

**From the Permanent Secretary**  
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Council Chief Executives

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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.

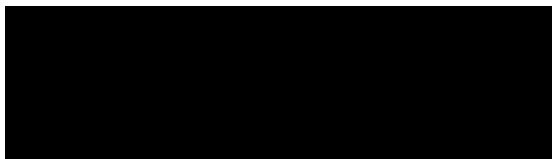
We all recognise the importance of addressing issues and weaknesses in processes. Importantly, however, we need a strong focus on capacity and capability. Specifically, to ensure that planning resources are fit for purpose and able to deliver a good planning service. With this objective in mind officials 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



**DR DENIS McMAHON**  
**DfI Permanent Secretary**