

Regional Planning Directorate



Department for

**Infrastructure**

An Roinn

**Bonneagair**

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To

Council Chief Executives

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14 February 2022

Dear Colleagues

### **PLANNING FORUM ACTION UPDATE**

You will be aware of the ongoing focus on the performance of the planning system in Northern Ireland, and in particular the role of statutory consultees in that system, including through the findings and recommendations set out in the recent Northern Ireland Audit Office report and subsequent hearings before the Public Accounts Committee. You will also be aware of the work of the Planning Forum, established following a review into the effectiveness and efficiency of the planning system (commissioned by the Department) which focused particularly on the role of statutory consultees.

The cross governmental forum works collaboratively between central and local government, with a particular focus on improving timeframes for processing major and economically significant planning applications. A work programme was developed through the forum, which originally involved circa 30 actions, with further actions being added over time. To date 19 actions have been completed with the remainder expected to be delivered in 2022. For your information, I have attached an overview of these actions and if you have any questions or queries in relation to the work, I would be grateful if you would raise them with me through your respective Heads of Planning.

Yours sincerely

[REDACTED]  
**ANGUS KERR**  
**Chief Planner &**  
**Director of Regional Planning**

Cc Heads of Planning (Council)

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## Planning Forum Action Update – January 2022

Actions to be completed		
Ref No. to Forum / Sub-Group Action Plan	Action	Update
3 <b>FAP7b</b>	Statutory consultees to review their resource requirements against workloads	All statutory consultees have responded (bar one) to a request for resource update. Minister met with DoF to discuss resources. Letter to Perm Secs from Katrina will issue. Continue to monitor resources going forward.
9 <b>FAP10</b>	Review Dfl's approach to transport assessments (TAs), drawing in appropriate stakeholders and including an analysis of resource requirements.	Dfl Roads Consultancy Services team has identified the additional resource that would be required to reduce response times for dealing with transport assessments (from 6 to 3 weeks). Will be considered as part of budget discussions.  Roads to continue to update Forum.
12 <b>SGAP7</b>	Produce a report for discussion/agreement with the Forum on which 'non-planning' elements should be considered for removal from the planning system. Implement any agreed recommendations.	Paper issued to members in relation to 3 of the 'matters' raised by local government for discussion at December meeting. Following December meeting: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Council reps asked to provide examples and potential solutions for the 3 matters set out in the paper.</li> <li>- Council reps asked to meet with NIW to discuss a number of issues and report back to Forum.</li> <li>- Roads to consider and feed back in relation to PSDs &amp; TAS approvals.</li> <li>- Council reps to consider and feed back on PSDs.</li> </ul> The remaining matters are being considered, pending further information and meetings.
21 <b>SGAP5</b>	Build capacity and capability in the system through targeted training.	DAERA had advised that councils need to indicate what training they require. If a specialist area, councils would need to take forward themselves. Knowledge sharing might be the way to go. DAERA held an information session about single dwellings, attended by 140 planners. However, it may be the end of the financial year before this can be rolled out due to resource pressures.
22 <b>SGAP3</b>	Review existing PAD process and identify/agree/implement improvements in practice between planning	Discussion paper presented at December meeting has been circulated with feedback requested by 21 January. Work shop approach agreed at the meeting and

## Planning Forum Action Update – January 2022

	authorities and statutory consultees. Include how to enforce compliance with PAD advice. Consider producing an updated practice note to support.	council reps asked to propose someone to take this work forward.
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<b>Actions reliant on other processes and decisions</b>		
<b>Ref No. to Forum/ Sub-Group Action Plan</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Update</b>
<b>1 FAP1</b>	Review proposals for outcomes within the draft PfG 2020/21 in relation to planning	This action will be kept under review during the next stages of the PfG process to ensure that the importance of Planning - as a vital cross cutting, multi-sectoral enabling process - is recognised in so far as possible.
<b>4 FAP5</b>	'Subject to Ministerial Approval' - Implement legislative change to introduce statutory local validation check lists (following consideration of BCC pilot review report).	This action is being taken forward through the review of the Planning Act.
<b>5</b>	'Subject to Ministerial Approval' - Implement legislative change to prevent the late submission of information with an application (when the council has resolved to take a decision based on the information previously submitted).	This action is to be considered through the review of the implementation of the Planning Act process.
<b>8 FAP8</b>	Consider making the NIW pre-development enquiry (PDE) process mandatory through future Water legislation.	NIW and DfI Water policy to explore future potential options for legislative change in the next mandate.
<b>10 FAP11</b>	Explore further the potential use of the transport model for the assessment of major planning applications.	The Department is in the initial stages of procuring a Managed Services Framework for transport planning and modelling services which would include for the construction of the transport model and the fore-running tasks of data collection. However, due to the COVID emergency there is substantial doubt over the validity of any data until a 'new normal' is established. Therefore the decision on the construction of the

## Planning Forum Action Update – January 2022

		<p>transport model is currently deferred – this impacts the achievement of this action.</p> <p>Roads to continue to provide updates to the Forum.</p>
<p><b>15</b></p> <p><b>FAP9</b></p>	<p>Take forward a commission to measure the public value of the planning system.</p>	<p>Work deferred pending outcome of work on PfG.</p> <p>Previous research reports have been produced through the RTPi in 2014. It is considered that the value of planning is well known and that this particular recommendation would not in itself speed up the consultation process. It was agreed at the December meeting that this action would be kept in the background and potentially revisited at a later stage.</p>
<p><b>18</b></p> <p><b>SGAP6</b></p>	<p>Establish workshops to rectify the common mistakes arising from information/evidence submitted.</p>	<p>It is recognised that this action should await the outcome of the validation checklist legislative process; however, councils have confirmed their intention to make preparations in advance, including engagement with applicants/agents.</p>

Completed Actions				
No.	Internal Action Ref.	Recommendation	Action Owner	Completion Date
1		Set up Planning Forum	Dfl - Julie Thompson	Dec-19
2		Appoint a SRO in Dfl to provide strategic oversight	Dfl	Dec-19
3		Complete a joint workshop to review council practice on consultation requests (necessity, timing, information etc.); and implement subsequent actions/measures.	Dfl	Nov-20
4		Carry out an urgent review of staff structures and staff numbers in Dfl Rivers against current workloads.	Dfl	Nov-20
5		IT capability should be reviewed as soon as possible (e.g. flood risk modelling).	Dfl	Nov-20
6	FAP2	Ensure the new planning IT system allows for effective monitoring and reporting of statutory consultee responses.	Dfl	Nov-20
7	SGAP8	Ensure capacity issues in Shared Environmental Services, an essential	Local Gov/Dfl	Mar-21

## Planning Forum Action Update – January 2022

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		element on the critical path of planning processes, are addressed.		
<b>8</b>	FAP3a	Explore delegating road safety assessments of access standards to councils	Dfl Roads	Jun-21
<b>9</b>	FAP6a	Review online and published information currently available to applicants and consider potential gaps and the resources required to plug these gaps.	Statutory consultees	Jun-21
<b>10</b>	FAP6b	Identify necessary guidance and place it in a suitably structured way onto the Planning Portal, with links to consultee websites.	Dfl (Planning Portal Team) & SC	Jun-21
<b>11</b>	FAP13	Improve and cleanse the data in the system to ensure annual and quarterly reporting for consultee responses is accurate.	Dfl Planning & Portal Team	Jun-21
<b>12</b>	SGAP2	Consider more proactive collaboration between planning authorities and statutory consultees to assess and expedite the processing of major or economically sensitive applications.	Planning authorities/ statutory consultees	Aug-21
<b>13</b>	FAP3b	Consider the benefits of embedding roads engineer within council planning teams.	Dfl Roads	Sep-21
<b>14</b>	FAP4	Consider a wider rollout of Dfl training proposals on environmental compliance to the wider stakeholder community.	Dfl/ statutory consultees	Sep-21
<b>15</b>		Issue guidance on the use of 'extensions to the 21 day duty to respond'.	Dfl Planning	Oct-21
<b>16</b>	FAP7a	Consultee bodies to review their approach to case management to ensure responses are targeted and proportionate.	Statutory consultees	Dec-21
<b>17</b>	SGAP4	Produce a protocol for statutory consultees which sets out in writing what involvement/support is required from them to support an effective and efficient planning system.	Dfl Planning	Dec-21
<b>18</b>	SGAP1	Review current practices to ensure all consultation requests are correctly and absolutely necessary, particularly to ensure that consultation requests are not forwarded to statutory consultees until sufficient evidence and information has been provided by the applicant.	Planning authorities	Dec-21

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<b>Completed Actions</b>				
<b>No.</b>	<b>Internal Action Ref.</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Action Owner</b>	<b>Completion Date</b>
<b>19</b>	FAP8	Consider making the NIW pre-development enquiry (PDE) process mandatory.  This action as stands is now closed and a new action has been created to explore future legislative options in the next mandate.	NIW	Dec-21