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Your reference:
Our reference:

Date: 8 November 2021

Dear [HEAD PLANNER]

DAERA ACTIONS TO IMPROVE PLANNING CONSULTATION DELAYS AND TEMPORARY IMPACT ON CASELOAD MANAGEMENT PRACTICES.

The purpose of my writing to you at this time is twofold: to provide you with an update in relation to the actions which the Department, as a Statutory Consultee in the planning process, is taking to improve our planning consultation response times, and consequently advise you of the temporary impact of these actions on a number of caseload management practices currently in operation.

Over the last 6 to 8 months the Department has been experiencing an increasing trend in the number of planning consultations being submitted to DAERA in our role as a Statutory Consultee; data provided by DfI in their most recent Northern Ireland Planning Statistics Bulletin for the first quarter of 2021/22 supported this position of increased levels of planning activity. While interventions undertaken in the earlier part of 2021 demonstrated that NIEA had significantly improved our performance, the Department recognises that this improvement is now in reverse and backlogs are accumulating.

The Department is taking a number of actions to address this situation with the aim of reducing the backlog over the coming months including the redeployment of staff and additional casual workers being secured. Nonetheless a significant contributory factor in the escalation of the backlog has been the large volume of queries from planners, agents and citizens alike seeking updates and prioritisations in relation to specific applications,

Update Requests

Since 1 January 2021 NIEA has dealt with approximately 1,750 update requests for information in addition to the number of direct phone calls and e-mails that case officers continue to receive. As I'm sure you can appreciate, only the specific case officer dealing with the consultation can evaluate the estimations of response times associated with these types of request, consequently this diverts their time away from processing actual responses.

Action One: To maximise the time case officers spend on assessing and responding to consultations, from **8 November 2021** DAERA will no longer provide indicative response times for any consultation until further notice.

While the Department recognizes the negative impact this action may have on our communications messaging it is hoped that the redirection of effort on the actual processing of consultations will yield an immediate impact on improving our statutory consultation return rates and response times; the ability to reduce the backlog will in turn reduce the number of such queries arising.

Prioritisation Requests

As Head Planners you will be familiar with the competing priorities in relation to the processing of a range of applications within your Planning Authority at any given time. To assist with these competing demands NIEA has provided a mechanism whereby requests can be made via yourselves to prioritise particular planning applications; over the past year the Department has received an ongoing and wide range of such types of requests. Although it was intended that this mechanism should only be used in exceptional circumstances, as there could be equality implications, we are receiving numerous requests for prioritisation per week which given our current resourcing level cannot be accommodated.

Action Two: To maximise the time case officers spend on assessing and responding to consultations and to consider whether a more robust prioritisation process could be developed, from **8 November 2021** DAERA will not be accommodating any prioritisation requests until further notice.

Similar to Action One above, it is hoped that concentrated focus on the actual processing of consultations within these competing demands will yield an immediate impact on improvements in our performance. The cumulative effect of both of these actions will in itself provide a more consistent framework for delivery thereby reducing the backlog which will in turn reduce the number of such queries arising.

DAERA Webpage Alert

To assist with the Departments communication around these temporary arrangements, an advisory message has been uploaded onto the DAERA webpage. This advises all users of our service that the Department has implemented a number of actions to improve our performance and we anticipate these steps will enable us to respond to our current backlog within the next **16 weeks**. The Department has consequentially taken the decision that we will no longer be providing responses to any requests for updates or prioritisations until further notice.

This is the standard departmental response that will be issued for the next 16 weeks should any update or prioritisation request be sought.

Action Three: A message has been uploaded onto the DAERA webpage advising customers of our actions; a copy of this message has been attached at **Annex A** for information.

As one of the major consultees in the planning process providing advice on a wide range of technical and environmental areas to support planning authorities, DAERA recognises the need to deliver in relation to our performance rate. With competing priorities for staff time it is essential that the actions above are taken to provide a more consistent daily framework to maximise the time case officers are spending on assessing and responding to planning consultations.

Thank you for your cooperation and patience as we adopt these measures to improve our performance rate.

Yours sincerely,

MARK HAMMOND
Head of Natural Environment Division Operations

Natural Environment Division - Planning Consultation Update

DAERA wish to alert all customers that we are currently experiencing a very heavy workload resulting in delays to planning consultation responses. The Department has implemented a number of actions to improve our customer service and to enable us to address our current backlog.

Providing indicative response times for inquirers diverts resource from making responses to consultations, the large volume of these are therefore slowing down our ability to respond. We appreciate the concerns of those waiting for responses so we will be focussing all resources **on making responses asap** rather than using resource to indicate when responses are anticipated.

The Department has consequentially taken the decision that it will no longer be providing responses to any requests for updates until further notice.

We acknowledge the delays in the current process and appreciate your cooperation and patience as we seek to address this situation and improve performance rates.