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Your Ref: Consultation Delays
Our Ref: CORR-1260-2021
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Dear Denise

DAERA ACTIONS TO IMPROVE PLANNING CONSULTATION DELAYS

Thank you for your letter of 07 December 2021, in which you write to express concern on behalf of the Planning Committee regarding the new temporary actions put in place by DAERA on 8 November 2021 to resolve planning consultation response times.

As you will be aware over the previous six to eight months the Department has been experiencing an increasing number of planning consultations received in our role as a Statutory Consultee. The impact on the Department's planning teams has been considerable and a backlog has developed. As a consequence there has been large volume of queries from planners, agents and citizens' alike seeking updates and prioritisations in relation to specific applications across the 11 Council areas.

It was in recognition of the frustration experienced by all users of our service that the Department introduced a number of temporary actions to improve our overall customer service to enable us to address our current backlog over the coming months. Maximising the amount of time case officers spend on casework rather than responding to the vast array of update/priority requests has already improved capacity in the system and increased the efficiency of processing. It is anticipated we will revert to previous caseload management practices once the backlog has been dealt with. In regards to prioritisation, we intend to implement a more robust and consistent prioritisation process which Officials will be engaging with Councils about in due course.

In relation to your request for an individual Standing Order to agree the types of applications that can be dealt with through standard conditions and informatives would prove to be difficult due to the Departments service provision to all 11 Councils and the site specific nature of environmental interests. However, there may be merit in considering this further collectively across all councils with my Department and with the Department for Infrastructure. In the absence of such agreement, my Department has attempted to



articulate where consultation is not required through a range of standing advice and we would welcome the Council's comments on any of the standing advice that has been issued. For example, I am aware that Officials have recently introduced new Standing Advice for Single Dwellings, to introduce a risk based approach to single dwelling applications which in turn should reduce the number of unnecessary single dwelling consultations being sent to the Department; a welcome action to assist with caseload management. This guidance has now been published on the DAERA and is available at the link below:

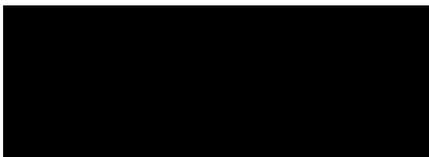
<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/standing-advice-development-land-may-affect-natural-heritage-interests>

I note your comments in relation to the Planning Response Team (PRT) and recognise the importance of this communication channel between the Department and the Council. PRT are continuing to receive essential communication where clarification is required on the technical aspects of a planning consultation or where material is of a sensitive or confidential nature; this correspondence is being forwarded to the relevant case officer for consideration during processing.

I acknowledge the concerns raised in relation to the need for timely advice especially with regards to planning consultations of strategic importance, I would however welcome your support for this short period of time to enable officials to have a concentrated focus on the processing of consultations. It is my expectation that this approach will yield an immediate impact on improvements in our performance thereby providing a more consistent framework for ongoing delivery, reduce the backlog which will in turn decrease the number of such queries arising.

I appreciate your cooperation and patience in this situation as the Department seeks to provide all of our customers with speedier responses.

Yours sincerely



EDWIN POOTS MLA
Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs