

Minutes of MS Teams Meeting held between RTPI Consultants and Head of Planning CC&GBC held 21 January 2022

Attendance:

Denise Dickson (Head of Planning) (DD)

Julie Sullivan (RTPI Northern Ireland Administrator) (JS)

Rhian Brimble (RTPI) (RB)

Mura Quigley (RTPI Chair) (MQ)

Gemma Jobling (GJ)

Una Somerville (US)

David Mountstephen (DM)

Kieran Carlin (KC)

Apologies:

Tom Stokes (TS)

DD opened the meeting providing the agenda for the meeting and presented via powerpoint presentation via MS Teams.

DD provided a background to the meeting and referred to the Planning Review conducted by external consultant Mr J Mackinnon.

DD referred to comments within the Report received from Elected Representatives, Agents, Chamber of Commerce and Communities and provided a summary of the key recommendations of the Planning Review. She provided an update on new initiatives undertaken including the publication of a revised Enforcement Strategy, implementation of Standing Advice with DfI Roads, application checklist, front-loading of assessment of applications, amendments to Planning Reports, Information Leaflet on CLUDs and appointment of a dedicated lawyer.

DD referred to actions ongoing including succinct template report for non-contentious householder and minor applications report and processing times, work with NI Water on Standing Advice, meeting with Chamber and recruitment of staff. She advised of the actions yet to be taken forward including customer survey, concordat, media communication, review of Members decisions on rural development, review of process for processing planning applications, introduce process for impartial advice on design, promote awards scheme for good planning and development and appointment of HRA specialist.

DD provided an update on performance at end of Q2 of 2021/22 highlighting improvements and approval rate above NI average.

Discussions were opened to attendees and the following points were raised:

Design:

Attendees commented on design making the following points:

- design assessment should not be taken from Planners who have the skill set to consider design issues; officers must give their view on design
- need to build the confidence of staff and support them to make decisions on design
- need to develop Members on design issues
- do not agree with need for an independent design arbitrator; should be short-term and needs careful consideration on who appointed with mix of planners and architects on the panel; links to Welsh design resources provided
- there is a lot of criticism of the English system and do not want to follow this example

Communication, Consultees and Processing Times:

Attendees commented on communication, Consultees and processing times making the following points:

- big change in service in recent weeks with meaningful engagement and positive experience
- need to encourage officers to provide their view on applications and welcome early discussion between case officer and senior officer as this will improve timeframe for submission of information
- need to avoid late requests for additional information/amendments
- consultation streamlining process is very welcome; need to consider carefully who needs consulted in first place and avoid late consultations
- public perception that planners focus on applicant rather than due consideration to objectors' concerns
- need to make decisions rather than allowing continual amendments to applications resulting in prolonged decision-making process; RoI have fixed timeframes for submission of information
- consultation response times are often dire; where consultation response outstanding, some Councils bring application to Committee and invite consultee to provide response at Committee
- negative conditions should be used more
- small changes made post committee to enable application to be approved should be facilitated
- officers need to consider other material considerations including Council Plans and Strategies such as Tourism Strategy
- need to recognise economic impact on delays to processing applications

PADS:

Attendees commented on communication and PADs making the following points:

- process currently not working

- would not mind a fee if process was meaningful
- need to recognise work put into information for PAD
- informal process very useful, tone of meeting important
- agree review of process required
- calendar for booking PAD meeting would be welcome

DD agreed to circulate the minutes of key points of the meeting to JS.

DD concluded the meeting by thanking attendees for their open discussions on various issues. She agreed to meet on a 6 monthly basis and earlier if necessary.