

Subject:	Northern Ireland Audit Office – Strategic Review of the Planning Appeals Commission
Date:	16 June 2026
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Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some time in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report or Summary of Main Issues
1.1	This report provides an update and summary of the Northern Ireland Audit Office’s Strategic review of the Planning Appeals Commission report which was published in May 2026.
2.0	Recommendation
2.1	Members are asked to note the contents of the report
3.0	Main Report
3.1	The Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) conducted a strategic review of the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC), the independent body responsible for handling examinations of Local Development Plan documents, planning appeals and providing recommendations on major planning decisions in Northern Ireland.

3.2	<p>The review assessed the PAC's performance, governance, and impact on the wider planning system. The final report was published on the 21 May 2026 and is included at Appendix 1.</p>
3.3	<p>Key Findings</p> <p>The report identified a number of key findings:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Significant delays and backlogs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The PAC has experienced substantial delays across its workstreams, particularly in complex "Hear and Report" cases involving regionally significant developments. • Many major cases have taken several years to progress, with none of those referred since 2021 completed at the time of review. • Planning appeal decision times increased significantly (from 23 weeks in 2016–17 to 73 weeks in 2024–25), though recent improvements have reduced this for newer cases. • These delays have contributed to wider inefficiencies across the planning system and can extend overall decision timelines to many years. 2. Economic and environmental impacts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delays are discouraging investment, reducing confidence among developers and stakeholders, and slowing delivery of major infrastructure and renewable energy projects. • Prolonged timelines risk undermining climate targets and mean Local Development Plans may be outdated before adoption. 3. Resource constraints and organisational challenges <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The PAC has faced significant staffing challenges, including loss of experienced commissioners and reliance on newly appointed staff requiring training. • Resource limitations have constrained its ability to manage complex cases, contributing directly to backlogs. • Funding is limited, with minimal cost recovery (less than 3% of expenditure from fees), and no charges applied to major referred cases. 4. Weak governance, accountability and oversight <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The PAC operates as a Tribunal Non-Departmental Public Body and is fully independent in its decision-making. However, it has: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ No statutory performance targets ○ Limited accountability to government or the Assembly ○ Weak performance monitoring arrangements • Compared to other jurisdictions (e.g. England and Ireland), Northern Ireland lacks clear targets, accountability structures, and performance incentives. 5. Poor coordination across the planning system <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ineffective communication and engagement between the PAC, Department for Infrastructure (Dfi), and other stakeholders has contributed to delays. • Lack of shared planning, prioritisation, and information exchange exacerbates inefficiencies.
3.4	<p>Overall Conclusion</p> <p>The report concludes that the PAC plays a critical role in ensuring independent planning decisions and access to justice. However, due to delays, resourcing issues, and weak governance arrangements, it is currently seen as a barrier to timely development. The NIAO concludes that the PAC is not delivering value for money and that significant reform is required. The report therefore makes a number of key recommendations:</p>

1. Fundamental review

The Department of Justice should urgently arrange to carry out a fundamental review of the PAC including its status, statutory structure and associated governance, oversight and accountability arrangements. In doing so it should liaise closely with key stakeholders.

2. Improved performance management

More certainty and confidence around the timescales for delivery of PAC caseloads is essential. Pending the outcome of a fundamental review, we recommend that the PAC should develop and publish detailed plans to clear the long-standing cases in each workstream. These plans should include timelines for clearing backlogs and regular monitoring by NICTS.

3. Reform funding and cost recovery

Pending the outcome of a fundamental review, we recommend that the PAC, working with the Department and DfI as appropriate, should carry out a review of the current appeal fees and charging regime, alongside performance reporting and monitoring, with a view to improving cost recovery.

4. Enhanced collaboration

While it is important that the PAC retains its independence in decision-making, it is a key part of the planning process and a shared commitment to improving delivery is urgently required. Pending the outcome of a fundamental review, we recommend that:

- The PAC, the Department and DfI should work together to ensure the operational delivery of new work allocated to the PAC is assessed and adequately resourced ahead of its introduction.
- The PAC and DfI should agree processes to ensure that administrative issues with the potential to delay or frustrate a public local inquiry or hearing are fully understood and resolved before the inquiry or hearing commences.
- The PAC should put in place a process of regular engagement with other parts of the planning system, including DfI and councils, to provide it with an early indication of issues in the planning system so that workloads and prioritisation can be properly planned.

5. Stronger oversight

The Department must immediately strengthen its oversight and governance of the PAC so far as the current statutory structure allows. Pending the outcome of a fundamental review, we recommend that:

- The Department should immediately undertake a review of the existing governance arrangements for the PAC, with a view to identifying additional accountability and oversight mechanisms that can be put in place within the current statutory structure.
- The PAC should develop and publish specific, measurable key performance indicators and timelines for different workstreams and consult with the Department as to any additional financial or administrative support required to achieve these. The PAC's annual reporting should include a clear assessment of whether key metrics have been achieved and any remedial action which is required.
- The Department and the PAC should work together to agree and publish new administrative performance standards in a revised Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) within the next six months and then continue to review the MoU on an ongoing basis.

4.1	There are no financial or resource implications as a direct result of this report.
5.0	Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment
5.1	There are no equality or good relations implications as a result of the report or a need for a rural needs assessment at this time.
6.0	Appendices – Documents Attached
	Appendix 1 – Northern Ireland Audit Office - Strategic Review of the Planning Appeals Commission (May 2026)

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