

Title of Report:	Correspondence
Committee Report Submitted To:	Corporate Policy and Resources Committee
Date of Meeting:	25 February 2025
For Decision or For Information	For Information
To be discussed In Committee	No
Linkage to Council Strategy (2021-25)	
Strategic Theme	Cohesive Leadership
Outcome	Council operates as one effective and efficient corporate unit with a common purpose and culture
Lead Officer	Director of Corporate Services
Estimated Timescale for Completion	
Date to be Completed	04 March 2025
Budgetary Considerations	
Cost of Proposal	n/a
Included in Current Year Estimates	n/a
Capital/Revenue	n/a
Code	n/a
Staffing Costs	n/a

Legal Considerations	
Input of Legal Services Required	YES/NO
Legal Opinion Obtained	YES/NO

Screening Requirements	Required for new or revised Policies, Plans, Strategies or Service Delivery Proposals.		
Section 75 Screening	Screening Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
	EQIA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
Rural Needs Assessment (RNA)	Screening Completed	Yes/No	Date:
	RNA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)	Screening Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
	DPIA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date:

1.0 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to present correspondence for Members' consideration.

2.0 Correspondence

- 2.1 Dr Denis McMahon, DfI Permanent Secretary correspondence dated 22 January 2025 regarding Planning Improvement Programme Update (copy attached)
- 2.2 Anne Menary, Assistant Director, Heritage Buildings Designation Branch, DfC dated 05 February 2025 regarding Proposals to List (copy attached)

3.0 Recommendation

It is recommended that Corporate Policy and Resources Committee note the above correspondence.

From the Permanent Secretary
Dr Denis McMahon

Council Chief Executives

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BT7 2JA
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22 January 2025

Dear Colleagues,

PLANNING IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME – UPDATE

We have previously discussed the Planning Improvement Programme (PIP) and I mentioned that we were looking at a new approach based on collaboration and honest conversations as to how we move forward. The purpose of this note is to update you and to seek your continued collaboration and support in moving forward.

Significant collective progress has already been achieved through the joint improvement programme. Not least, delivery of legislation to enable councils to produce local validation checklists which will improve the quality of applications and in turn performance. The work with statutory consultees, through the Planning Statutory Consultee Forum, is also bearing fruit. The most recent statistics show that 80% of statutory consultations were responded to within the statutory target. Training has also been delivered to statutory consultees and planning staff on the challenging and time-consuming area of Environmental Impact Assessment, as part of the Department's Environmental Governance Work Programme.

The good work will continue to be taken forward in the next phase of the programme. This will include completing a Review of the Planning (Development Management) Regulations (NI) 2015. Specifically, to ensure that the legislation is practical and appropriate; support current and future development trends; streamline the planning application process; and facilitate and encourage greater participation in the process. In addition, the collaborative work and actions to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the Local Development Plan process also remains a key priority.

The Department, under the leadership of the Minister, is keen to build on this momentum and continued collaboration. The next phase will focus on specific areas of collective action and initiatives to support the long-term sustainability of the system; as well as improving overall performance. The objective is to reduce the burden of bureaucracy, as far as we can, and improve efficiency of processes, so that planners can concentrate on their core purpose, which is to improve our society.

This will mean collectively diagnosing issues across the 12 planning authorities (including my own Department); and addressing those issues that are generically and individually impacting performance. Departmental officials have already commenced a series of face-to-face meetings with councils, including members of the planning committees (where possible). The feedback so far has been very positive, and we sense a desire amongst colleagues to have real conversations in a safe space. Our expectations are that this process will identify the specific and practical issues that are impacting on the efficiency and effectiveness of the system; and more importantly, present opportunities for shared learning, support and best practice.

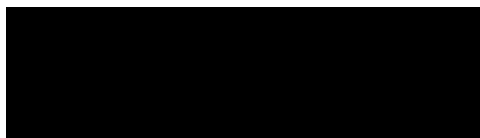
We all recognise the importance of addressing issues and weaknesses in processes. Importantly, however, we need a strong focus on capacity and capability. Specifically, to ensure that planning resources are fit for purpose and able to deliver a good planning service. With this objective in mind officials in the Department will explore ways to improve the skills of staff across the 12 planning authorities through the development of a collective training and development programme; including how best to establish graduate trainee and apprentice schemes for planners, ensuring succession planning for the future.

Effective enforcement is the backbone of a good planning system, ensuring that the credibility and integrity of the system are not undermined by unauthorised development and that appropriate action is taken to limit environmental and reputational damage. To this end, the Department will continue to work with councils to ensure regional compliance with environmental obligations in this area. Working to review and improve the efficiency of the implementation of the local development plan process with councils will also remain a key area of focus for the next phase of planning improvements. Financial sustainability of the system will also be a key part of the next phase of planning improvement.

The approach that we hope to develop with you is focused on outcomes, rather than long lists of actions. Achieving this will require the establishment of a new Planning Performance & Improvement Framework (PPIF) for all 12 planning authorities as agreed in the initial phase of planning improvement. The framework will assess and report on the systems and procedures being used to deliver planning functions. It will be based on system-wide indicators and performance measures (quantitative and qualitative). This will bring our planning system into line with other jurisdictions, improve transparency and provide a framework for identifying strategic challenges and brokering action, as well as establishing, sharing and applying good practice.

I hope this provides you with a useful update on the next phase of improvements to the planning system. We have been incredibly heartened by the engagement with you and your colleagues. In that spirit, we look forward to your continued co-operation, partnership and collaboration in delivering planning improvement for everyone.

Yours sincerely

A large black rectangular redaction box covering the signature area of the letter.

DR DENIS McMAHON
DfI Permanent Secretary

To Chief Executives and Heads of Planning

Historic Environment Division
Heritage Buildings Designation Branch
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Date: 5th February 2025

Dear Sir/Madam

PROPOSALS TO LIST

There have been a number of recent press articles regarding proposals to list, in which a number of images of dwellings in private ownership have featured. This has upset owners and appeared during the consultation phase of the listing process when no decision on listing has been made. The Department would request that proposals to list, particularly those in private ownership are kept confidential until the listing process has been completed and a decision made by the Department on whether the buildings should be added to the list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest. This request will be added to the early warning email that is issued to all Council's to provide them time to schedule any proposed listings into Council meetings and will also be included within our advance notice of listing papers going forward.

I trust this is acceptable.

Kind Regards

[Redacted signature]

ANNE MENARY

Assistant Director, Heritage Buildings Designation Branch