



Northern Ireland Environment Agency
Gníomhaireacht Comhshaoil Thuaisceart Éireann
Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Your Reference
Our reference AE2-26-31821

Heads of Planning
Local Planning Authorities

Planning Response Team
NIEA Lisburn
17 Antrim Road
Tonagh
Lisburn
BT28 3AL

Telephone: 028 9056 9604

Email:

planningresponse.team@daera-ni.gov.uk

23 February 2026

Dear Head of Planning,

NIEA Planning Improvement Plan and Initial Steps to Provide an Update on Consultation Timeframes

I acknowledge the continued delays that NIEA is experiencing in the provision of advice to Planning Authorities. We are taking steps to address this and to improve our overall customer service through the development and implementation of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) Planning Improvement Plan. I also wish to advise you on initial steps we are taking to provide an indication of timeframes for responding to planning consultations.

NIEA Planning Improvement Plan

The NIEA Planning Improvement Plan is a strategic improvement plan that provides a single, coordinated framework for improving the NIEA's performance in responding to statutory planning consultations. It is a key initiative for the NIEA designed to strengthen the effectiveness, consistency, transparency, engagement and the quality of service provided.

The overarching objective of the Plan is to increase NIEA's performance rate for statutory consultations by:

- reducing delays and streamlining the workflow processes;
- improving quality and consistency of planning decisions;
- enhancing communication with stakeholders and applicants;
- increasing staff capability and resource efficiency;
- improving customer satisfaction and trust; and



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- ensuring continued regulatory compliance and best practice.

The actions within the Plan are structured around five work strands – Technical Advice and Guidance; Caseload Management; Monitoring and Reporting on Performance; and Communication and Stakeholder Engagement.

Further detail on the work strands is set out in the plan which is attached at Annex A for your information.

We will engage with you further as we progress the actions set out in the plan.

Update on Consultation Timeframes

As a first step of the review of communication and stakeholder engagement, we are taking forward a special exercise to provide an update to planners on all consultations awaiting a response. This update will be provided through the NI Consultee Hub, confirming receipt of the planning consultation, advising the case has been allocated to the requested team and provide an update on the processing timeframe for the development type.

Information on indicative response times for each development type will also be published on the DAERA website.

This special exercise will be completed by 1 March 2026.

I would like to thank Planning Authorities for their continued commitment to improving planning outcomes for all and hope that we can rely on your continued collaboration, which is essential to the success of this initiative.

Should you have any questions or wish to discuss further, please do not hesitate to contact my office.

Yours sincerely,



Liz Loughran
Director
Natural Environment Division





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NIEA Planning Improvement Plan



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Purpose

DAERA is a Statutory Consultee in the planning process under The Planning (General Development Procedure) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (as amended) (GDPO).

Performance is measured against a legislative duty to respond to a statutory consultation within 21 calendar days or otherwise agreed timeframe, or 30 days for EIA development.

Section 229 (3) of the Planning NI Act 2011 provides the statutory basis on which a consultee must respond to a planning consultation.

DAERA also receive and respond to non-statutory planning consultations. These are consultations with organisations and bodies that are not legally required but are considered relevant to a planning application due to policy or other interests, examples include pre-application discussion and non-material amendment applications.

When consulted on a planning application the Department provides a single collated response covering all relevant departmental divisions. There are 8 discrete teams within DAERA that can be asked for technical advice on the following: -

- Habitats and Species
- Air Quality
- Drinking Water
- Radiation, Pollution Prevention and Control
- Water Regulation and Surface Water Quality
- Land and Ground Water
- Marine
- Fisheries

The NIEA Planning Improvement Plan has been developed to strengthen the Department's performance in responding to planning consultations by improving efficiency, transparency, engagement and quality of advice.

Objectives

The objective of this improvement plan is to increase DAERA's performance rate for responding to statutory consultations by:

- Reducing delays and streamlining the workflow process
- Improve quality and consistency of planning decisions
- Enhance communication with stakeholders and applicants
- Increase staff capability and resource efficiency
- Improve customer satisfaction and trust
- Ensure compliance with regulations and best practices

Governance & Responsibilities

The actions within the Planning Improvement plan will be managed under 5 work strands.

The work strands and responsible officers are: -

1. Technical Advice & Guidance – Head of Natural Environment Operations, NIEA
2. Caseload Management – Head of each DAERA Planning Team
3. Monitoring and Reporting on Performance – Head of Central Services Unit, NIEA
4. Process and IT Systems – Head of Central Services Unit, NIEA
5. Communication and Stakeholder Engagement – Head of Central Services Unit, NIEA.

A NIEA Planning Management Meeting chaired by Director of the Natural Environment Division, will manage the delivery of this planning improvement programme, monitor the overall performance and address or escalate any related risks and issues.

A Planning Technical Advisory Group, chaired by the Head of Natural Environment Operations, will provide a forum for addressing technical operational issues related to specialist advice and guidance across all DAERA planning teams.

Responsible Officers for each work strand will report on progress to the NIEA Planning Management Meeting.

A progress report will issue from the chair of NIEA Planning Management Meeting to the NIEA Management Board.

The Department for Infrastructure is currently implementing a Planning Improvement Programme, working closely with local government and partners, to improve current processes and the performance and delivery of the planning system at regional level. NIEAs improvement plan will complement this work.

NIEA will continue to be represented on the DfI Planning Statutory Consultee Forum, chaired by DfI Grade 3 and attended by Local Council and Statutory Consultee representatives. The Director of Natural Environment Division will represent DAERA / NIEA at this forum with deputies attending when necessary.

A subgroup of the DfI Planning Statutory Consultee Forum for NIEA to meet with planning staff in councils to address any technical or operational issues is chaired by Head of Natural Environment Operations.

Key Improvement Areas and Actions

The improvements are categorised into 5 work strands with a set of actions to deliver.

Work Strand 1 Technical Advice and Guidance

The objective of the Technical Advice and Guidance work strand is to ensure accuracy and consistency across all teams on the technical advice being provided. It is also ensuring the advice is open, transparent and accessible for planning authorities and applicants to reduce the number of consultations being submitted to DAERA.

Work Strand 1 Technical Advice and Guidance		
Actions	Responsible Officer	Timeline
1.1 Review all DAERA current standing advice to ensure it is up to date and provides planners	Head of Natural Environment Operations Unit	By April 2026

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and applicants/agents with the information they need.		
1.2 Develop a suite of new risk based standing advice for planners.	Head of Natural Environment Operations Unit	By April 2026
1.3 Establish a Planning Technical Advisory Group to provide a forum to address issues related to specialist advice and guidance across all DAERA planning teams.	Head of Natural Environment Operations Unit	Jun 2025

Work Strand 2 Caseload Management

The objective of the Caseload Management work strand is for planning teams to effectively manage productivity using the management information from the NIEAPC Reporting tools. This will support the planning teams in identifying problems and opportunities and assist with the allocation of resources effectively.

Work Strand 2 Caseload Management		
Actions	Responsible Officer	Timeline
2.1 To review resource requirements and ensure all needs are progressed in line with DAERA Workforce Planning Guidance.	Heads of each DAERA Consultee Group	By March 2026
2.2 All consultee groups to be trained in using the reporting tools on NIEAPC to support monitoring of caseload and performance.	Heads of each DAERA Consultee Group	By end of Feb 2026
2.3 Performance to be reported on at each NIEA Planning Management Meeting.	Heads of each DAERA Consultee Group	By Jan 2026

Work Strand 3 Monitoring and Reporting on Performance

The objective of the Monitoring and Reporting on Performance work strand is to have a clear set of management information that will allow monitoring of performance at the appropriate levels.

Work Strand 3 Monitoring and Reporting on Performance		
Actions	Responsible Officer	Timeline
3.1 Produce suite of management information to monitor planning performance	Head of Planning Response Team	Apr – Jun 2025
3.2 Streamline and simplify the Management Information data sets	Head of Planning Response Team	Nov 2025 – Mar 2026
3.3 Clarify and communicate the calculation of the Planning Performance Rate	Head of Planning Response Team	By Feb 2026

Work Strand 4 Process and IT System

The objective of the Process and IT System work strand is to develop a streamlined, consistent process supported by a fully digital system and using AI technology with the necessary data and information security controls in place.

Work Strand 4 Process and IT System		
Actions	Responsible Officer	Timeline
4.1 Review and design a new process for processing planning applications that is fully compliant with the legislation and policy guidance and consistent across all Planning Consultee Groups	Head of Planning Response Team	By June 2026
4.2 Develop KPIs for each stage in process and include in design of new IT system	Head of Planning Response Team	By June 2026

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4.3 Design and agree development plan for a new fully digital case management system	Product Owner / DSD	Dec 2025 – Sept 2026
4.4 Develop interface with DFI Planning System ensuring fully digitised process for receipting planning applications from all Councils	Product Owner / DSD	Mar – Sept 2026
4.5 Review and implement Data and Information Security Controls	Product Owner / DSD	Dec 2025 – Sept 2026
4.6 Explore the use of using AI in the planning process	Head of Planning Response Team	Jan – Mar 2026

Work Strand 5 Communication and Stakeholder Engagement

The objective of the Communication and Stakeholder Engagement work strand is to enhance collaboration with Dfl and local planning authorities to achieve timely responses and to provide a high level of customer service to the customer.

Work Strand 5 Communication and Stakeholder Engagement		
Actions	Responsible Officer	Timeline
5.1 NIEA to be an active member of the Dfl Planning Statutory Consultee Forum to enhance working relationships.	NED Director	By Jan 2026
5.2 Identify actions / implications for DAERA falling out of the Dfl Planning Improvement Plan and include in the NIEA planning improvement work strands.	Head of Natural Environment Operations Unit	By Jan 2026
5.3 Quarterly meeting between NIEA and Head of Planners group	NED Director	By Jan 2026
5.4 Reinstate the Client Liaison meetings between DAERA and Planning Authorities	Head of Planning Response Team	By April 2026

5.5 To define DAERA’s role in respect of planning applications and communicate to Planning Authorities and stakeholders	Head of Central Services Unit	By April 2026
5.6 Improve customer service by reverting to issuing appropriate responses to all planning related correspondence.	Head of each Planning Consultee Group	By April 2026
5.7 Understand the users of the planning information on DAERA website and redesign the web pages ensuring it meets the needs of users.	Head of Planning Response Team	By April 2026

Measure of Success

The success of this improvement plan will be measured by the following indicators: -

1. A consistent performance rate of 80% or above
2. A reduction in number of ministerial correspondence cases by 30%
3. Monitoring and meeting KPIs as defined.



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