

**Planning, Water,
Driver and Vehicle Agency**



Department for

Infrastructure

An Roinn

Bonneagair

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To All Chief Executives (Councils)
(Via Email)

17 May 2019

Dear Chief Executive

Re: DFI Planning Environmental Governance Work Programme

As you are aware, as planning authorities we are required to make good, environmentally sound planning decisions that comply with important environmental obligations, laws and standards. Non-compliance with these requirements carries a risk, not only of environmental harm through inappropriate development, but also the prospect of significant reputational and financial harm to the authority because of judicial and other challenges to planning decisions and potential delay or derailment of important development.

The reality is that public concern and interest around environmental issues and the planning system has increased significantly and this has been manifested in an escalating number of complaints and challenges in recent years.

It is therefore important that we continue to support and develop our own capacity and competence in this area, and that we engender trust and confidence in local communities and other stakeholders that the system is meeting its environmental compliance obligations.

In order to provide support for councils in this area, the Department is taking forward a work programme to support improved environmental governance and compliance in the planning system. We have recently secured the services of an environmental specialist, with extensive expertise and experience in capacity building for environmental compliance, to assist with the delivery of the capacity building strand of this work.

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The contract is for a two year period and will focus on delivering the following:

- Baseline capacity survey assessing current confidence, experience and knowledge in dealing with environmental issues in the planning system.
- Practical and user friendly guidance documents in key environmental areas.
- EIA training delivered in two training streams – a core understanding course and an advanced series.
- The establishment of an Environmental Officers' Forum which will enable representatives from each council to share knowledge, experience and identify opportunities to resolve challenges and improve performance.

This work has already commenced and representatives from Causeway Coast and Glens, Derry City and Strabane and Mid and East Antrim councils came together for a workshop with the environmental specialist in early April. This was an opportunity to provide an initial overview of the programme and discuss current experiences in dealing with environmental issues. Planning staff were fully supportive of the proposals and the productive and engaging discussions will shape the focus and content of the baseline capacity survey.

Successful delivery of all aspects of this programme of work will require support and commitment from each of us. It is an ambitious programme but one which can have a positive, long-lasting effect, bringing benefits to all involved through the delivery of sound, compliant, and sustainable planning decisions. I trust the Department can rely on your support and full engagement with the work and planned activities.

A separate letter will issue to Heads of Planning in each council with greater detail on our plans and the commitment required. We look forward to working with your planning teams as our activities progress.

Yours sincerely



JULIE THOMPSON
Deputy Secretary
Planning, Water & DVA