

**Climate, Planning  
and Public Transport**



Department for

**Infrastructure**

An Roinn

**Bonneagair**

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**Infrastructure**

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To  
Council Chief Executives

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Your Reference:

Our Reference:

10 January 2023

Dear Chief Executives

## **PLANNING IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME**

As part of the Department's wider engagement on the Planning Improvement Programme for Northern Ireland, I recently met with Alison McCullagh, on behalf of Solace, and representatives of the Heads of Planning Group to progress the Planning Improvement Work Programme. This meeting was very constructive and follows on from a number of previous workshops, discussions and correspondence on this important agenda over recent months, including the sharing of a "starter for 10" work programme in September. Both local and central government are agreed that improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning system is essential and that we all need to play our part in delivering the required changes. It has been agreed that the most effective way for us to collectively engage in this work is by focussing on a small number of priority actions that will make the most difference in terms of performance.

In this regard, the Heads of Planning will be meeting on 20 January to recommend, for onward reporting to SOLACE, the local government leads for the work programme, the priority actions and their timeframes. These will be added to the Departmental leads, priority actions and timeframes to form a collective prioritised Planning Improvement Work Programme. This programme will be taken forward and managed by central and local government, with significant collaborative work required by us all on relevant actions. The final agreed Planning Improvement Work Programme will be shared after the 20 January meeting, and an update will be provided to the next PSG/SOLACE meeting scheduled for 20 February 2023.

It is recognised that a number of the recommendations set out in the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) and Public Accounts Committee (PAC) reports on Planning, are viewed as "business as usual" and, given the two tier system, will be for each planning authority to take forward, as appropriate within their organisation, rather than being managed through the collective Planning Improvement Work Programme. This will have the added benefit of keeping the collective Planning Improvement Work Programme much shorter and more focussed than the "starter for 10" programme previously shared in September.

At the recent meeting it was agreed that the Department would write to each planning authority setting out those recommendations to be taken forward in this "business as usual" manner. These are as follows with the source of the relevant report(s) referenced for information:-

In relation to Development Management:

- (a) Planning authorities should consider how checks on good record keeping, to ensure transparency, could be carried out effectively. All those involved in decision making should ensure that processes are open and transparent, particularly where a high degree of interpretation has been exercised (PAC);
- (b) Planning authorities should regularly review past decisions to understand real world outcomes, impact on communities and the quality of the completed development (NIAO/PAC);
- (c) Where a Planning Committee makes a decision that is contrary to planning officials' advice, the official minutes of planning committee meetings should contain details of the planning considerations that have driven the decision made (NIAO);
- (d) Planning Committees should ensure that minutes of meetings include details of the applications that are brought to committee as a result of a referral; who brought it to committee and outline the planning reasons why the application has been referred (NIAO);
- (e) Immediate action is required to ensure that the system is operating fairly and appropriately with regard to overturn rates (NIAO);
- (f) Rural housing policy should be implemented equally and consistently (NIAO/PAC); and
- (g) Consistency in enforcement case outcomes should be investigated and best practice shared (NIAO).

In relation to Skills and Training:

- (h) Planning authorities should assess skills & experience gaps in the system and where a common skills gap across multiple councils is identified, a plan should be developed to ensure that all councils have access to the skills they need to operate effectively. This plan should include assessments of different provision options (NIAO); and

- (i) Councils should consider the introduction of compulsory training for members of planning committees (NIAO).

Whilst there is no direct reporting from local government to the PAC, it would nonetheless be helpful to receive your assurances regarding the implementation of these recommendations, either to understand how your planning authority has already taken them forward or any future plans to do so. Your response by 28 February would be very helpful in this regard. You may, of course, be taking forward other actions locally to improve planning performance, and your response may also provide an opportunity to update us in that regard, so that we have a full understanding of all the work being taken forward on improvement across the planning system.

Finally, we are taking steps to put in place the Regional Planning Commission for a first meeting at the start of February and will provide a further update on this shortly.

I look forward to continuing to work with you to progress the Planning Improvement Programme.

Yours sincerely

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**Julie Thompson**  
**Deputy Secretary**

cc Heads of Planning