloads and prioritisation can be properly planned.



Recommendation 5

The Department must immediately strengthen its oversight and governance of the PAC so far as the current statutory structure allows. Pending the outcome of a fundamental review, we recommend that:

- The Department should immediately undertake a review of the existing governance arrangements for the PAC, with a view to identifying additional accountability and oversight mechanisms that can be put in place within the current statutory structure.
- The PAC should develop and publish specific, measurable key performance indicators and timelines for different workstreams and consult with the Department as to any additional financial or administrative support required to achieve these. The PAC's annual reporting should include a clear assessment of whether key metrics have been achieved and any remedial action which is required.
- The Department and the PAC should work together to agree and publish new administrative performance standards in a revised Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) within the next six months and then continue to review the MoU on an ongoing basis.

Part One:

Introduction and background

Introduction and background

Since 2015, planning in Northern Ireland has been a two-tier system

- 1.1 An effective planning system is a key enabler to drive economic growth through investment and sustainable development, job creation, social regeneration, and wellbeing. It can make a difference to local communities, but it can also act to support social and economic development in Northern Ireland as a whole. It is therefore vital that it is operating in an efficient, effective, and financially sustainable way.
- 1.2 The Planning Act (NI) 2011 established the current two-tier system for the delivery of planning functions in Northern Ireland and, since April 2015, the responsibility for delivering most operational planning functions passed from central government to local councils. Since 2015, between 9,000 and 13,000 planning applications have been processed each year.
- 1.3 The Department for Infrastructure (DfI) retained a central role under the two-tier system, with the responsibility for preparing regional planning policy and legislation, as well as monitoring and reporting on the performance of the councils in delivering their planning functions. DfI also retained responsibility for determining a small number of planning applications that are either Regionally Significant and or that it calls-in where the application raises issues of such importance that their impact is considered to extend to a sub-regional or regional level. In addition, DfI has routine oversight responsibilities for council Local Development Plans (LDPs). DfI also has a specific oversight role in relation to causing an Independent Examination (IE), and consideration of an IE report before issuing direction to council.

The Planning Appeals Commission provides an appeals process for applicants and plays a key role in informing decision-making on significant projects

- 1.4 The Planning Appeals Commission (the PAC) is an independent body which deals with a wide range of planning issues. While the work undertaken by the PAC is varied, it has two main functions:
 - i. **Hear and Decide (planning appeals work)**

The PAC hears and decides on all planning appeals made by applicants against council planning refusals. Appeals can focus on a wide range of planning and environmental matters. In these instances, the PAC is the final decision-maker, and its decisions can only be challenged on a point of law by way of a judicial review. This workstream provides the PAC with its largest volume of work in terms of number of cases received and decisions issued each year.
 - ii. **Hear and Report (referred and advisory work)**

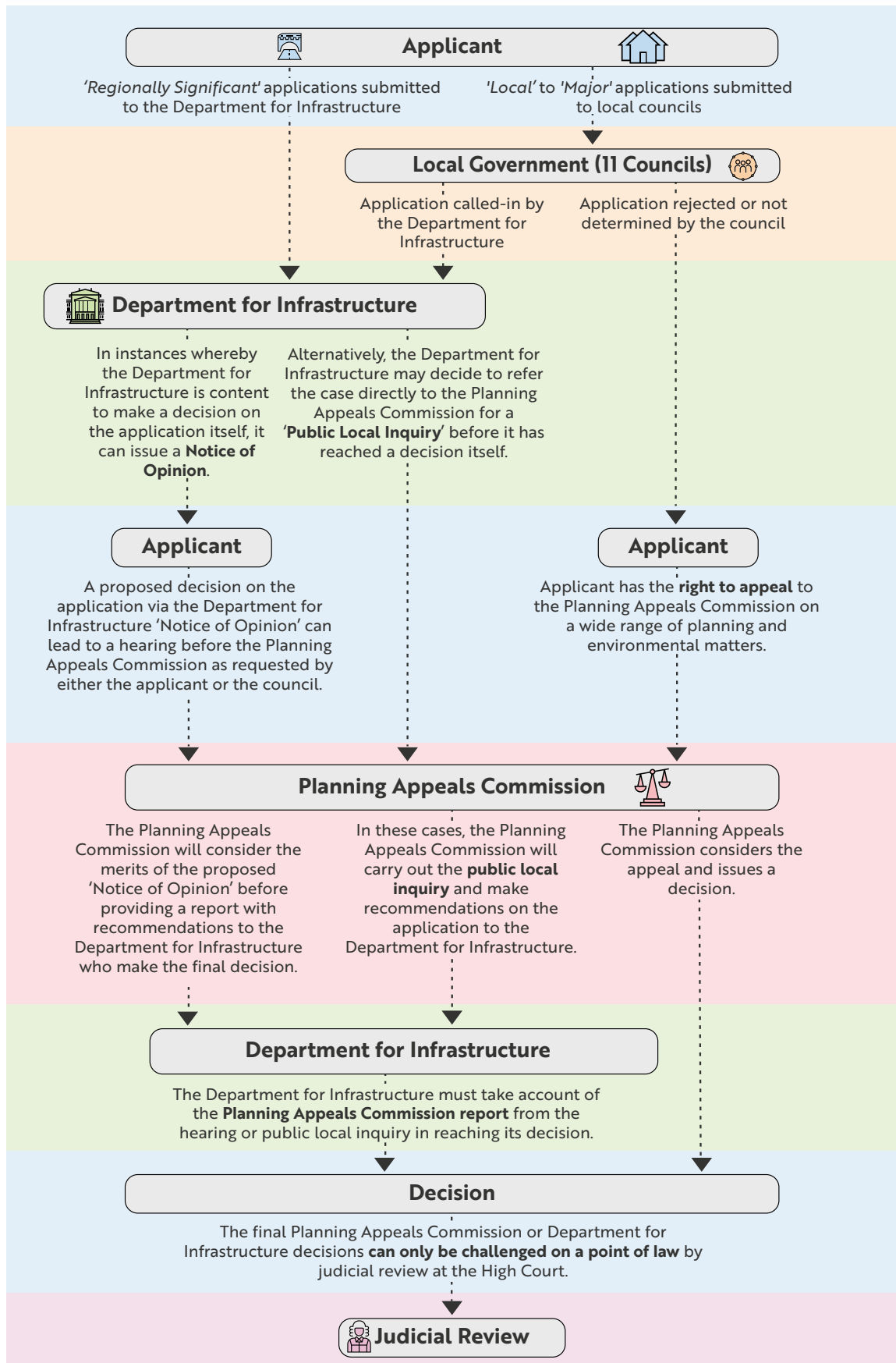
The PAC also makes recommendations on a range of cases referred to it by government departments or arising from proposed decisions of departments. Regionally Significant applications are those applications with the potential to make a critical contribution to the economic and social success of Northern Ireland as a whole, or a substantial part of the region. These planning applications are processed by DfI and in most cases its officials complete a planning report and make recommendations to the Minister. At this point, two main options are open to DfI in determining the application:

- **Public local inquiry** – Having completed a period of public and statutory consultation, DfI may determine that a public local inquiry, held by the PAC, is required. At a public local inquiry hearing, DfI, those who have made representations in respect of the planning application and other interested parties may present their views both orally and in writing.
- **Notice of Opinion** – When a public local inquiry is not called, DfI issues a Notice of Opinion which outlines its reasons for proposing to approve or refuse a planning application. In this instance the applicant or the relevant council can then request an opportunity to appear before and be heard by the PAC concerning DfI's proposed decision.

1.5 DfI also has the power to call-in planning applications from councils. Such applications follow the same process route as Regionally Significant applications and therefore may result in a PAC public local inquiry or hearing. In all Hear and Report work, the PAC's role whilst advisory, is important. The presiding Commissioner(s) will issue a detailed report with recommendations, which the Minister can either accept or reject, therefore the final planning decision remains with the DfI Minister.

1.6 The PAC also conducts IEs of councils' LDPs. Under the two-tier planning system, each council is required to prepare an LDP which will guide future development, ensuring sufficient land is available for housing, employment and community facilities while protecting the environment. The LDPs will also guide decision-making in local councils, forming the basis of planning decisions for many years to come. The LDPs comprise two parts: a Plan Strategy (PS) and a Local Policies Plan (LPP). Councils are required to submit their plans to DfI for IE, which to date have always been conducted by the PAC. The PAC reports back to DfI as to the 'soundness' of each council's development plan document, including their contents, whether it has taken account of regional planning policy and legal compliance. It can also provide proposed amendments to make a development plan sound. The IE is required at both stages of plan development, therefore based on 11 councils there will be 22 in total.

Figure 1: The process for the determination of planning applications in Northern Ireland

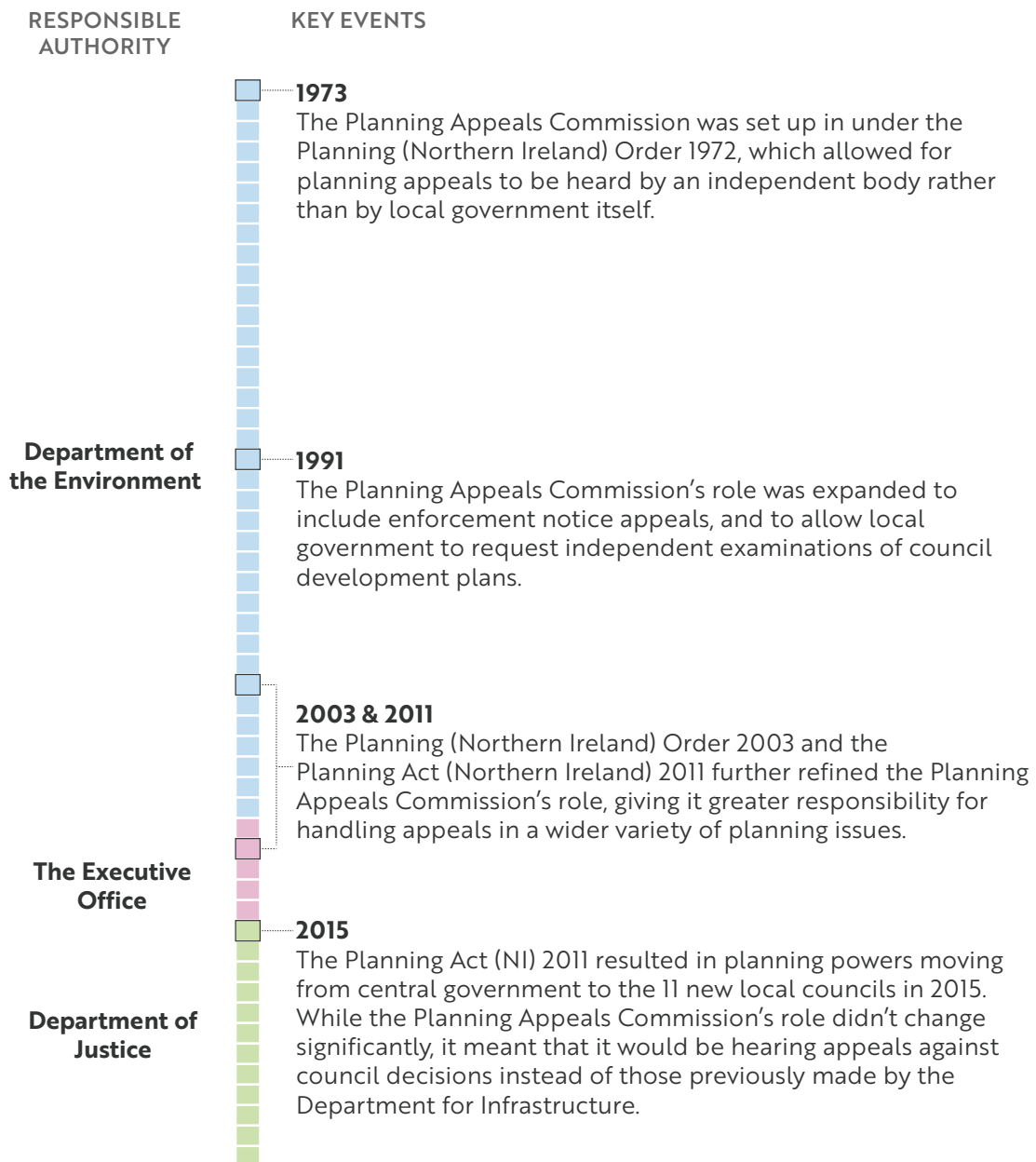


Note: The process outlined above excludes IEs, EIA hearings and appeals against enforcement notices.

As a Tribunal NDPB, the PAC's decisions and recommendations are made independently from any government department and the rest of the planning system

- 1.7** The PAC sits within the departmental boundary of the Department of Justice (the Department) and receives financial and administrative support from its sponsor body, the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS). The Department is responsible for appointing Commissioners and, in consultation with the PAC, can make rules for regulating its proceedings. Despite these sponsorship arrangements, the PAC currently maintains complete autonomy in its decision-making, and NICTS told us that its oversight of the PAC's performance is constrained by the statutory structure and the need to respect constitutional boundaries given the PAC's status as a Tribunal NDPB. We examine this issue in detail in **Part Four** of this report.
- 1.8** The PAC is made up of Commissioners appointed by NICTS on behalf of the Department. Commissioners are not civil servants but are appointed following open public competition as Office Holders and are independent of government. At August 2025, the PAC had 19.4 full-time equivalent Commissioners. The decisions of the Commissioners are quasi-judicial, in that they are administrative in nature but made in a judicial context.
- 1.9** In 2024-25, the PAC received £2.7 million of funding from NICTS, £2.3 million of which covered both Commissioner and administrative salary costs. The PAC also receives a small amount of income from fees attributable to its appeals work. In 2024-25, this equated to around £78,000.
- 1.10** The departmental sponsorship arrangements rested with the then Department of the Environment (DoE) until 2010. In subsequent years, the PAC has been sponsored by the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) (subsequently the Executive Office (TEO)) and since 2016 it has fallen under NICTS which is part of the Department. The statutory role of the PAC and associated accountability arrangements since its creation can be summarised in the timeline in **Figure 2** below.

Figure 2: The History of the Planning Appeals Commission



All elements of the planning system have struggled to meet performance targets but poor delivery from the PAC has contributed significantly to backlogs

1.11 In February 2022, the NIAO published a report ‘Planning in Northern Ireland’, which considered how the planning system had operated since April 2015. The report found a planning system that had struggled to “achieve efficient and timely processing of major development applications...a consistent failure to process the most important development applications in line with the timeliness targets set...”. It concluded that the planning system was not operating efficiently and not delivering for the economy, communities, or the environment. The 2022 report focused on the role of local councils, DfI and statutory consultees and was very critical of the significant delays arising at that time. However, the report did not consider the PAC’s role within the overall planning process.

- 1.12** Since 2022, all elements of the planning system have continued to struggle to meet performance targets. Between 2020-21 and 2024-25, DfI's annual planning statistics, which are accredited official statistics assessed by the Office for Statistics Regulation, show that average processing times for Regionally Significant applications have ranged from 215 to 362 weeks. A proportion of these applications are referred to the PAC, either by DfI, or by way of a hearing. The PAC have advised us that they believe DfI's statistics may not be completely correct as they exclude applications of regional significance previously made under Article 31 of the 1991 Planning Order. It considers that, if these were included, then the range should be 216 to 717 weeks. However, as these figures are not official statistics DfI could not agree their accuracy. Timescales for conducting public local inquiries, hearings and IEs of LDPs are also excessive, with cases regularly taking several years to progress. As discussed in **Part Two** of this report, the considerable backlogs in PAC work on Regionally Significant projects over several years have contributed in large part to these long processing times. Given the economic significance of these projects, these delays are likely to have a very significant impact on investment in Northern Ireland.
- 1.13** Whilst the PAC has no statutory targets for processing appeals (Hear and Decide), considerable backlogs and delays have also accumulated in this workstream. Between 2020-21 and 2024-25, there have been an average of 270 'live' appeal cases with the PAC. At its peak, there were 379 'live' cases. Following efforts to increase resources and improve decision-making timelines, by 31 March 2025 this had reduced to 149 cases.

Scope and methods

- 1.14** This strategic review sets out the important role of the PAC, highlighting the challenges it has faced in recent years, the impact these have had on its performance and planning outcomes and identifying where improvements should be made for the future.
- Part Two considers the PAC's delivery in recent years and the impact of this on the planning system and the wider economy.
 - Part Three summarises the main internal and external challenges facing the PAC and looks at how the PAC has been addressing these issues.
 - Part Four outlines the accountability and governance issues and considers opportunities to improve delivery and learn lessons from other jurisdictions.
- 1.15** The report does not assess the role of the Water Appeals Commission (WAC). The WAC is a separate appellate body and exercises a wide range of functions under Water, Fisheries, Drainage and other similar legislation. The WAC consists of the same Chief Commissioner, Deputy Chief Commissioner and other Commissioners of the PAC. In the last twelve months, only four appeals were received by the WAC, all of which were withdrawn.
- 1.16** While this report is a strategic review of the PAC, the structure of the planning system in Northern Ireland means it is almost impossible to consider a single element of the system in isolation. We have therefore also examined how the PAC interacts with other elements of the two-tier planning system, as well as its interaction with the Department, through the NICTS, as its sponsor department. We previously reported on the wider planning system ('Planning in Northern Ireland' published February 2022) focusing on the roles of both DfI and local councils but this did not include any consideration of the PAC. Therefore, while we recognise that delays occur in other parts of the planning system, those issues have already been considered in our earlier report. Consequently, this report focuses primarily on the work of the PAC.

1.17 Our methodology included:

- Engagement with the PAC, NICTS and DfI throughout the fieldwork process.
- Review of internal delivery data provided by the PAC as well as planning statistics published by DfI and the PAC.
- Review of corporate governance documents from both the PAC and NICTS.
- Meeting with representatives from local government, including senior planning officials from all councils.
- Interviews with a number of current and ex-PAC Commissioners.
- Discussions with interested third-party stakeholders including the NI Chamber of Commerce and representatives from the renewable energy and town planning sectors.
- Meeting with planning appeals officials from other jurisdictions and review of publicly available information on their performance and governance arrangements.

Part Two:

Backlogs and delay

Backlogs and delay

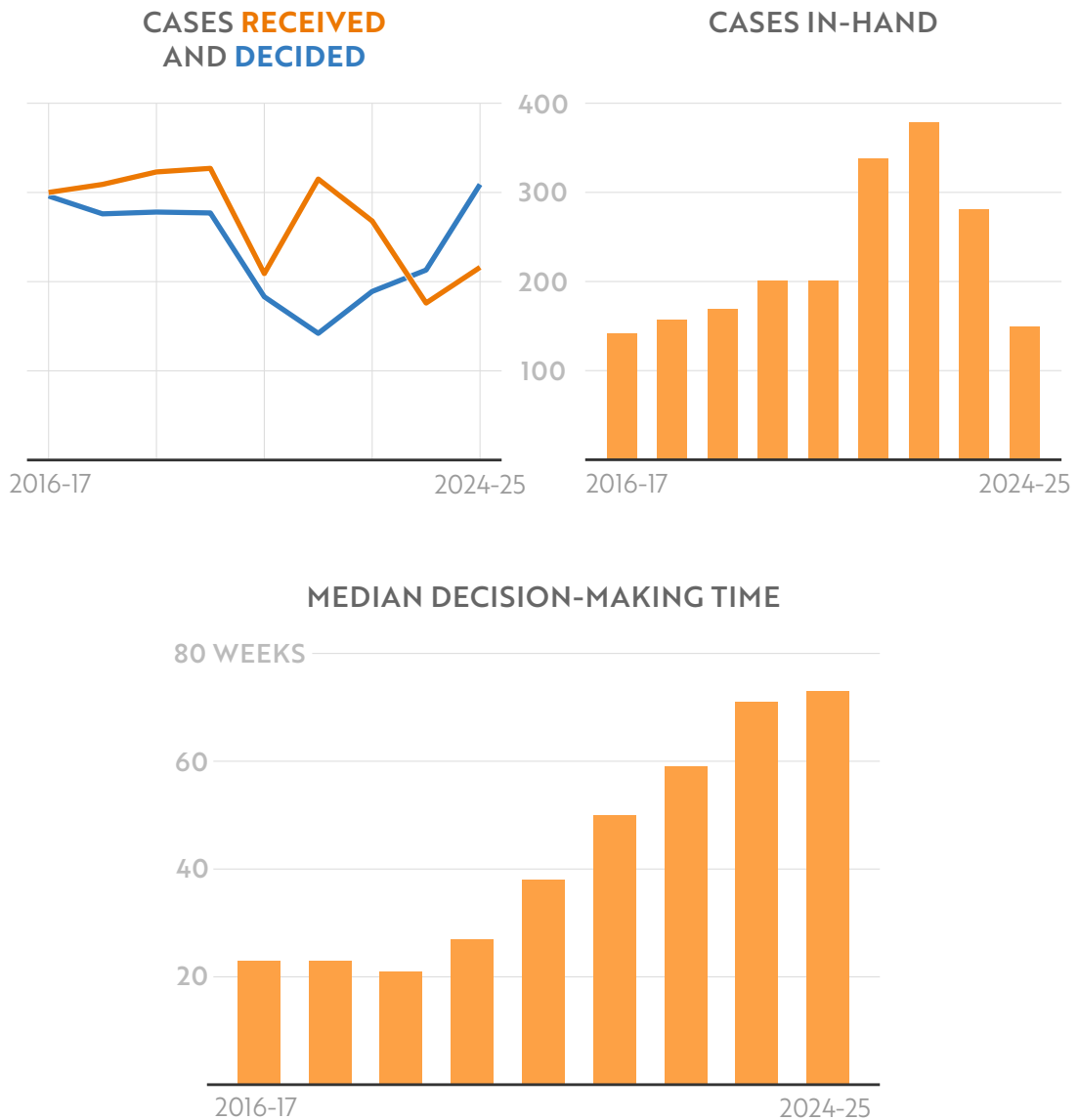
A small proportion of planning applications are subject to PAC review

- 2.1** As noted in **Part One**, the PAC's work is divided into two main workstreams – Hear and Decide, which is appeal work, and Hear and Report, which is both referred and advisory work including Regionally Significant, called-in and the IE of Local Development Plans.
- 2.2** Although the PAC only deals with a relatively small proportion of overall planning applications and appeals in Northern Ireland, over recent years a significant backlog of work built up across all workstreams. On average, around 270 Hear and Decide appeals are received by the PAC each year, a figure equivalent to around two per cent of overall planning applications, received across Northern Ireland. The majority of these appeals relate to the refusal of planning permission, but also include appeals against non-determination of planning applications, and appeals against conditions attached to planning approvals.
- 2.3** The Hear and Report caseload is also very small in number; typically fewer than 20 cases sit with the PAC at any given time (excluding LDPs). However, these cases are the most complex and significant developments in Northern Ireland and take up a very considerable amount of time for the PAC. The last case referred to the PAC by DfI was in July 2024, and there were 19 live cases with the PAC at the end of the 2024-25 year.

Timeframes for appeals have increased by an average of 50 weeks, causing delays to planning appeal decisions

- 2.4** Since 2016-17, the number of appeals received by the PAC has reduced from around 300 per year to just over 200. However, over the same period, the PAC's annual reporting shows that decision-making timeframes have increased substantially from an average of 23 weeks to 73 weeks in 2024-25. The PAC told us that the reduction in output was due to a combination of factors including the impact of the pandemic preventing physical hearings which only recommenced in June 2021, diversion of resources to assist on a new IT system, as well as the Commissioner resource issues which are covered in more detail in **Part Three**.

Figure 3: A significant backlog of Hear and Decide cases built up between 2020 and 2022, with decision times becoming slower



Source: PAC Annual Reports

2.5

Timeframes on appeals have been considerably slower than in England, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. A review of the latest publicly available statistics on each region shows that the PAC took up to nine months longer to process appeals than these other jurisdictions. Whilst direct comparison is difficult, due to the different processes and systems involved in each jurisdiction, this is likely to make Northern Ireland a much less attractive proposition for inward investment.

Figure 4: Other jurisdictions' performance on appeals* has been faster

	Median time/range in 2024-25**
Northern Ireland	73 weeks
Republic of Ireland	41 weeks
Scotland	12-41 weeks
England	25-27 weeks

* The appeals process in other jurisdictions are different to those of the PAC

** In England and Scotland, a range of median times is reported, depending on the procedure i.e. written representations only, hearing etc.

- 2.6** The PAC has implemented action plans to improve decision-making timelines, and this has led to an improvement in delivery timescales in recent months. Hear and Decide cases that were submitted in 2024 took an average of 25 weeks to be decided and cases in hand at the year-end reduced from 281 in 2023-24 to 149 in 2024-25.

Regionally Significant, called-in and EIA cases can take several years to progress

- 2.7** The PAC publishes a list of 'live' Hear and Report cases on its website. These are cases where the public local inquiry or hearing has not yet commenced. In August 2025, there were 20 live cases, all of which were subject to lengthy delays (**Appendices 1 and 2**):

- eight cases related to the Curraghinalt Project (Dalradian);
- three wind farms;
- five requests for environmental impact assessment hearing determinations;
- one case relating to the Lough Neagh sand extraction; and
- three 'other' cases.

On average, these cases had been with the PAC for around two and a half years, however nine cases had been with it for more than three years.

- 2.8** DfI provided us with a list of the nine Hear and Report reports and recommendations received on applications which had been referred to the PAC since 2016 up until the date of our review. Our analysis shows that on average there were 107 weeks, or around two years, between DfI's referral and the PAC issuing its report and recommendations. However, it is important to note that when cases are passed by DfI to PAC, in some cases it can be several weeks or months before all information is actually received by PAC. The PAC told us that when this is taken into account the period between referral and the PAC report being published was actually 75 weeks.

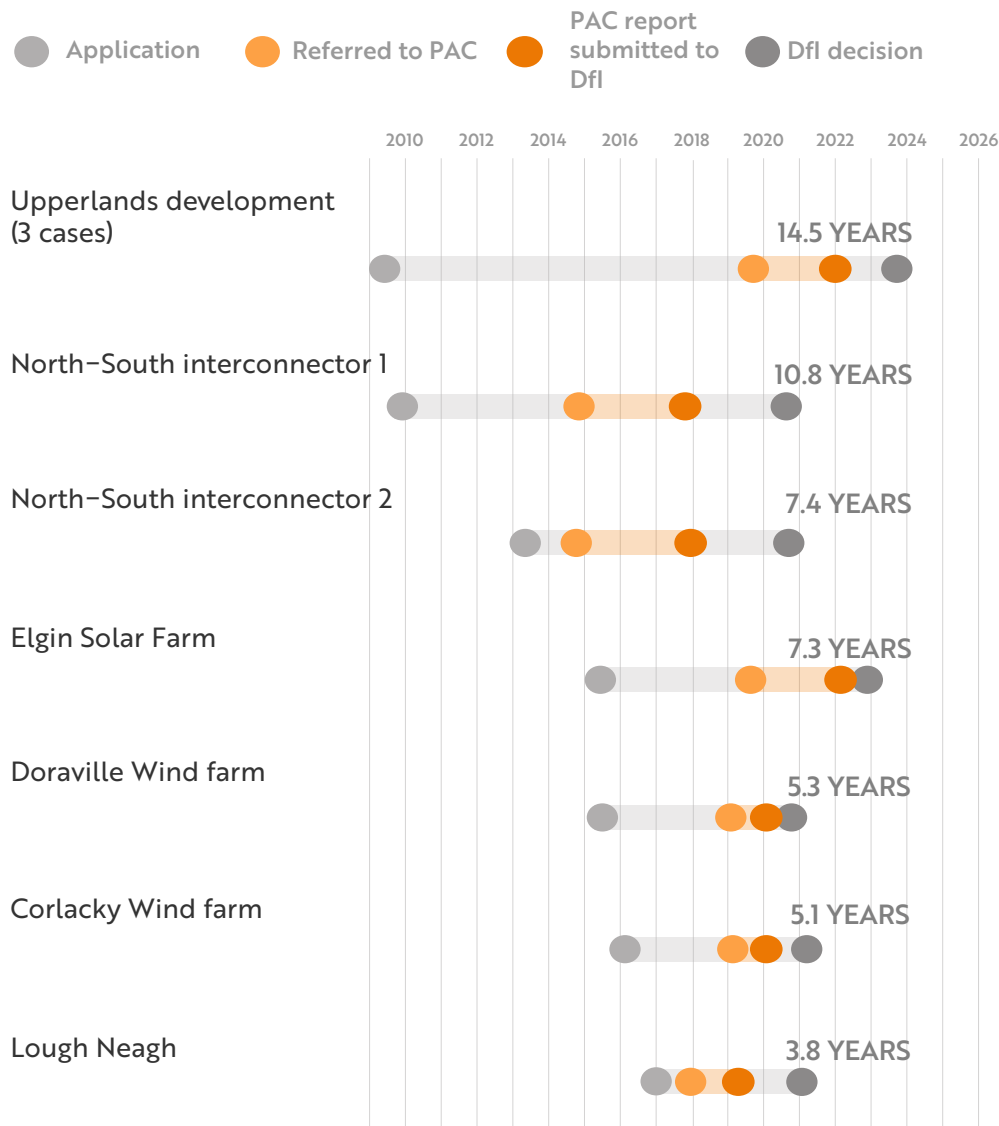
2.9 The PAC also told us that resourcing issues have been the main cause of delay on the Hear and Report workstream as it has been building capacity internally amongst the Senior Commissioner cohort to undertake this type of work. All but one of the cases have been allocated to a Senior Commissioner pending the outcome of a judicial review on a linked appeal case. However, as at August 2025, none of these had been able to progress, for a number of reasons including:

- after a long period of delay, the need to update environmental information; and
- four cases which have reverted to DfI due to the need to undertake statutory procedures which are beyond the remit of the PAC, again partly due to long delays with the PAC.

Delays are also encountered in the planning process both before cases are referred to PAC and after the PAC issues its report and recommendations

2.10 While the PAC provides a report and recommendations on Hear and Report cases, DfI remains the final decision-maker in these cases. DfI provided us with a list of the decisions it has issued in the last five years on Regionally Significant and called-in cases (**Appendix 3**). There were only nine decisions in total, and our analysis shows that the applications were with both the PAC and DfI for significant periods of time (**Figure 5**). On average, Hear and Report (excluding LDPs) cases were with the PAC for 107 weeks, or two years (based on the date the case was initially passed to PAC), before a report and recommendations were issued to DfI. On average, DfI took a further 86 weeks, or just over a year and a half, to issue a final decision to the applicant. DfI told us that a range of reasons, including the potential for judicial review and other legal challenges, can cause delays once a report has been received from the PAC.

Figure 5: Decisions on Regionally Significant and called-in cases referred to the PAC



Source: DfI Planning Portal and DfI internal data

At the time of our review, none¹ of the Hear and Report cases that DfI had referred to the PAC since 2021 had been completed

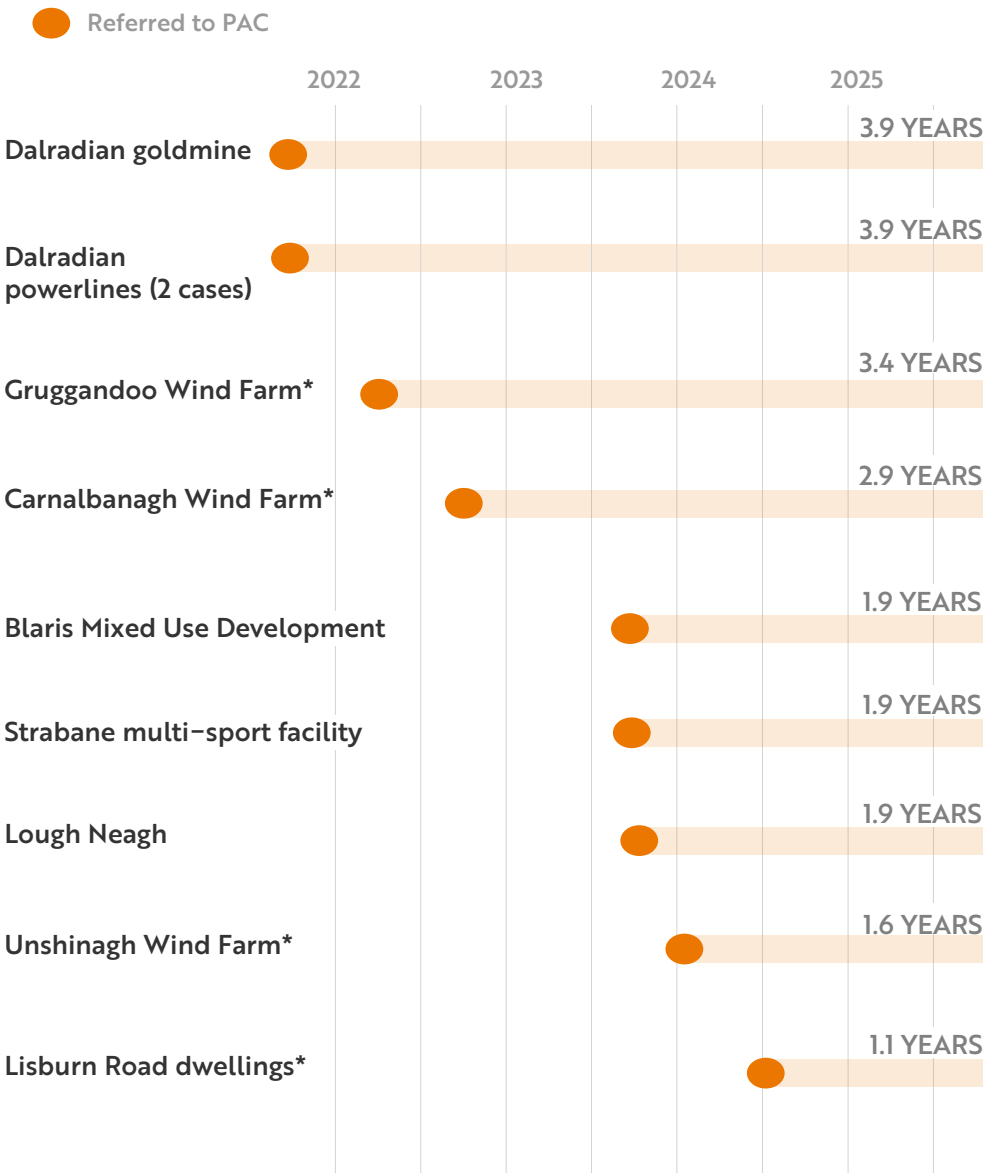
2.11 Since 2021, a further ten Regionally Significant or called-in cases have been referred to the PAC, with only one report and recommendations received to date (**Appendix 1**). Of these, five were public local inquiries and five were the subject of Notices of Opinion where hearings have been requested by either the applicant, council or both. These cases are included in **Figure 6**.

2.12 These referrals took place despite the PAC advising DfI that it did not have the resources at that time to progress the cases. Due to the delays in scheduling a public local inquiry or hearing, four of these cases (which are included in **Figure 6** below) have reverted to DfI to undertake updated statutory processes which the PAC does not have the power to undertake.

¹ Our review concluded in August 2025. Since then, one of the Hear and Report cases referred by DfI to the PAC has been completed.

Figure 6: Outstanding Regionally Significant and called-in cases

Cases still outstanding up to the end of August 2025



Source: DfI Planning Portal and DfI internal data

*At August 2025, these four cases had reverted back to DfI (paragraph 2.9).

2.13 Whilst there have been serious issues with the PAC’s delivery and timeliness of decision-making in recent years, delays are experienced across the whole system and a collaborative approach to improving performance is urgently required, including prioritisation of the most significant projects. We discuss this issue in more detail in **Part Three**.

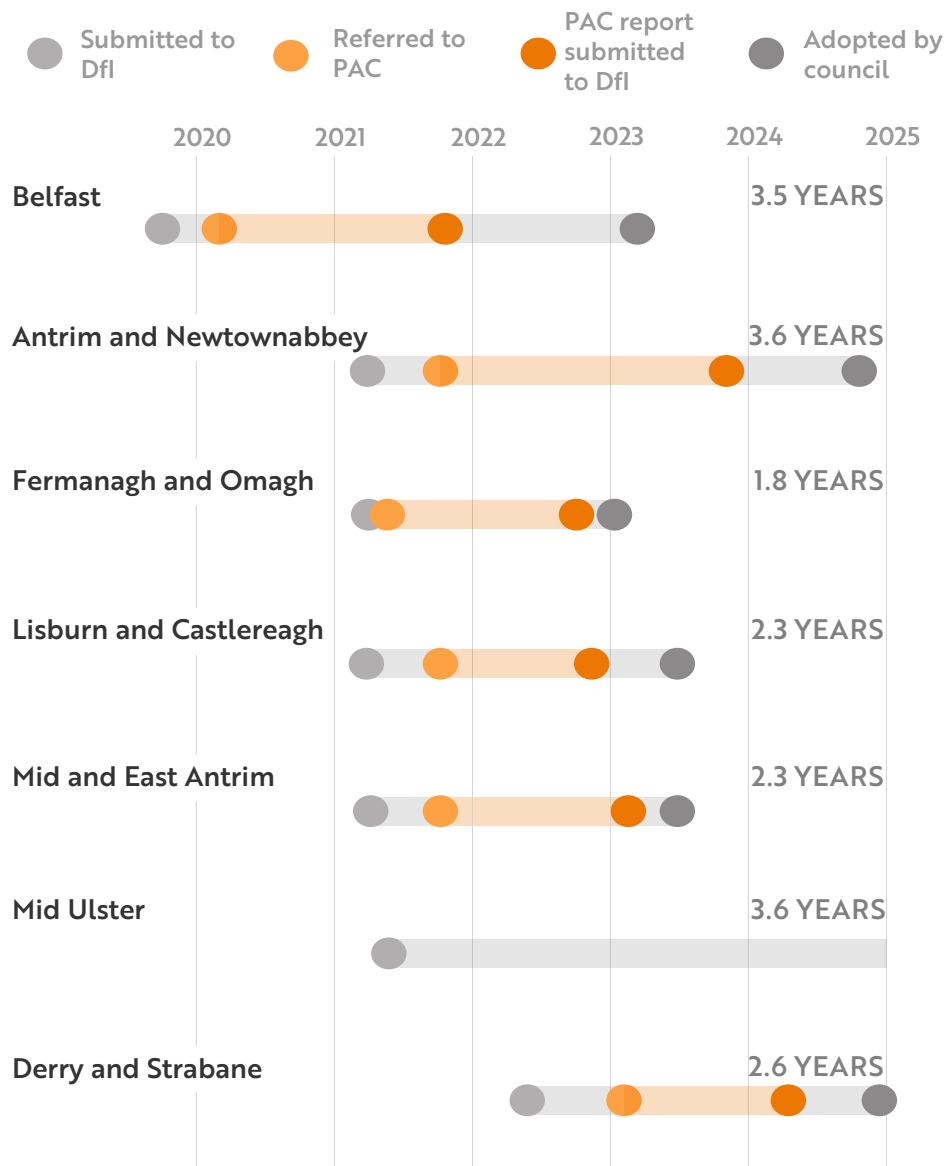
Independent examination of Local Development Plans has been slow to progress

2.14 Councils in Northern Ireland are required to prepare an LDP, which provides a 15-year framework to direct and control the scale and type of development in that council area. They are fundamentally important in planning as they should underpin all future planning decisions taken.

2.15 There are two parts to the completion of the LDP process, which are prescribed in legislation. Firstly, a PS is completed by the council. It will include the vision, objectives, growth strategy and strategic policies for the council area. The second stage is an LPP which will include policy and proposals, such as settlement limits and zones, which are more local and detailed. Both stages require a Soundness Based IE, which to date have been completed by the PAC. DfI will consider the PAC report before directing the council to adopt, modify or withdraw the development plan document.

2.16 Currently, six of the eleven local councils’ plans have been through the IE process for the first stage of their LDP. Our analysis (**Figure 7**) shows that this process took between 22 and 43 months to complete (**Appendix 4**), with a significant proportion of this time spent at PAC (between 16 and 28 months). The PAC told us that the extended timescales in four of the cases resulted from them being received within a four-month period, requiring hearings to be staggered to accommodate the parties involved. As yet, no council has completed the second stage of the process.

Figure 7: Local Development Plan timelines



Source: DfI

- 2.17** Whilst issues with the volume and complexity of the work required by councils have undoubtedly played a fundamental role in delays, the PAC has also contributed to delays. The PAC received additional funding from the Department in 2020 to appoint three new Senior Commissioners to progress LDP work, however it told us that those new Commissioners needed to gain experience. The PAC also stated that the legislative framework within which it operates has contributed to delays across the LDP process. It disagrees that it has itself caused delays, maintaining that all referred LDP work was prioritised and allocated to a Commissioner within three to five months of receipt, which it considers to be a standard lead-in time. It also stated that one of the more recently appointed Commissioners has now presided over an IE.
- 2.18** There is only one LDP awaiting referral to the PAC from DfI and therefore Commissioners have reverted to other workstreams but will be reallocated to LDPs when plans are ready for examination. The PAC anticipates that Commissioners will resume work on LDPs in 2026-27. Timetables prepared by councils indicate that all plans will be approved and in place by 2032-33, some 17 years after planning powers transferred to local councils. Six councils have adopted their Plan Strategies and are working towards publication of a Local Policies Plan, with a number due to publish draft documents in 2026 and therefore move to the IE stage in 2027. The remaining four councils have yet to submit draft Plan Strategies to DfI. It therefore appears that the provisional timetable is ambitious for all councils to achieve.
- 2.19** Our 2022 report on the planning system identified the need for DfI to review the LDP process and to consider whether it was proportionate and provided value for all stakeholders. Subsequently, the Public Accounts Committee recommended that DfI consider ways to streamline the remaining LDP processes. DfI told the Public Accounts Committee that "streamlining LDP processes is a significant element of the Planning Improvement Programme, with several actions being taken forward jointly by DfI and local government covering all areas of the existing process, including legislation, guidance, procedures and the role of key stakeholders, including the Planning Appeals Commission." With the first stage of the LDP review process taking an average of two and a half years to complete, there is little evidence that the actions outlined above have been effective.
- 2.20** There have been suggestions that the LDP process could be streamlined in several ways – for example removing the need for councils to submit their plans to DfI in the first instance as these are regularly passed on to the PAC without commentary. Another suggestion is that the PAC's report should be binding and similarly made directly to the council rather than going back through DfI. These changes would require a change to primary legislation, which would take a number of years to implement.

Delays in decision-making are likely to have major economic and environmental impacts

- 2.21** The planning system has the potential to make an important contribution to much needed development in Northern Ireland. When it works effectively, it can have a key role in encouraging investment and supporting the economy, creating places that people want to work, live and invest in. Our 2022 report concluded that *"the planning system is not operating efficiently. Crucially, in many aspects, the system doesn't deliver for the economy, communities, or the environment."*

2.22 For this report, we undertook a range of engagement with representatives from the business, renewable energy and local government sectors, all of whom raised significant concerns about the impact of delays on the regionally significant and called-in projects that are being held up in the PAC process, as well as more generally across the planning system in Northern Ireland. These concerns can be grouped into three broad themes.

A lack of certainty is discouraging investment in Northern Ireland

2.23 Significant development projects have the potential to encourage investment, create jobs, and improve infrastructure for local communities. However, a poorly performing planning system is widely seen as a barrier to investment in Northern Ireland. A report produced by the NI Chamber of Commerce and Industry highlighted the importance of a well-functioning planning system in facilitating economic growth and instilling confidence in potential investors. In particular, the report stated that, *"the absence of certainty around timescales is a major disincentive for investment in Northern Ireland."*

2.24 This contrasts with the arrangements in the Republic of Ireland where An Coimisiun Pleanála (ACP), the appeals body in the Republic of Ireland, has specific targets for processing strategic infrastructure projects and incurs financial penalties if these are missed, creating more certainty for investors (see **Part Four**). However, unlike the PAC, the ACP deals with these cases as the planning authority of first instance meaning that, if similar arrangements were in place in Northern Ireland, such financial penalties would be incurred by DfI. The implementation of changes, such as introduction of financial penalties, would require legislative change which could be considered within a fundamental review of the status and structure of the PAC.

Delays on renewable energy applications such as windfarms put climate change targets at risk

2.25 Northern Ireland's Energy Strategy and the Climate Change (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 set a renewable electricity consumption target of 80 per cent by 2030. Statistics from the Department for the Economy show that in the period from April 2024 to March 2025, 43 per cent of electricity consumption in Northern Ireland was from renewable sources and that this figure has decreased for the last two years. Meeting renewable energy targets will require a significant increase in renewable generating capacity and the planning system has a vital role to play.

2.26 Of the 20 Hear and Report cases with the PAC in August 2025, three are proposals for wind farms, which were initially submitted to the PAC between 19 and 40 months previously. A report published by Renewables NI in September 2023 (Accelerating Renewables in Northern Ireland) cited planning timetables in Northern Ireland as a "major barrier" to development and found that the lack of clarity is having a "material impact on development" meaning that Northern Ireland is now lagging behind Ireland and Great Britain in efforts to decarbonise.

2.27 It also stated that, given the current timelines to progress projects, unless a project was currently in the pipeline it was unlikely to contribute to the 2030 targets and therefore it is highly likely that these will be missed. We also heard anecdotal evidence that at one time developers were applying with smaller scale schemes, which can be decided at local council level, to avoid the delays with both DfI and the PAC. However, this limited the size and scope of renewable projects and will also have an impact on the ability to meet climate change targets.

Local Development Plans will be out of date by the time they are reviewed and adopted

2.28 Northern Ireland’s planning system is intended to be “plan-led” with each council preparing a LDP which will direct and control the scale and type of development which can be undertaken. In 2015, DfI originally estimated that each council would have a plan in place within 40 months of commencing the process. Our 2022 report on the Planning System found that this timetable was unrealistic, and we recommended that DfI should consider streamlining the remaining process. Since then, the process has experienced even more delays, with a significant proportion of time spent at the PAC and current estimates show that it is now likely to be the mid-2030s before all plans are adopted. Councils told us they were concerned that plans will be out of date by the time they have completed the process. DfI has advised that under the Planning Improvement Programme (PIP), improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the LDP process remains a key priority, and is being progressed in partnership with Local Government. The broad themes being taken forward are legislation, guidance and processes, and roles and responsibilities at independent examination. It is important that the PAC are part of this process.



Recommendation 1

The Department should urgently arrange to carry out a fundamental review of the PAC including its status, statutory structure and associated governance, oversight and accountability arrangements. In doing so it should liaise closely with key stakeholders.

We recognise that a fundamental review of the PAC is likely to take some time to complete and deliver change. In the interim, a range of actions to drive improvements in delivery, communication and accountability should be implemented.



Recommendation 2

More certainty and confidence around the timescales for delivery of PAC caseloads is essential. Pending the outcome of a fundamental review, we recommend that the PAC should develop and publish detailed plans to clear the long-standing cases in each workstream. These plans should include timelines for clearing backlogs and regular monitoring by NICTS.

Part Three:

Key challenges and issues

Key challenges and issues

The PAC has gone through a period of considerable resourcing issues

3.1 Since 2010, the resourcing of the PAC has changed significantly, with a reduction in the number of Commissioners and administrative staff. Previously there were around 20 permanent Commissioners, supported by an administrative team and, until 2013-14, a small number of Panel Commissioners who could be called upon in peak times to ease pressures. By 2016-17, the PAC's total complement had reduced by over 40 per cent and the Panel Commissioner role no longer exists.

3.2 Whilst there has been considerable natural attrition, mostly due to retirement since 2016-17, the PAC has also faced operational and personnel issues in the intervening period. We engaged with a number of current and ex-Commissioners during our fieldwork for this report and received a mix of feedback about organisational and performance issues over the last number of years. Issues raised with us included:

- a lack of succession planning;
- a change in working practices and culture in recent years;
- the loss of experienced Commissioners due to retirement, as well as to other parts of the planning system and other jurisdictions; and
- the appointment of new Commissioners with little tribunal experience.

They also pointed to other jurisdictions where Commissioners tend to come from a range of backgrounds and experience, such as engineering, architecture, and ecology, whereas PAC Commissioners are predominantly planners.

3.3 Regardless of the reasons behind the above issues in this period, they have had a major impact and contributed to the loss of a significant number of experienced Commissioners. Due to the number of departures, NICTS has had to undertake a series of Commissioner recruitment exercises. Since 2020-2021, there have been 17 new appointments to the PAC, including 14 new commissioners. It also operated below full complement of Commissioners for most of this period.

3.4 The 2024-25 financial year is the first time that the PAC has had a full complement of Commissioners since 2017. However, the PAC told us that some of these new appointees will require more experience in the role and therefore it considers that it is likely to be 2026-27 before the PAC is fully operational.

Resourcing has impacted on how the PAC has allocated its workloads

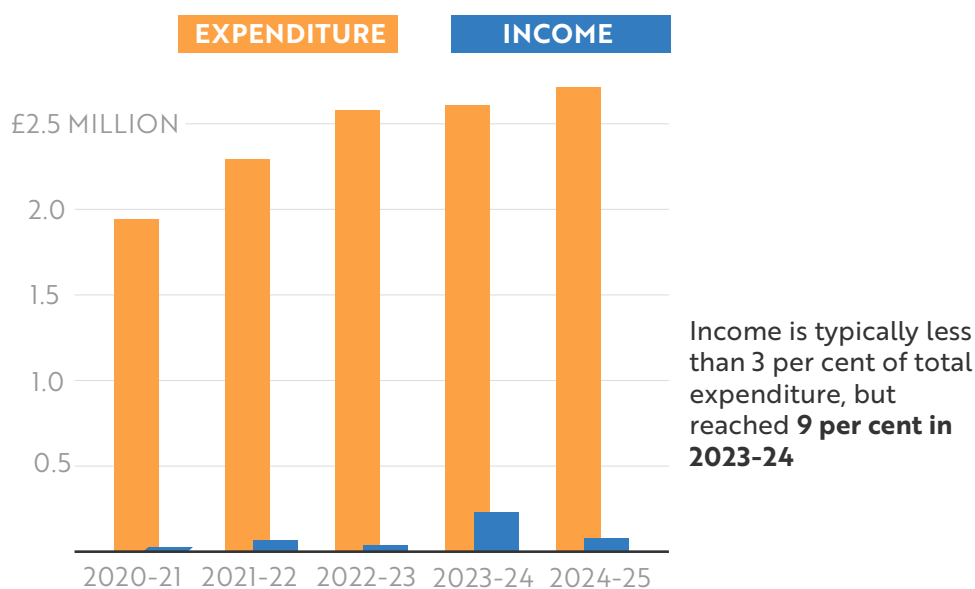
3.5 The vacancies at Senior Commissioner level, followed by a period of upskilling newly appointed Commissioners, have had a significant impact on the way the Chief Commissioner has chosen to allocate work in the last number of years. The PAC told us that the new Senior Commissioners, have mainly worked on Hear and Decide cases to gain experience, followed by working alongside more experienced Commissioners on the more complex Hear and Report work.

- 3.6** Whilst this has led to an improvement in the delivery timescales on Hear and Decide work since 2023-24, ultimately it has meant that the Hear and Report development (excluding IE of LDPs), which tends to be more complex, has not been progressed, leading to the long backlogs and delays outlined in **Part Two**. This is contrary to arrangements in other jurisdictions, where different legislative arrangements and governance structures allow nationally significant projects to be prioritised. The PAC told us that the more complex work was always factored into business planning and progressed at the earliest opportunity.
- 3.7** Referring authorities do not indicate any prioritisation of the cases sent to the PAC, therefore the Commission chooses to allocate these in order of their receipt, as it considers that this is the fairest means of progressing casework, regardless of their potential impact or complexity.

The PAC receives a small amount of income from fees for appeals work

- 3.8** Fees are charged for appeals received by the PAC (under the 'Hear and Decide' route) and are set by the Planning Fees (Deemed Planning Applications and Appeals) Regulations 2015. These regulations prescribe the fees to be charged for planning appeals and deemed planning applications, with both sets of fees having been uplifted once since 2015. The planning appeals fee is £150 per appeal, regardless of the scope and scale of the development. The PAC received income of £78,000 from the appeals workstream in 2024-25. Total PAC expenditure in 2024-25 was £2.7 million, meaning it recovered just under three per cent of its costs. Over the last five years, it has never recovered more than ten per cent of its costs as there is no mechanism for it to do so.

Figure 8: PAC income is consistently lower than expenditure



Source: NICTS

- 3.9** DfI is responsible for setting planning application fees. Both the Department's fees for appeals and deemed applications and DfI's planning fees have been uplifted by 19 per cent since 2019. DfI recently announced a further inflationary uplift of 2.1 per cent for 2025 and the Department has prepared a draft statutory instrument with a view to mirroring this increase, subject to the outcome of a consultation exercise.

- 3.10** Deemed application fees arise in enforcement appeal cases where the appellant argues that planning permission should be granted for unauthorised development (i.e. where no planning permission was sought). Fees received by the PAC to determine these deemed applications are lower than the planning application fee set by DfI in the first instance. The PAC told us that it had been liaising with the Department on this issue for six years, however the fees were only uplifted in August 2025 and are still less than those charged by DfI and local councils.

There is no charge to referring authorities when they refer cases to the PAC

- 3.11** No fees are charged for any aspect of the Hear and Report work referred to the PAC by statutory bodies, predominantly DfI. DfI receives the planning fee for Regionally Significant applications, which can be considerable, but none of this is passed on to the PAC under the current arrangements. This is contrary to arrangements in other jurisdictions as discussed further below.
- 3.12** We are concerned that the current arrangements could create an incentive for DfI to pass this work on to the PAC at no financial cost. DfI told us that decisions to request that the PAC hold a public local inquiry into a planning application would never be influenced by financial considerations. Rather, it told us that they are a matter of planning judgement in each individual case based on factors such as significant issues of public interest, conflict or policy importance that warrant being aired and tested through the independent inquiry process to allow for cross-examination, expert evidence and full public participation.
- 3.13** In the absence of specific cost-recovery mechanisms, the Department, through NICTS, has full responsibility for funding the PAC to deliver its services. For example, the Department provided over £300,000 of funding in October 2020 to appoint three Senior Commissioners, increasing the PAC's capacity for LDP work.

In other jurisdictions, a range of more substantial planning charges are applied

- 3.14** In other jurisdictions, whilst different structures, procedures and legal frameworks exist, a range of more substantial planning charges is applied. In England, the Planning Inspectorate (PINS) does not charge a fee for planning appeals, however it receives income for some services including local plan examinations and nationally significant infrastructure projects (NSIP). The standard daily amount for an independent examiner is £993 and is paid by the referring authority. Where PINS processes and decides on a planning application under the NSIP regime, the planning application fee is paid directly to it. PINS received £16.7 million for NSIP work in 2024-25, £2.9 million from local plans and £1.7 million for other major specialist casework.
- 3.15** In the Republic of Ireland, ACP appeal fees are proportionate to the scale of the development, ranging from €220 to €4,500. For strategic infrastructure applications, where ACP processes and decides upon the planning application, a flat rate of €100,000 is applied, part of which is refunded to the applicant if costs do not reach this level.
- 3.16** In Scotland, planning appeal fees were introduced in June 2025 at a rate of 40 per cent of the original planning application fee. Fee income is ring-fenced for improvements to the appeals service and has allowed for recruitment across both reporters (the equivalent of Commissioners) and administrative staff. In Wales, a similar system is being considered, which would introduce planning appeal fees at 50 per cent of the original application fee.

- 3.17** We note that the PAC and NICTS do not collect detailed information on the costs of different workstreams, and only the costs of the ongoing, high-profile, Curraghinalt Project (Dalradian) public local inquiry are analysed separately in the financial reporting system. Therefore, the amount of public money being incurred on distinct types of work and what would be needed to achieve better cost-recovery is not currently scrutinised. Commissioners are allocated to specific work, for example Hear and Decide, LDPs, Hear and Report, and so it should be possible to analyse the time and costs incurred by the PAC on this basis. More robust information on the costs of different workstreams would allow the PAC and NICTS to make a stronger case for additional resources and demonstrate the time and effort required for each element of their work.
- 3.18** Whilst there is a compelling argument for the introduction of new or improved mechanisms for cost-recovery, this would have to be linked to improved performance outcomes. It is unlikely that users of the planning system and referring authorities would be willing to pay more for appeals or towards hearings and inquiries if decision-making timetables remain so unpredictable and protracted. This view was supported by the Chamber of Commerce during our period of engagement. The PAC told us that an increased financial resource could be reinvested in securing additional Commissioners and therefore ultimately lead to increased productivity. It is important that any future business cases for increased funding for additional posts make a clear case for the impact of such resources and that any increase in productivity is actively monitored and assessed by the NICTS.



Recommendation 3

Pending the outcome of a fundamental review, we recommend that the PAC, working with the Department and Dfl as appropriate, should carry out a review of the current appeal fees and charging regime, alongside performance reporting and monitoring, with a view to improving cost recovery.

Communication and engagement between the PAC and other key stakeholders could be improved to prevent unnecessary delays

- 3.19** The relationship between Dfl and the PAC is an important one as the majority of Hear and Report work comes from Dfl, and the PAC depends on the quality and completeness of information to be able to conduct inquiries and hearings efficiently and effectively. Both organisations indicated concerns regarding the adequacy and timing of information exchange, which has contributed to delays. The PAC indicated that when Dfl refers work to it, it considers that the supporting documentation can be poor quality or incomplete, that some referrals are made at too early a stage and the need for further information can cause more delays. However, Dfl told us that it completes and submits a vast amount of work and information before it calls for a public local inquiry, and that it considers that the PAC has a responsibility to liaise with it, provide regular updates on progress and ensure that information provided is satisfactory and meets its needs before commencing its inquiry. We note that the PAC takes the position that, once a case is live, all issues must be dealt with transparently, meaning in public.
- 3.20** We have seen examples of difficult working relationships and less than effective engagement and communication, with differing views on how independence should be maintained. The PAC told us that it must always act in an open, fair and transparent way and cannot be perceived as directing any party. However, our strong view is that a more co-operative approach between the PAC and Dfl as to the scheduling of work and the completeness of information is urgently needed to improve planning outcomes.

3.21 Hear and Report cases can come before the PAC in two ways:

- A public local inquiry is a formal process initiated at Dfl's discretion. It can be initiated before any view on refusing or approving the application has been taken, or after such a recommendation has been made to the Minister.
- Alternatively, Dfl may choose to perform its own assessment and make a Notice of Opinion to both the applicant and the relevant council. If either party, or both, requests an opportunity to appear before, and be heard by, the PAC, Dfl must afford to each of them that opportunity.

Five of the ten Hear and Report cases currently with the PAC were referred directly without a Notice of Opinion.

3.22 While Dfl is fully entitled to pass cases directly to the PAC to hold a public local inquiry, it should consider the capacity of the PAC to undertake the work at that time, including any impact on delivery timeframes. Dfl told us that it cannot make these judgements based on resourcing or capacity issues of the PAC, and that they will be based on the individual merits of the case.**3.23** The PAC also told us that Dfl had been unwilling to provide guidance on prioritisation of its casework. In recent months, Dfl has written to the PAC to inform it of the cases that are ready for a public local inquiry to commence, and those which require additional information due to the passage of time since they were submitted. However, a more structured mechanism for shared understanding of case urgency would help manage expectations, plan the Hear and Report casework and give more certainty to applicants as to when their cases are likely to come before the PAC, while respecting statutory independence.**3.24** The PAC told us that, given the nature of what each body does, the relationship between Dfl and the PAC has always been strained. From our review of written correspondence, minutes of meetings and engagement with stakeholders, we observed that the relationship between Dfl and the PAC appears to have become increasingly fractured in recent years. Despite the strategic issues facing the planning system, quarterly meetings between the Dfl's Chief Planner and the Chief Commissioner are no longer the norm and communication is largely in the form of written correspondence only. Dfl told us that it has made a number of attempts to recommence these meetings.**3.25** A key recommendation of the Public Accounts Committee report on Planning in Northern Ireland was that a Commission should be established to undertake a fundamental review of the planning system. Dfl established an independent interim Regional Planning Commission which first met in February 2023. It was tasked to constructively review, identify improvements, and promote further accountability in planning in Northern Ireland. Whilst Dfl and local councils are represented on the Commission, the PAC was not invited to participate, in order to maintain its independence. Instead, Dfl told us that it chose to liaise with the PAC separately on key elements of the PIP, with the Commission being established to represent the planning profession, including external representatives from the environment, economy and community. As a result, there is no apparent vehicle for all key statutory bodies to discuss and manage the ongoing backlogs, issues and risks facing the planning system.

3.26 We also heard criticisms that the PAC itself is isolated and has little engagement with other elements of the planning system, in particular local councils. Requests for meetings have been rejected, with the PAC's need to maintain independence cited. The PAC explained to us that it facilitates meetings when requested and where they are not related to live casework. It is possible, however, that more meaningful engagement with both DfI and local councils could give the PAC a better understanding of applications in the pipeline and inform its wider workforce planning, scheduling of work and risk management.

Changes implemented by NICTS and the PAC are beginning to make an impact on Hear and Decide cases

- 3.27** NICTS and the PAC acknowledge that delivery has not been at the required level for the last number of years but have implemented a number of changes aimed at improving delivery. These include:
- recruitment processes that are more tailored to the unique nature of the Commissioner role;
 - action plans to clear backlogs of Hear and Decide casework, including reallocation of work;
 - transition of the PAC to new premises designed to consolidate hearings centrally;
 - ongoing investment in training and development; and
 - investment in a new IT system which provides better management information and facilitates the Commissioners with digital working.
- 3.28** Cumulatively, the increase in the number of Commissioners and these changes are making an impact, particularly on Hear and Decide caseloads. We analysed the decisions issued between 2021-22 and 2024-25 and found that whilst overall timeframes have increased by 20 weeks, these have now started to decrease and that the number of decisions issued has increased.
- 3.29** The recent improvement in Hear and Decide delivery is welcome and it is important that the PAC focuses on building on this progress in future.

DfI has secured funding to help address pressures in the planning system

- 3.30** The Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 provides DfI with powers to appoint persons other than the PAC to carry out Hear and Report work. However, despite the obvious issues with the PAC's capacity and delivery, this has not been invoked since the move to the two-tier planning system in 2015. Due to the ongoing performance and resourcing issues of the PAC, there have been repeated calls, including from the PAC itself, for DfI to use this legislation to appoint individuals outside of the PAC to conduct inquiries and help clear the backlog of Hear and Report cases, however funding has been a consistent barrier for DfI.
- 3.31** In March 2025, the Infrastructure Minister announced £3 million Public Sector Transformation funding from the Transformation Programme to enable DfI to exercise its powers under the Planning Act (NI) 2011 to appoint independent persons to deliver reports to the Department on the planning and environmental considerations relating to major Hear and Report work. This includes public local inquiries, hearings following a notice of opinion issued by DfI for Regionally Significant and called-in applications, and the independent examination of LDPs.

- 3.32** The project is in the early stages and the Dfl project team continues to progress the appointment process. It is anticipated that appointments will be made in Quarter 1 of 2026-27, with work allocated from Quarter 2 of 2026-27. Whilst the additional measures to improve the system are welcomed, it is important that these are introduced as soon as possible and that any potential impact on the PAC is considered.

Significant challenges remain on Hear and Report work

- 3.33** At August 2025, the PAC had planned and profiled Hear and Report casework into the 2026-27 year. All ten Regionally Significant and called-in cases are scheduled to commence in early 2026-27. The PAC told us that these timetables are provisional and that there are several cases which may not progress due to circumstances beyond its control. We note that this does not include provision for any LDP work or any new referrals from Dfl. At the time of this review, the PAC told us it was still not operating at full capacity with vacancies and as some Commissioners remained in training.

The PAC has taken responsibility for additional workstreams with limited extra resources

- 3.34** Dfl has recently amended planning legislation to include a new requirement for validation checklists to be submitted with planning applications. These validation checklists are intended to improve the quality of planning applications received by councils and therefore speed up decision-making. They include a role for the PAC where disputes arise from the checklists, in which cases applicants can appeal to the PAC. The PAC also cited the introduction of the costs regime and its role in conducting and reporting on independent examination of LDPs as additional workstreams which were not funded by the body who introduced them, and instead required NICTS to provide funding for three new Senior Commissioners.
- 3.35** The PAC has told us that it is concerned about the operational impact of these additional workstreams and that it should receive additional funding for any new work from the body introducing it. The accountability and funding arrangements for the PAC are from the Department, through NICTS, and requests for increased funding are considered alongside other departmental priorities. Dfl has told the PAC that resourcing is an issue for it and its sponsor department, and that in any case it expects that the volume of validation checklist appeals is likely to be low.

The increasing complexity of cases, particularly in relation to environmental issues, contributes to delays

- 3.36** The PAC and other stakeholders told us that the process for Regionally Significant applications can be unpredictable and resource intensive for all involved. Changes to proposed schemes, additional environmental information and issues with consultees' responses, as well as the impact of court action can all result in delays in decision-making.
- 3.37** Extended PAC timescales can themselves be a cause of further delay. The longer a public local inquiry or hearing is delayed, the more likely it is that new or updated considerations particularly in relation to environmental issues, will occur and further information will be required, prolonging the process even further. By example, there are currently four Hear and Report cases which have had to be returned to Dfl as the applicants had to update their environmental information and, in some cases, amend their scheme.

The Curraghinalt Project (Dalradian) public local inquiry will be particularly resource intensive now it has resumed

- 3.38** The Dalradian public local inquiry was postponed in January 2025. Since that time, Dfl has undertaken transboundary consultation. It reopened in April 2026. The scale and resources required for it are likely to put pressure on the PAC and may impact its ability to effectively deliver other work.



Recommendation 4

While it is important that the PAC retains its independence in decision-making, it is a key part of the planning process and a shared commitment to improving delivery is urgently required. Pending the outcome of a fundamental review we recommend that:

- The PAC, the Department and Dfl should work together to ensure the operational delivery of new work allocated to the PAC is assessed and adequately resourced ahead of its introduction.
 - The PAC and Dfl should agree processes to ensure that administrative issues with the potential to delay or frustrate a public local inquiry or hearing are fully understood and resolved before the inquiry or hearing commences.
 - The PAC should put in place a process of regular engagement with other parts of the planning system, including Dfl and councils, to provide it with an early indication of issues in the planning system so that workloads and prioritisation can be properly planned.
-

Part Four:

Accountability, oversight and governance

Accountability, oversight and governance

The PAC is wholly independent from any minister or department in terms of its decision-making

- 4.1** Since its inception, the PAC has retained an independent decision-making role, separate from any government department or political influence. Financial and administrative support is provided by the sponsoring department, the Department of Justice, through NICTS. The PAC is completely autonomous in its decision-making and the operation of the appeals, hearings, inquiries and examination processes. It is not answerable for its decisions to any government department, Minister or any other agency or public body. Decisions are, however, open to challenge on a point of law by application to the High Court for judicial review, reflecting the PAC's independent appellate roles in planning and environmental matters.
- 4.2** Throughout our review, the Chief Commissioner stressed the importance of the PAC's independence as it is a key democratic safeguard where citizens can access justice and challenge decisions in front of an independent body. However, the PAC sits within the Department's boundary and under the sponsorship of NICTS. NICTS is accountable for the PAC's use of public money, its governance, stewardship and performance, within the confines of its statutory independence and status as a Tribunal NDPB.

The PAC is the only part of the planning system that has no statutory targets

- 4.3** The PAC has no statutory targets in place for decision-making timelines and sets its own objectives and publishes information on performance in its Annual Report. NICTS told us that the statutory structure of the PAC means the Department and NICTS do not have a role in agreeing targets and objectives in the same way as they would for a standard NDPB. The PAC's 2024-27 Corporate Plan contains two priorities and eleven actions. However, none of the objectives are framed in SMART terms, there are no targets for either the volume or timeliness of decision-making and so it is difficult to see how the Department and the PAC will be able to assess performance.

Figure 9: The PAC sets its own objectives

Priority: Focus on performance	Priority: Looking forward
<p>Objective 1: To deliver a high-quality service that meets the demands of our customers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to reallocate cases as and when resources become available to ensure timely decision-making. • Actively review the remaining long-standing cases to ensure they are delivered as soon as practically possible. • Aim to ensure that new cases entering the system are issued in a timely fashion. • Continue to invest in the training and development of the workforce. • Continue to ensure that the quality of decisions is maintained. 	<p>Objective 2: To ensure that the organisation is placed in the best position to deal with future challenges.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aim to be at full operational capacity by 2026-27. • Undertake customer engagement exercises. • Continue discussions with the sponsor body regarding funding and resourcing. • Respond to any recommendations arising from the publication of the Northern Ireland Audit Office report. • Engage in meaningful outreach work to ensure all interested parties understand PAC's role in the planning process. • Implement updates to the website including updating the keyword facility.

Source: PAC Corporate Plan 2024-27

4.4 The PAC's Annual Report also includes key performance indicators (KPIs) which are not included in the Corporate Plan. These set out targets for decision-making, split across the different workstreams.

4.5 The KPIs for Hear and Decide are to decide 80 per cent of appeals within the following timeframes, depending on the process followed:

- Informal hearings – 30 weeks
- Written representations with an accompanied site visit – 28 weeks
- Written representations with a Commissioner site visit – 26 weeks
- Enforcement related appeals – 34 weeks.

These targets have not been achieved for the last five years.

4.6 For Hear and Report cases, the KPI is to deliver all reports to the referring authority by the indicative date set by the end of public proceedings (i.e. when the public local inquiry or hearing has been completed). The focus is on the later stages of the process and there are no targets set in respect of the timeframes for commencing inquiries or hearings, nor for the overall timeframe. The PAC told us that in their view, it is not possible to set clear timelines for earlier stages of the process as these include factors that are largely outside of its control.

In other jurisdictions, planning bodies have different accountability arrangements

4.7 We compared Northern Ireland's planning appeal and public inquiry arrangements with other jurisdictions. We note that direct comparisons are difficult because of the different structures, procedures and legal frameworks in each jurisdiction. Nonetheless, other jurisdictions take different approaches to balancing independence and accountability. These may offer examples for consideration as part of our recommended fundamental review. Northern Ireland is the only jurisdiction where the body responsible for planning appeals, hearings and public local inquiries is not accountable to a Minister or the Assembly, due to its status as a Tribunal NDPB. Other jurisdictions also have a range of statutory targets, including timebound targets for different workstreams.

Figure 10: Comparison with other planning bodies

	PINS (England)	ACP (Republic of Ireland)	PAC (Northern Ireland)
Status	Executive Agency	Executive Agency	Tribunal NDPB
Sponsorship arrangement	Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government	Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage	NICTS, within the Department of Justice
Accountable to a Minister	✓	✓	✗
Statutory targets/ deadlines	✗	✓	✗
Appeal fees	✗	✓	✓
Strategic infrastructure/ Regionally Significant fees	✓	✓	✗

**While there are no statutory time limits for determining planning appeals in England, the government sets performance targets for PINS and has a policy called the 'planning guarantee' which states that no application should take more than a year in total to be decided, including the appeal stage.*

4.8 NICTS told us that while the functions of each appeal body are comparable, there are key differences that limit direct equivalence, in particular that the PAC is established in legislation as a Tribunal NDPB, a public body type which is no longer the default or preferred form of public body under Cabinet Office guidance. We also note that strategic infrastructure applications are made directly to PINS and ACP in England and Ireland respectively. This means applications are submitted directly to PINS and ACP for processing, followed by a decision from the relevant Secretary of State.

PINS – England

- 4.9** PINS had similar issues with levels of casework exceeding its capacity to deliver in the early 2020s. In dealing with this it focused on cases with the greatest individual potential for economic impact and community interest including local plans, energy generation and transport which did lead to a backlog of less high-profile planning appeal casework. The PAC has taken a different approach, focusing on appeals decisions as these provide access to justice, along with independent examinations of LDPs at the expense of other Hear and Report work. In the interest of fairness to appellants, it also encouraged Commissioners to issue decisions in date order of case receipt.
- 4.10** A further key difference is that for nationally significant infrastructure, PINS provides advice throughout the application period, identifying where projects need improvements or more evidence to support them. PINS then makes recommendations to the Secretary of State as to whether these applications should go ahead. PINS' annual report points to the need for certainty over the process and avoiding delays, stating that "our advice is aimed at making sure those applications are supported by the right information and address issues likely to be considered when they are examined." This is possible as PINS is a planning authority of first instance in respect of NSIP, rather than the tribunal body as is the case with the PAC. PINS also charges fees for considering NSIP applications and received £16.7 million in 2024-25.

ACP – Republic of Ireland

- 4.11** An Coimisiún Pleanála (ACP) replaced An Bord Pleanála (ABP), in 2024. ACP decisions are required within 18 weeks, with a target of 16 weeks for large-scale residential development (there are some cases where no statutory timeframe applies). The target for strategic infrastructure decisions is 48 weeks. The ACP incurs financial penalties if it fails to meet those timescales, for example repaying the applicant a fixed percentage of fees paid. The ACP also has to notify applicants of expected decision dates and provide reasons for delays. We note that ACP, like PINS, is a planning authority of first instance in the case of strategic infrastructure.
- 4.12** The ACP's organisational structure separates the decision-making function from corporate and organisational roles. A Governing Board, led by a chairperson, is responsible for approving and publishing written procedures for Planning Commissioners. Planning Commissioners are responsible for all decision-making and are overseen by a Chief Planning Commissioner. Corporate functions are overseen by a Chief Executive Officer, appointed by the Governing Board, who is responsible for the overall performance of the ACP including the allocation of resources and personnel.
- 4.13** Whilst we fully understand the need for hearings and inquiries to be conducted independently, the lack of proper timelines and adequate accountability to the Assembly for the performance of the PAC needs to be resolved. This view was shared by a range of stakeholders with whom we engaged.

Pending the outcome of a fundamental review, Departmental and NICTS oversight of the PAC should be strengthened

- 4.14** Despite the issues with the PAC's delivery, NICTS told us that its approach to oversight and challenging operational performance is constrained by the statutory structure of the PAC and the need to respect constitutional boundaries, given the PAC's status as a Tribunal NDPB. The Department has a clear responsibility for the governance and oversight of the PAC, and this role can be fulfilled without risking the independence of decision-making.
- 4.15** Any change to the governance and accountability arrangements for the PAC requires proper consideration and will take time. Pending a longer-term fundamental review there is an urgent need to address the existing oversight and governance arrangements, particularly the role of NICTS as the sponsor body.

A Memorandum of Understanding between NICTS and the PAC has recently been updated

- 4.16** Since 2019, NICS departments have been encouraged to use partnership agreements to manage relationships with the bodies they sponsor. These agreements establish a clear framework for accountability, objectives and governance arrangements. However, the current templates are not suitable for tribunal-type bodies and therefore a partnership agreement has not been developed between NICTS and the PAC. Instead, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) sets out the relationship between NICTS and the PAC, defining the financial and administrative framework within which the PAC operates. The last MoU between NICTS and the PAC was agreed in 2017. A revised MOU between NICTS and the PAC has now been agreed and signed off in December 2025.

The approach to Liaison Group meetings could be strengthened

- 4.17** A NICTS and PAC Liaison Group is in place to give the NICTS Accounting Officer assurance over the administration of public resources allocated to the PAC. A Liaison Officer has been appointed to seek assurance from the Chief Commissioner on performance monitoring, budgetary and finance matters, risk management, corporate governance and staffing. Liaison Group meetings are scheduled to take place quarterly. NICTS should provide both a support and challenge function to the PAC, however our review of meeting minutes shows that although resourcing and budget pressures are regular topics of discussion there is little in the way of challenge regarding the PAC's performance. We also noted that there are typically between two or three meetings per year, rather than the quarterly meetings set out in the group's Terms of Reference. NICTS told us, however, that there are regular informal meetings between the PAC and NICTS at a senior level, typically on a fortnightly basis.

Administrative performance standards could potentially enhance NICTS oversight

4.18 Although it would not be appropriate for NICTS to set targets for the PAC, given the constraints of its statutory structure, we note that there is a range of administrative performance standards for courts and other tribunal bodies within the departmental boundary. These include targets for the offering of hearing dates after all papers have been received and timeframes for decisions being issued following completion of tribunals. There are no equivalent standards and monitoring for the PAC; instead it sets its own performance indicators and reports on these via annual reports. As the sponsor body and as outlined in its MoU, NICTS is responsible for the stewardship of the public money allocated to the PAC. Robust performance monitoring is crucial for ensuring accountability, transparency and ultimately driving improvement.



Recommendation 5

The Department must immediately strengthen its oversight and governance of the PAC so far as the current statutory structure allows. Pending the outcome of a fundamental review, we recommend that:

- The Department should immediately undertake a review of the existing governance arrangements for the PAC, with a view to identifying additional accountability and oversight mechanisms that can be put in place within the current statutory structure.
- The PAC should develop and publish specific, measureable key performance indicators and timelines for different workstreams and consult with the Department as to any additional financial or administrative support required to achieve these. The PAC's annual reporting should include a clear assessment of whether these key metrics have been achieved and any remedial action which is required.
- The Department and the PAC should work together to agree and publish new administrative performance standards in a revised Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) within the next six months and then continue to review the MoU on an ongoing basis.

Appendices

Appendix 1 (paragraphs 2.7 and 2.11)

Regionally Significant and called-in cases with PAC – ongoing as at August 2025*

	PAC reference	Description	Procedure	Initial planning application	First referred to PAC**
1	2021/C005	Curraghinalt Project (Dalradian) – goldmine	Public local inquiry	27 November 2017	22 September 2021
2	2021/C006	Curraghinalt Project (Dalradian) – powerlines	Public local inquiry	22 November 2019	22 September 2021
3	2021/C007	Curraghinalt Project (Dalradian) – powerlines	Public local inquiry	22 November 2019	22 September 2021
4	2021/C010	Gruggandoo Wind Farm	Public local inquiry	16 March 2015	29 March 2022
5	2022/C002	Carnalbanagh Wind Farm	Public local inquiry	23 June 2017	26 September 2022
6	2023/C004	Blaris Mixed Use Development	Hearing	12 November 2018	29 September 2023
7	2023/C003	Lough Neagh (amending conditions)	Hearing	1 October 2021	19 October 2023
8	2023/C005	Strabane Multi-Sport Facility	Hearing	19 February 2018	3 October 2023***
9	2023/C006	Unshinagh Wind Farm	Hearing	22 December 2021	17 January 2024
10	2024/C001	Lisburn Road Dwellings	Hearing	19 May 2021	8 July 2024

* Due to the delays in scheduling a public local inquiry or hearing, four of these cases have now reverted to DfI to undertake updated statutory processes

** This refers to the date of first referral to the PAC, however the PAC told us that in some cases it was several months later before it received all information in relation to cases

*** The PAC issued its report on the Strabane multi-sport case in November 2025

Appendix 2 (paragraph 2.7)

Other live cases with PAC – ongoing at August 2025

PAC reference	Description	Procedure	First referred to PAC**
1 2021/WHR01	Curraghinalt Project (Dalradian) – water	Public local inquiry	5 November 2021
2 2021/WHR02	Curraghinalt Project (Dalradian) – water	Public local inquiry	5 November 2021
3 2021/DR001	Curraghinalt Project (Dalradian) – abandonment	Public local inquiry	17 February 2022
4 2022/C001	EIA determination	Hearing	14 April 2021
5 2023/EIA001	EIA determination	Hearing	17 May 2023*
6 2024/WHR01	Curraghinalt Project (Dalradian) – water	Public local inquiry	5 September 2024
7 2024/WHR02	Curraghinalt Project (Dalradian) – water	Public local inquiry	5 September 2024
8 2025/EIA001	EIA determination	Hearing	28 April 2025
9 2025/EIA002	EIA determination	Hearing	22 May 2025
10 2025/EIA003	EIA determination	Hearing	6 June 2025*

* The PAC issued reports on these cases in January 2026

** This refers to the date of first referral to the PAC, however the PAC told us that in some cases it was several months later before it received all information in relation to cases

Appendix 3 (paragraph 2.10)

PAC reports on Regionally Significant and called-in cases since 2020

	PAC reference	Description	Initial planning application	First referred to PAC**	PAC report issued to DfI	Decision issued by DfI
1	2019/C006	Upperlands development	6 May 2009	18 November 2019	27 January 2022	19 October 2023
2	2019/C007	Upperlands development	6 May 2009	18 November 2019	27 January 2022	19 October 2023
3	2019/C008	Upperlands development	6 May 2009	18 November 2019	27 January 2022	19 October 2023
4	2018/C009	Corlacky Wind Farm	18 February 2016	21 March 2019	22 January 2020	16 March 2021
5	2018/C007	Dorville Wind Farm	30 June 2015	1 February 2019	20 February 2020	26 October 2020
6	2011/C001	North-South interconnector 1	1 December 2009	9 October 2014	20 November 2017	14 September 2020
7	2014/C004	North-South interconnector 2	30 April 2013	9 October 2014	20 November 2017	14 September 2020
8	2019/C004	Elgin Solar Farm	12 June 2015	19 September 2019	31 March 2022	6 October 2022
9	2017/C004	Lough Neagh	16 March 2017	14 February 2018	7 May 2019	6 January 2021

A number of these cases were delayed due to the impact of the Covid pandemic or experienced delays due to legal or jurisdiction issues.

*** This refers to the date of first referral to the PAC, however the PAC told us that in some cases it was several months later before it received all information in relation to cases.*

Appendix 4 (paragraph 2.16)

Local Development Plan Timelines

Council	Plan Strategy submitted to Dfl	Referred to PAC for Independent Examination	PAC report issued to Dfl	Dfl instructed Council to adopt Plan Strategy
Belfast	30 August 2019	5 December 2019	29 September 2021	4 February 2022
Antrim and Newtownabbey	8 March 2021	1 June 2021	4 October 2023	27 September 2024
Lisburn and Castlereagh	22 March 2021	6 July 2021	30 November 2022	28 June 2023
Fermanagh and Omagh	18 December 2020	12 March 2021	14 October 2022	20 January 2023
Mid and East Antrim	29 March 2021	30 June 2021	28 February 2023	30 June 2023
Derry and Strabane	20 May 2022	20 September 2022	10 May 2024	17 December 2024
Mid Ulster	28 May 2021	–	–	–

As at August 2025, seven councils had submitted their draft Plan Strategies to Dfl with the other four councils still in the processes of preparing their Strategy.

NIAO Reports 2025 and 2026

Title	Date Published
Ambulance Handovers	11 March 2025
Homelessness in Northern Ireland	25 March 2025
Health and Social Care Imaging Services	31 March 2025
Effective Audit and Risk Assurance Committees – A Good Practice Guide	31 March 2025
PSNI Fleet Management	08 April 2025
Continuous Improvement Arrangements in Policing (2025 Report)	13 May 2025
Waste Crime in Northern Ireland	03 July 2025
Major IT Projects in Northern Ireland	04 July 2025
Active Travel in Northern Ireland	29 September 2025
Performance of Restricted Procedures by Health Trusts	07 October 2025
Northern Ireland Energy Strategy	21 October 2025
Comptroller and Auditor General’s Report on Financial Audit Findings 2025 – Central Government	09 December 2025
Local Government Auditor’s Report 2025	11 December 2025
Leading and Resourcing the Northern Ireland Civil Service	27 January 2026
Raising concerns in the Northern Ireland public sector	20 March 2026
Raising Concerns: A Good Practice Guide for the Northern Ireland Public Sector	20 March 2026
Partnership Working: Departments and Arm’s Length Bodies	25 March 2026
Evaluation of Programmes Addressing Educational Disadvantage	31 March 2026
Assessing the Quality of Education in Northern Ireland	02 April 2026



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