

Office of the Chief Executive

**Belfast**
City Council

Your reference

Our reference JW/lc

Date April 2022

William Humphrey MLA
Chair, Public Accounts Committee
Northern Ireland Assembly
By email: Committee.publicaccounts@niassembly.gov.uk

Dear Mr Humphrey

NI Assembly, Public Accounts Committee Report on Planning in NI

Belfast City Council was extremely keen to engage with the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) on first hearing of its review of the NI planning system. Council officials met NIAO at the outset in December 2020 then followed this up with detailed written representations in January 2021 calling for fundamental change.

The Council notes the tonality of the Public Accounts Committee report and shares its high degree of frustration about how the NI planning system was designed and currently operates.

Both Belfast and wider region have enormous potential – economically, socially and environmentally. Belfast is the *First City*, economic driver for the region and of huge importance socially and culturally. If our City is to truly realise its tremendous potential, and to deliver on the *Belfast Agenda*, its Community Plan, then it must be supported by an efficient, effective and fit for purpose planning system.

To deliver on this, it is our firm opinion that further devolution must take place and that Belfast should enjoy the same autonomy and powers as other regional cities in these Islands if it is to truly compete with them. Therefore, the Council must have responsibility for transport, regeneration, technical advice on most heritage assets and a much greater say on city wide infrastructure.

Consequently, Belfast City Council welcomes the Public Accounts Committee report, its recommendations and requirement for fundamental change.

The Council's Planning Service has been able to innovate to an extent, for example, through publication of its *Application Checklist* in 2018 as a means to improve the quality of planning applications on submission, but this like many other things is essentially a work around of the existing legislative process. There is no doubt that significant reform and change to planning legislation is required to address both the slow Local Development Plan process and

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underperformance in Development Management. This legislative change must be a key priority for the NI Assembly following the upcoming election.

The NI planning system must be about delivery and outcomes, rather than focus on process and red tape.

In our view it is necessary to have a much deeper understanding of how planning operates in NI in a systems context. In this regard, there are four main pillars for us to collectively focus on: Culture, Systems, Delivery and Quality Outcomes.

We recognise that the only way to address the significant challenges with the current system is through collaboration and by truly working together. The Council recognises that it has an important leadership role in this journey of change and it very much looks forward to working with the Department for Infrastructure, the other 10 councils, development industry, communities and other key stakeholders to bring about the fundamental reform that is needed. To this end, we have already been engaging with the Department and fellow councils on how to move forward.

I am also expecting the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives in NI (SOLACE) to provide a response to the Public Accounts Committee report on behalf of the 11 councils. As sovereign local authorities, the other 10 councils may also wish to make separate representations to the Committee.

Please let me know should the Committee require any further information, insight or assistance.

Yours sincerely

John Walsh
Chief Executive

Copied to: SOLACE NI
Other 10 councils in NI
Department for Infrastructure