

Climate, Planning and Public Transport



To:

Chief Executives
and Heads of Planning (Councils)

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Your Ref:
Our Ref:

15 May 2025

Dear Chief Executives & Heads of Planning

RE: TRANSFORMING PLANNING – APPOINTED PERSONS, INDEPENDENT INSPECTORS PROJECT

I am writing to give you an update on the above project which has the potential to facilitate the progress of councils' local development plans, in addition to speeding up consideration of any regionally significant and called-in planning applications in your council area.

We have all had concerns about the potential for considerable delays in such work stemming from the resource issues at the Planning Appeals Commission, and in response the Department is looking to utilise its powers under the Planning Act (NI) 2011 to appoint independent inspectors to deliver reports and recommendations to the Department on the planning and environmental considerations of such work.

As part of this we made a bid to the Executive's Transformation Fund to allow us to undertake the project, and on 4th March 2025 the Minister of Finance advised that we had been successful in securing Executive agreement for £3m of ring-fenced funding for the project up to the end of the 28-29 financial year.

This funding finally allows us to develop the project, and we are currently putting together the project team to develop the detailed project plans and to progress the scheme. Uppermost in our minds at this early stage is the issue of the appropriate governance to ensure that the outcome for all stakeholders in the planning system is that of quality independent reports and recommendations being made by inspectors.

In that respect there is a lot of groundwork to be done before any independent inspectors are appointed. The project team itself sits outwith DfI's planning directorates and will be responsible to our Climate, Planning and Public Transport Group's Deputy Secretary, Judith Andrews. Their initial work will be to detail the project plan and to drive forward the establishment of the appropriate administrative protocols, guidance, procedures and monitoring arrangements. We are also keen to look at innovative ways of carrying out this work, for example the benefits of webcasting and potential use of AI.

The project team will have an experienced project manager in place to lead the work and two senior professional planners on secondment from councils will be joining the team shortly - the latter being able to give us a valuable council perspective. More staff may be brought into this intensive project development phase as required.

To assist in governance and to challenge the project to achieve its aims we have approached independent experts - very experienced senior persons in the fields of planning and appeal work - to act as critical friends. Their experience, from outwith Northern Ireland, will contribute positively to the diverse perspectives we require to make the project robust. We hope to be able to confirm their names shortly.

In terms of wider stakeholder engagement, we will keep you up to date with major developments, and in addition to any high-level engagement you think would be helpful we will reach out to you and your officials where appropriate. We have also had very positive early discussions with the community sector (Community Places) and the RTPI who represent a wide spread of public and private sector planners.

To assist project oversight the interim Public Sector Transformation Board will also be regularly briefed and engaged with on progress, and they will want in turn to engage with our independent experts and stakeholders.

I am sure you will agree that this is a positive development which will allow us to create an alternative route to allow hear and report work to progress at pace, and allow for scope to prioritise and align resources and work with the needs of the wider planning system to deliver both wider central and local governmental objectives with respect to the economy, environment and society. While we are reviewing project timelines, we hope to be able to have the process ready before the end of this financial year.

I hope this gives you an idea as to where we are at this very early stage of the project and that it reassures you that we recognise that this is a project to serve us all as stakeholders in the planning system.

Yours faithfully



Alistair Beggs
Interim Director, Projects

cc Denis McMahon
Judith Andrews
Rosemary Daly
Kathryn McFerran