

**Minutes of MS Teams Meeting held between RSUA Members and Head of
Planning CC&GBC held 02 April 2025**

Apologies:

Mark Hand – RTPI Director of Wales, Northern Ireland and Planning Aid England

Julie Sullivan– RTPI Northern Ireland Administrator

Michael Graham (Tetra Tech Group)

Gemma Jobling - JPE Planning

Attendance:

Denise Dickson - Head of Planning - (DD)

Jennifer Lundy – Development Management Manager Principal Officer (JL)

Shane Mathers – Development Management and Enforcement Manager Principal Officer (SM)

Ciaran Fox - RSUA Chair

Curtis Large – RSUA Policy and Public Affairs – (CL)

Murray Bell - Local RSUA Rep – Bell Architects Ltd – (MB)

Tom Stokes - TSA Planning – (TS)

Graeme Montgomery – Montgomery Irwin Architects Ltd – (GM)

Damien McLaughlin – HERE Architects – (DML)

Alana Durrent – Valley Architects - (AD)

Tom Stokes – TSA Planning – (TS)

Nathan Armstrong – (NA)

Eoighin Farren – Farren Architects - (EF)

David Montstephen – (DM)

Duncan Jamieson – Taggarts – (DJ)

Scott Caithness – Montgomery Irwin Architects Ltd - (SC)

Adam Larkin – Gravis Planning - (AL)

Scott Kennedy – Bell Architects - (SK)

Brendan Carey – Carey Consulting (BC) (Guest)

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 DD opened the meeting, welcoming attendees and providing introductions.
- 1.2 DD referred to the already circulated agenda for this meeting and thanked those who had contributed to the agenda items.

2.0 Minutes of Previous Meetings:

- 2.1 DD tabled the minutes from the meeting held 30 January 2025 advising that when agreed these will be published on Planning section of Council's website for those who cannot attend to view what has been discussed and for open and transparency.
- 2.2 It was agreed to proceed to publish the minutes.

3.0 Action Points from Previous Meetings:

- 3.1 DD went through the action points from previous meetings and updated as follows:
 - Minutes of 01 May 2024 will be published on website after 07 February 2025 to allow further time for comment – **complete** - DD
 - Validation Checklist – advise staff that applications can be validated with biodiversity checklist and PEA if required and do not need to be returned if bat survey not submitted at validation stage - **complete** – DD
 - Planning Statements – develop Development Management Information Note on Planning Statements – **ongoing** – DD
 - NI Water – proceed with negative condition at stage when solution identified – **complete** – DD
 - Planning Performance Agreement – further consider – **ongoing** – DD
 - Efficiency of planning process – continue to review and seek improvements to delays at the beginning of the planning process – **ongoing** – DD
 - Customer Service Training – customer service training to be provided to staff – **ongoing** – DD
 - Planning Reports – further review of planning reports will take place to streamline – **ongoing** - DD

4.0 Special Planning Committee Meeting

- 4.1 DD stated that she was disappointed at the comment made at the special Planning Committee meeting that these meeting have a tone of concern. She stated that she had considered these meetings to be very productive and beneficial in identifying issues of concern and reaching agreement on resolutions.

- 4.2 CF stated that having these meetings are very beneficial in getting issues raised. He considered that in 2025 we have had a great start and pace has picked up with 2 meetings held and another scheduled. He felt there had been real improvement in communications and is seeing positive changes and benefits of these meetings.
- 4.3 Discussions took place around the definition of a contentious application. DD referred to the Scheme of Delegation which clearly sets out the types of applications that are not considered as a contentious application for consideration of referral to Planning Committee. DD agreed to include further information on Planning website of a contentious application.
- 4.5 Discussions took place on notification of agents when an application goes on the Contentious List. JL advised that all parties involved in the planning application would require to be notified including those making representations.
- 4.6 DD agreed to seek confirmation from ICF as to whether an alert can be included when the Group Recommendation is made on a planning application.
- 4.7 Discussions took place on length of Planning Committee meetings and comparison with other Councils. It was suggested that Members take the Planning Committee Report as read without the Planning Officers going through the detail of the report. DD advised that this has previously been suggested to members but declined. DD agreed that it could be raised with Members again at the next special Planning Committee meeting.
- 4.8 DD requested 3 nominees to attend the next Special Planning Committee meeting. MB advised that DML and himself have agreed to attend. CF suggested that the third person should be from RTPI. DD to seek nominee from RTPI.

5.0 *NI Water Conditions and Standing Advice Update*

- 5.1 DD advised that things have progressed positively with NIW on the waste water infrastructure issues. She stated that this council have now moved to negative conditions on applications where the waste water infrastructure is raised as a concern by NI Water and where they are stating in their consultation responses *"Refuse: Subject to the applicant engaging with NI Water as outlined in the response below, NI Water may reconsider its recommendation."* JL advised that this does not apply to building over pipes or issues in relation to drinking water.
- 5.2 Discussion took place around the wording of the 2 negative conditions. BC welcomed the conditions but advised that in relation to the first condition agents would welcome being able to develop to sub-floor level rather than foundations stage. DD agreed to amend wording to sub-floor level. BC and DML advised there are also serious concerns in terms of reference to requiring agreement on receiving waste water treatment works capacity. With reference to condition 2 BC stated that not every development requires an Article 161.

- 5.3 DD agreed to raise these concerns at a meeting between Heads of Planning and NI Water on 14 April 2025. RSUA agreed to forward amended wording of conditions to DD for discussion at meeting on 14 April.
- 5.4 CF stated that he had a meeting with NIW 2 weeks ago regarding SuDs and they are trialling this with Belfast City Council.
- 5.4 DD advised that the NI Water Standing advice for Single Domestic Properties in Rural Areas will be piloted in this council, Antrim and Newtownabbey Council, and Newry, Mourne and Down Council commencing 01 April 2025.

6.0 Performance Update

- 6.1 DD referred to the Third Quarterly Report on Northern Ireland Planning Statistics advised that performance was continually improving. She stated that there had been a significant improvement since the implementation of the validation Checklist on 01 September 2024. DD stated that over the period 01 September 2024 – 31 March 2025 only 33 applications out of approximately 570 applications received had been returned due to not having all the necessary information. Of the 33 returned, over 50% related to biodiversity checklists and preliminary ecological assessments.
- 6.2 EF advised that new PADs process was also likely to improve performance. JL stated that one issue that has arisen in the new PADs process is in relation to the dates provided by the agent in the form. When contacted by the Planning Officer these dates were on occasion no longer available and this was causing delays in holding meetings. She requested that if agents are providing dates that these are kept free until the Planning Officer contacts them to arrange the meeting, normally within 5 days of receipt of the PAD.
- 6.3 GM stated that he had submitted 2 major PADs under the new process and found it very useful with very clear outcomes and useful report at end of the process. He emphasised the importance of having the client at the PAD meeting.
- 6.4 DD advised that prior to even submitting PAD there is the RSUA Design team and Mag who can provide advice from the outset on key sites. DD further advised that she will be issuing a survey to those who have completed the new PAD process to seek their comments on how it is working.

7.0 Issues raised by agents for discussion

Update on Validation Checklist

- 7.1 DD reminded those present that the consultation on the Validation Checklist closes on 24 April 2025. She advised that biodiversity checklists are the main reason for applications being returned. Other issues relate to tree survey (1),

Landscape & Visual Impact Assessment (2), Planning Statement (2), Drainage Assessment (2), and Daylight & Overshadowing Assessment (2).

NI Water Issues

- 7.2 It was agreed that this was discussed earlier in the agenda (Item 5 above).

Continuity of Applications – Start, Beginning and Ending.

- 7.3 It was agreed that this was discussed at the last meeting.

Cycle Application Files on a Consistent and Organised Basis

- 7.4 It was agreed that this was discussed at the last meeting.

Communicate Clearly and Efficiently

- 7.5 CF commented that planners feel more distant from architects and sometimes a quick half hour meeting to discuss an application can help resolve issues quickly. DD agreed that a meeting is often a quicker and better method of discussing and resolving issues rather than numerous emails back and forth. Discussions took place on the appropriate time to meet. JL stated that she had recognised this issue from reviewing performance and is looking to improve on this. She stated that Planning Statements have been very beneficial in clarifying the reasons for designs etc. and would accommodate an additional meeting if it was going to be beneficial and resolve issues to move the application forward quickly.

Avoid excessively complex and repetitive planning reports

- 7.6 DD advised that there is a need to Planning Reports to clearly set out the assessment of the application. She had reviewed the Planning reports referenced against recent streamlined reports and the layout was very similar. She stated that a further minor streamlining of the delegated reports could be implemented but reiterated the need for open and transparent decision-making and that the detail within the reports are required when complaints/challenges are received in order to demonstrate consideration of all issues.

Scrutiny of the enforcement process

- 7.7 It was agreed that this was discussed at the last meeting.

The new 'planning statements' requirements are not at all considered or described

- 7.8 It was agreed that this was dealt with at the last meeting and a Development Management Information note will be produced.

The new PAD process - Is it working

- 7.9 It was agreed that this was discussed earlier in the agenda (Item 6 above).

Senior Officer Decision Making

- 7.10 DD advised that most of vacant posts are now filled and staff are gaining more experience and confidence in their decision-making. All senior officers are assisting when there are a large number of reports and decision notices requiring review and issuing at any one time to prevent a bottle-neck and enable decisions to issue more quickly.

Decision timelines

- 7.11 It was agreed that this was discussed at the last meeting.

Neighbour Notification for Minor Amendments

- 7.12 It was agreed that this was discussed at the last meeting.

Second Homes

- 7.13 DD referred to correspondence received from DfI following her correspondence with them on this issue. She stated that DfI have advised that they have commenced early discussions with a cross-departmental group comprising DfC, DfI and DfE with the purpose of providing “...an informed understanding of nature and scale of second homes across Northern Ireland and to assess the effects of second homes on the housing market and the sustainability of local communities and services.”

- 7.14 DD agreed to write to DfI and ask for quarterly updates.

Housing Allocation

- 7.15 It was agreed that this was discussed at the last meeting.

CLUD Applications

- 7.16 DD advised that the procedure for not publishing CLUDs is the same across all 11 Councils. DD advised that there is no legislative requirement to advertise or notify on CLUDs.

8.0 AORB

- 8.1 DD reminded those present of the amendment to the Planning Fees Regulations that were implanted on 01 April 2025.
- 8.2 DD advised of current consultations on Ammonia Strategy & operational protocol and Offshore renewable Energy Action Plan.
- 8.3 CF queried the timeframe for the LDP. DD referred to the recently updated LDP Timetable.
- 8.4 CF queried whether there are further opportunities to improve the Planning Portal. DD advised that as part of the yearly costs is a budget for enhancements to the Portal.
- 8.5 BC raised concerns regarding issues raised by NI Water regarding drinking water and agreed to look at wording of a condition for consideration.

11.0 Date of Next Meeting:

11.1 The date of the next meeting 02 July 2025.

ACTIONS

Issue	Action	Owner
Minutes	Publish minutes of meeting on Planning section of Council's website	DD
Planning Statements	Develop Development Management Information Note on Planning Statements	DD
Planning Performance Agreement	Further consider	DD
Efficiency of planning process	Continue to review and seek improvements to delays at the beginning of the planning process	DD
Customer Service Training	Customer service training is to be provided to staff	DD
Planning Reports	Further review of planning reports will take place to streamline Raise with Members Planning Committee Reports taken as read rather than detailed presentation	DD DD/Nominees at Special Planning Committee meeting
Contentious List of Applications	Provide further information on planning website on Contentious List of Applications Discuss with ICF if alert can be included in Planning Portal at group recommendation stage	DD DD
Special Planning Committee meeting	Seek 1 nominee from RTP1 for meeting to be held 21 May 2025	DD

NI Water Conditions	Amended wording of negative conditions	RSUA
	Raise wording of conditions at meeting to be held on 14 April 2025	DD
PADs process	Survey those who have completed	DD
Second Homes	Seek quarterly update from DfI	DD