



Title of Report:	Planning Department Performance Annual Report 2020/2021
Committee Report Submitted To:	Planning Committee
Date of Meeting:	25 August 2021
For Decision or For Information	For Information

Linkage to Council Strategy (2021-25)	
Strategic Theme	Cohesive Leadership
Outcome	Council has agreed policies and procedures and decision making is consistent with them
Lead Officer	Head of Planning

Budgetary Considerations	
Cost of Proposal	Nil
Included in Current Year Estimates	
Capital/Revenue	
Code	
Staffing Costs	

Screening Requirements	Required for new or revised Policies, Plans, Strategies or Service Delivery Proposals.		
Section 75 Screening	Screening Completed:	N/A	Date:
	EQIA Required and Completed:	N/A	Date:
Rural Needs Assessment (RNA)	Screening Completed	N/A	Date:
	RNA Required and Completed:	N/A	Date:
Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)	Screening Completed:	N/A	Date:
	DPIA Required and Completed:	N/A	Date:

1.0 Background

1.1 Schedule 4 of The Local Government (Performance Indicators and Standards) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 sets out the statutory performance targets for the Planning Department for major development applications, local development applications and enforcement cases and these are reflected in Council's Performance Improvement Plan 2020-21 and the Planning Department Business Plan 2020-2021.

1.2 The statutory targets are:

- Major applications processed from date valid to decision or withdrawal within an average of 30 weeks
- Local applications processed from date valid to decision or withdrawal within an average of 15 weeks
- 70% of all enforcement cases progressed to target conclusion within 39 weeks of receipt of complaint.

1.3 The Planning Department Business Plan targets are:

- Achieve a reduction in the number of over 12 month applications.
- Major applications processed from date valid to decision or withdrawal within an average of 50 weeks
- Local applications processed from date valid to decision or withdrawal within an average of 19 weeks
- 70% of all enforcement cases progressed to target conclusion within 39 weeks of receipt of complaint.
- Stable Staff Resource
- Reduction in number of Agency staff employed
- Expenditure in line with budget allocation.

1.4 The Northern Ireland Planning Statistics is an official statistics publication issued by Analysis, Statistics & Research Team, Department for Infrastructure. It provides the official statistics for each Council on each of the statutory targets and is published quarterly and on an annual basis. The 2020/21 Annual Statistical Bulletin was published on 1st July 2021 providing planning statistics for this period. It also provides a summary of Council progress across the three statutory targets.

2.0 Details

Website link 1

<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-planning-statistics-april-2020-march-2021> provides the link to the published bulletin.

Development Management Planning Applications

2.1 Table 1 below provides a summary of performance in relation to the statutory targets for major development applications and local development applications for the 2020-21 business year and provides a comparison of performance against all 11 Councils.

Table 1: Planning Applications

2020/21	Major		Local		Total		Live	
	Rec'd	Dec'd/ W/D	Rec'd	Dec'd/ W/D	Rec'd	Dec'd/ W/D	Total	Over 12mths
Planning Applications	9	13	1,152	941	1,161	954	897	206 (23%)
Rank	7 th	4 th	5 th	5 th	5 th	6 th	8 th	8 th (8 th %)
Average Processing Times	86.2 weeks		20.8 weeks					
Rank	10 th		9 th					
Approval Rate	92.3%		95%		94.9%		8 th Rank	

Source: Northern Ireland Planning Statistics: 2020/21 Annual Statistical Bulletin

2.2 In the 2020/21 business year, Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council received the 5th highest number of planning applications out of the 11 Councils, decided the 6th highest number of applications and had the 4th highest number of live applications in the system. In terms of applications in the system over 12 months, this Council had the 4th highest number of applications in the system for over 12 months. The Council is therefore sitting mid-rank out of the 11 Councils in terms of applications received, decided and just below mid-rank in relation to over 12 month old planning applications.

2.3 Although we did not achieve the target to reduce the number of over 12 month applications the increase in the overall number of over 12 month applications in the system is reflective of the impact of Covid-19, largely in the first quarter of this business year. Steady progress continues in terms of the average processing times for local applications when compared to the other 11 Councils from 2nd slowest in 2019/20, to 3rd slowest in 2020/21. Furthermore, the approval rate of applications decided at 94.9% has increased by 2.1% compared to the previous year, sitting with 6 other Councils with approval rate in the range between 94% and 96%. Focus going forward will be to continue to improve the average processing times for local applications whilst balancing this reducing the number of over 12 month applications in the system.

Major Applications

2.4 Analysing the statistics based on major hierarchy category, this Council received the 7th highest number of major applications out of the 11 Councils and decided the 4th highest number of major applications with 12 out of the 13 applications approved. Unfortunately due to the impact of Covid-19 and the resultant impact on Planning Committee meetings, we did not meet the statutory processing time nor the Business Plan target. The impact on the average processing times is due to focusing on determining some of the older major applications in the system; 8 of the 13 applications determined being in the system for over 18 months. Focus going forward will be to continue to reduce the average processing times for the major applications received in the 2021/22 business year, balancing this with the determination of some of the older major applications. At the end of 2020/21 there were 25 live major planning applications in the system.

Local Applications

- 2.5** Looking at the local category of planning applications this Council received the 5th highest number of local applications and issued the 5th highest number of decisions, again sitting just above mid-rank out of the 11 Councils. However, we failed to meet the average processing time of 15 weeks for local applications and the Business Plan target of 19 weeks. Of note is that we were on target to meet the Business Plan target as we had reduced our average processing time in Q3 to 19.8 weeks. However, the decision to focus on issuing more of the older applications in the system over 12 months during Q4 resulted in the yearly average processing time for local applications of 20.8 weeks. However, of note is that we improved our ranking against the other 10 councils from 2nd to 3rd slowest. This improvement in performance has continued into Q1 of the 2021/22 business year.
- 2.6** The number of over 12 month old applications increased in 9 out of the 11 Councils over the business year. The increase in over 12 month applications in this Council area took place over the first 6 months of the year and began to decrease again from Q3 when focus was to issue larger numbers of the over 12 months and those applications just shy of over 12 months. This reduction has continued into Q1 of the 2021/22 business year.

Enforcement

- 2.7** Table 2 below shows statistics in relation to enforcement for the 2020/21 business year. Unfortunately, due to the impact of Covid-19 and the restrictions on visiting sites during Q1, like a number of other Councils we failed to meet the statutory target for concluding enforcement cases of 70% within 39 weeks by 4.5%, ranking 7th out of the 11 Councils. We opened the 7th highest number of cases and closed the 7th highest number of cases with over 40% closed due to no breach identified. However, we had the highest number of prosecutions and 4th highest number of convictions out of the 11 Councils.

Table 2: Enforcement

2020/21	Open	Conclude	Conclusion Times	Court Action		Live cases
			70% within 39wks	Prosecutions	Convictions	
Cases	245	233	66.5%	14	1	366
Rank	7th	6th	7th	4th	3rd	4th

Source: Northern Ireland Planning Statistics: 2020/21 Annual Statistical Bulletin

Other Activity by Planning Department

- 2.8** Tables 3 and 4 below indicate the level of other activity carried out by the Planning Department over the 2020/21 business year.

Table 3: Other Activity

	2017/18 Received	2018/19 Received	2019/20 Received	2020/21 Received
Discharge of Conditions	86	48	100	96
Certificate of Lawful Development	33	43	58	48
Pre Application Discussions	57	52	46	37
Non Material Change	38	27	41	30
TPOs	10	14	13	7
Pre Application Notice	19	17	13	6
Total	243	201	271	224

Source: Northern Ireland Planning Statistics: Annual Statistical Bulletins

Table 4: Correspondence, Complaints and Appeals

	2017/18 Received	2018/19 Received	2019/20 Received	2020/21 Received
Complaints Stage 1	23	27	24	44
Complaints Stage 2	9	9	11	23
Complaints Stage 3	12	4	11	12
Complaints to Ombudsman	4	3	6	6
Judicial Review Decision	1	2	1	0
General Correspondence	600	734	607	535
Request For Information (EIR/FOI)	68	60	69	91
Planning Appeal Decisions	24	22	17	20
Total	741	861	746	731

Source: 2020/21 Unvalidated Statistics – Internal Reports

- 2.9** In addition to the formal applications received, the Planning Department received 224 other types of applications relating to planning applications and dealt with some 731 pieces of correspondence, complaints and appeals, a reduction on the previous year. However, of note is the increase in the number of stage 1 complaints. 1 decision received from the NIPSO determined they would be taking no further action.
- 2.10** Of the 20 decisions made by the Planning Appeals Commission, the Planning Department successfully defended its decision on 13 appeals (65%).

Local Development Plan

- 2.11** The Development Plan team continued to work in accordance with the revised timetable and work programme over the 2020/21 business year. Work continued on updating the background/evidence papers for the topic papers in preparation for the Draft Plan Strategy despite the cancellation of workshops from April through to September due to the impact of Covid-19 restrictions. Workshops recommenced on 29 September 2020 and continued throughout the business year. The impact of the cancellation of workshops for the LDP negatively impacted on the timetable for publication of the draft Plan Strategy and a new timetable was agreed for publication as a result.

Factors Impacting on Performance

Unstable staffing resource

- 2.12** The issue of staffing is one factor that impacts on performance. Having a stable staffing resource is important to ensuring applications and enforcement cases are progressed in a timely fashion. The agreement to recruit additional staff in December 2020 was progressed with the appointment of temporary staff at Planning Officer grades. This recruitment continues into the 2021/22 business year to fill vacant posts. When all staff have been appointed and in post this should assist in reducing workloads and improvements to performance.

Covid-19

- 2.13** The impact of the restrictions imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic had a negative impact on the performance of the Planning Department. With the office closed to the public, staff instructed to work from home and Planning Committee meetings cancelled, processing of planning applications, enforcement cases and LDP workshops were adversely affected. Output improved with the provision of laptops and VPN access for remote working in August and the commencement of Planning Committee meetings remotely in June and LDP workshops at end of September. However, it was always going to be an uphill struggle to reduce the impact that the first 5 months of restrictions had on performance.
- 2.14** Nevertheless, the output of decisions significantly increased in Q3 and Q4 with the provision of resources to effectively work from home and staff rota in place to attend the office. Other workarounds to processes were put in place to enable applications to be assessed remotely until such times as site visits could resume and the submission of planning applications and amendments by email.

Planning Review

- 2.15** During Q4 of the business year a Planning Review was commenced by an external consultant. The Report on this Review was not received during this business year.

Budget

- 2.16** Despite the negative impact of Covid-19 on planning application income, through the careful monitoring of expenditure against income the Planning Department remained within budget in 2020/21 coming just under budget. Careful management of expenditure was necessary due to income below that was largely achieved through savings on staff salaries due to vacant posts not being filled and other savings on budget codes such as Development Plan, Legal Services and staff mileage.

Conclusion

- 2.17** In conclusion, performance within the Planning Department remains steady with against a difficult year due to Covid-19 restrictions and vacant posts. However, with restrictions easing and recruitment of staff ongoing it is envisaged that improvements in performance and increased number of decisions issuing will continue into the 2021/22 business year.

3.0 Recommendation

- 3.1 IT IS RECOMMENDED** that the Planning Committee note the Planning Departments Annual report.