

Planning Review Steering Group

Meeting held: 07 March 2022

Attendees: Councillors Callan, McGurk, Nicholl (joined 18:00)

Moira Quinn, Denise Dickson, Sharon Mulhern, Shane Mathers, Emma Hudson, Stephen O'Neill, Julie McMath, Michael Wilson

Mr J Mackinnon (external consultant)

1. Apologies:
David Jackson (CX)
2. Declarations of Interest:
None
3. Minutes of previous meeting:
Proposed by Cllr Callan to agree the minutes
Seconded by Cllr McGurk
Unanimously **agreed**.
4. Implementation Plan:
D Dickson took Members through the updated Planning Review Action Plan (previously circulated) and referred to minutes of meetings with RSUA and RTPI (previously circulated).

In response to a query raised by Councillor Callan regarding the application validation checklist, D Dickson advised that first steps are ensuring staff are frontloading the assessment of the application. There is greater awareness of the need to submit biodiversity checklists on relevant applications and steps of progress are being made. She referred to Belfast City Council who initiated the implementation of the checklist and advised that as part of DfI review of the Implementation of the Planning Act this area of validation is being considered. However, changes to legislation will require to go through the relevant procedures and the new Minister may also have views.

In reference to the engaging with the Chamber, Councillor Callan referred to the town centre forums as a means of communication. D Dickson advised that the Chambers had been approached and engagement had been made with Ballycastle Chamber and her LDP team is working with A Deighan in Causeway Chamber on town centre survey. However, response numbers to the survey was very poor. The LDP team are also engaged in other town centre meetings and will continue to do so.

ACTION POINT: Councillor Callan requested a report be brought to the next Steering Group on the design arbitrator in terms of options going forward.

J Mackinnon congratulated staff on the great work done on the action plan. He considered the response from Dfl on the review of the Planning Act to be very disappointing and there needs to be continued pressure put on Dfl to make changes to the planning system. In terms of rural planning policy, he advised that professional planning view and members view needs to be as aligned as possible. He considered the town centre policy should be more about action on car parking charges and environmental improvements rather than policy. J Mackinnon considered the new PADs process when complete may largely overcome a lot of the design issues. He understands that the messages coming through now are that the Planning Department are easier to deal with and more open to discussions. J Mackinnon considered that the response from Dfl on the LDP process is totally unacceptable. Need pressure from all CXs and councillors to communicate with Dfl on this issue. He concluded by stating that the progress made to date has been impressive.

Councillor Callan agreed that pressure needs to be put on Dfl to make changes. He referred to the NIAO report and agreed a collective effort is need by NILGA, CXs and Heads of Planning to push for changes.

Councillor Nicholl confirmed that issues are continually being raised but Dfl are not taking onboard the concerns.

D Dickson referred to staff pressures due to vacancy at senior level.

M Quinn clarified the period for resignation.

In response to a query from Councillor McGurk, D Dickson clarified that those at the RTPI meeting did not consider a design arbitrator necessary as they considered staff to have the qualifications and skills necessary to make assessments on design issues. D Dickson advised that design was not the key topic of discussion at the RSUA meeting but was touched upon and Ciaran Fox, RSUA Director, advised that RSUA have a design panel and is to provide further details.

D Dickson advised that key topic area going forward is to review the PADs process and a further joint meeting with RSUA and RTPI is arranged for end of April to review draft process. She stated that case officer office phone numbers are now published in the Planning section of council's website as a result of one of the agreed actions from the meetings to improve communications.

Councillor Callan commented that there appears to be good engagement with agents at these meetings. He stated that there is a need to ensure that the actions from these meetings are taken forward. He considered that media

communication regarding these meetings would be good for improving the media on planning.

J Mackinnon advised that Belfast City Council invite the press team to their senior management team meeting to improve media communications. He stated that there is a positive narrative that can be communicated on how Planning service is improving.

5. AORB:

In response to a query from Councillor Callan, D Dickson referred to the Quarterly Statistical report circulated to Planning Committee for performance statistics. The report previously circulated to this Group was a response to a query at the previous meeting regarding the spread of decisions issuing in terms of processing times.

ACTION POINT: Councillor Callan suggested that the customer survey could be carried out through survey monkey. D Dickson agreed to contact ICT to seek advice on how this can be carried out.

Councillor Callan and Councillor McGurk thanked staff for all their efforts and welcomed the positive reaction to this review which is commendable

6. Date of Next Meeting: **10 May 2022**