

Your Reference:
Our reference:

Heads of Planning
Local Planning Authorities

[REDACTED]
Date: 30 January 2024

Dear Head of Planning,

**UPDATE ON DAERA ACTIONS TO IMPROVE PLANNING CONSULTATION
RESPONSE TIMEFRAMES AND ENGAGEMENT ON THE NEED TO FACILITATE
PRIORITISATION REQUESTS**

The purpose of my writing to you at this time is twofold: to provide you with an update in relation to the outcome of actions which the Department, as a Statutory Consultee in the planning process, took to improve our planning consultation response times in the autumn of 2021; and consideration of the need to facilitate prioritisation requests to assist with ongoing caseload management practices.

You will be aware that since November 2021 DAERA has not been providing detailed responses to requests seeking updates in relation to timeframes for issuing consultation responses. We found that the provision of detailed updates for the high volume of requests received from applicants/agents, political representatives and planning officials significantly reduced the time officials had for processing consultation case work responses. This measure was therefore initiated to maximise the time case officers spent on responding to planning consultations as opposed to providing such updates. We also have not been facilitating prioritisation requests to assist with case management.

Sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone.



I am pleased to inform you that these measures alongside other initiatives undertaken by NED have resulted in significant improvements to our planning performance:

- At the time these measures were introduced (November 2021) Natural Environment Division (NED) had an outstanding caseload of close to 600 cases. At present NED's total outstanding caseload is just in excess of 140 cases.
- DAERAs statutory performance levels have increased from 62% of responses being made within statutory timeframes (based on the 2022/2023 annual performance) to a current rate of 75% by Quarter 2 of 2023/24: an increase of 13 percentage points.

Although these improvements are welcome, we are aware of significant challenges to maintain the improvements gained to-date, in particular challenges around resourcing pressures. Given the weekly number of planning consultations receipted has remained steady and not reduced since the autumn of 2021 the Department will be maintaining our position of not providing indicative response times for any planning consultation until further notice.

I am aware that stopping the provision of detailed updates and not facilitating prioritisation has caused frustration to planning authorities and that planning officials would like to be able to speak to individual NIEA case officers in relation to queries they have.

However, as was previously the case, it should be noted that officials are still available to offer advice about queries of a technical nature. In these regards planning officials should contact the DAERA Planning Response Team in the first instance outlining their technical query. PRT will then seek the most appropriate case officer/s to respond from DAERA's 7 internal planning teams.

In relation to prioritisation requests our experience has shown that they have been received from a wide range of planning officials, government officials, applicants/agents and political representatives for a broad spectrum of planning application types and for a wide variety of reasons. Prioritisation impacts significantly on the flow of casework management and consultation responses and invariably impacts on response timeframes

Sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone.

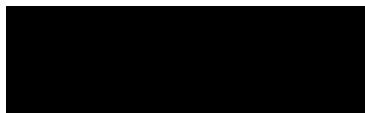
for those consultations not prioritised. Unless used only in exceptional circumstances, prioritisation could overwhelm our ability to respond to all other casework in a timely manner.

Nonetheless, acknowledging our role as a Statutory consultee and the conflicting demands and pressures associated with the variety of development across all Planning Authorities, DAERA is willing to consider reviewing our position if Planning Authorities are able to jointly agree a prioritisation procedure and criterion; and any agreed procedure and criterion are only to be used in exceptional circumstances.

A good starting point may be for this issue to be raised and considered at the Planning Statutory Consultee Forum at which representatives from the Senior Planners Group (SPG) attend. We would of course be willing to engage with the Forum as thoughts develop.

Hopefully this letter gives you encouragement in relation to NED's performance, the availability of NIEA case officer advice in relation to technical queries and our willingness to engage further in relation to the prioritisation issue.

Yours sincerely,



MARK HAMMOND

Head of Natural Environment Operations - NIEA

Sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone.



An Agency within the Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**
www.daera-ni.gov.uk



**INVESTORS
IN PEOPLE**