



MEDIA RELEASE

Planning in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland's planning system is not working efficiently and, in many aspects, is failing to deliver for the economy, communities or the environment. That is the conclusion of a joint report published today (Tuesday 1st February) by the Comptroller and Auditor General, Mr Kieran Donnelly CB, and the Local Government Auditor, Mrs Colette Kane.

The report on 'Planning in Northern Ireland' considers how the system has operated since April 2015, when responsibility for delivering the majority of operational planning functions passed from central government to local councils. However, the Department for Infrastructure retains a central role, with responsibility for preparing planning policy and legislation, as well as monitoring and reporting on the performance of councils in delivering planning functions.

Today's report notes that there is significant silo working in the planning system, and that the most important planning applications are still taking too long to process. Almost three quarters of Regionally Significant and Major planning applications processed between 2017-18 and 2019-20 weren't completed within the statutory target of 30 weeks. Over half (56 per cent) had taken more than one year to process, and 19 per cent more than three years.

The time taken to process Major applications varies substantially between councils, with the median processing time for the slowest council more than three times that of the fastest council. The report highlights other notable variances between councils in their decision-making processes. These include the extent to which planning decisions are delegated from elected representatives to professional planning officials, and how councils resolve enforcement cases where there are potential breaches of policies or planning conditions.

The report recognises the significant pressures that the planning system faces with around 12,500 planning applications being processed each year since 2015. Planning decisions have become increasingly complex, requiring more interaction with those who have specialist knowledge or skills, particularly in regards to assessing and managing environmental impacts. While this requires more work for many applications, planning fees, the main source of income for the planning system, have not been adjusted year on year to keep pace with inflation. As a result, the planning system is increasingly financially unsustainable and the gap between the income generated from planning activities by councils and the cost of those activities has increased significantly.

These pressures have also contributed to slow progress in the creation of Local Development Plans (LDPs) by councils. LDPs are intended to provide a 15-year framework to direct and control the scale and type of development in each council area. However, seven years since the transfer of planning powers to local councils, none are complete and some LDPs remain at the early stages of development. The lack of LDPs means planning decisions are not guided by long-term, up-to-date plans

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Commenting on the report's conclusions, Mr Donnelly and Mrs Kane said:

"The planning system can be a key enabler for the economic and social development of Northern Ireland, as well as playing an important role in protecting the environment, and the focus of all those involved should be on ensuring it delivers its functions in an efficient, effective and financially sustainable way."

"The 'planning system' in Northern Ireland is not currently operating as one system. Rather, there is a series of organisations that are not interacting well and not delivering an effective service. Addressing the issues identified in this report will be both a cultural and a practical challenge, demanding strong leadership."

Among its other findings, the report also highlights concerns over how the planning system is dealing with applications for developments that will produce ammonia emissions. Failure to address the increasing level of ammonia emissions has the potential to contribute to serious, long term harm to the environment and human health. A lack of clear environmental guidance in regards to levels of ammonia emissions has resulted in significant uncertainty for planning authorities and applicants.

ENDS

Notes for Editors

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General, Mr Kieran Donnelly CB, is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). He, and the NIAO, are totally independent of Government. He certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. He has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. His reports are published as Assembly papers.
2. As Local Government Auditor, Ms Colette Kane is responsible for leading all local government audits across Northern Ireland. The scope of external audit in Local Government covers not only the audit of the financial statements, but also the audited bodies arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources, as well as councils' performance improvement responsibilities. The Local Government Auditor has statutory authority to undertake comparative and other studies designed to enable her to make recommendations for improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the provision of services by local government bodies and to publish her results and recommendations.
3. The report is available on the [Audit Office website](#). The report is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on 1 February 2022.
4. The Planning Act (NI) 2011 established the two-tier structure for the delivery of planning functions in Northern Ireland. Under the Act, responsibility for delivering the main planning functions passed from a central government department to local councils in April 2015.
5. The Department for Infrastructure (the Department) has a central role in the Planning system in Northern Ireland. Alongside this, it has responsibility for preparing planning regional policy and legislation, and monitoring and reporting on the performance of councils' delivery of planning functions. In addition, the Department makes planning decisions in respect of a small number of regionally significant and called-in applications.
6. Under the Planning Act (NI) 2011, responsibility for delivering the majority of operational planning functions passed from a central government department to local councils in April 2015. These include development planning, development management, and planning enforcement.
7. Planning applications are classified according to the scale of the development proposed, and its impact on society. The most important applications, in terms of their ability to enhance the overall wellbeing in Northern Ireland, are 'Regionally Significant' and 'Major' planning applications.
 - Regionally Significant applications are those applications which are considered to have a critical contribution to make to the economic and social success of Northern Ireland as a whole, or a substantial part of the region. These applications are submitted to, and decided by, the Department.
 - Major developments are those developments which have the potential to be of significance and interest to communities. They are likely to be developments that have important economic, social and environmental implications for a council area. These applications are usually submitted to, and decided by, local councils. However, in certain circumstances the Department may call-in a particular major planning application, meaning that it assumes responsibility for making a decision on the application.

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8. The Department is currently undertaking a review of the implementation of the Planning Act. This review will consider the extent to which the original objectives of the Act have been achieved, and whether there is a need to retain, amend or repeal any provisions of the Act.
9. Background briefing can be obtained from the Audit Office by contacting Colette Kane (028 9025 1064) or Roger McCance (028 9025 4312).