

# Planning Committee

## Planning Performance Report 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021



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# Summary Planning Statistics

## Introduction

This Performance Report provides an overview of planning activity and includes performance information from 01 April to 31 March 2020. It provides an outline of Development Management performance and summary statistical information on council progress across the 3 statutory targets for major development applications, local development applications and enforcement cases. It also provides information relating to performance against corporate targets.

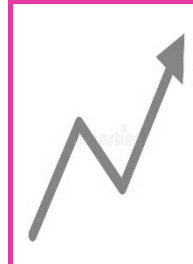
Decisions down



**8%**



**95%**  
approval rate



Householder  
applications  
increased

Regeneration of former  
Royal Exchange, 650  
new affordable homes  
and new aquarium  
**APPROVED** by  
Committee



**583**

householder  
applications  
approved

Appeals against  
decisions down



**106**  
Committee  
applications  
considered  
this year

Live enforcement cases  
reduced by 28%



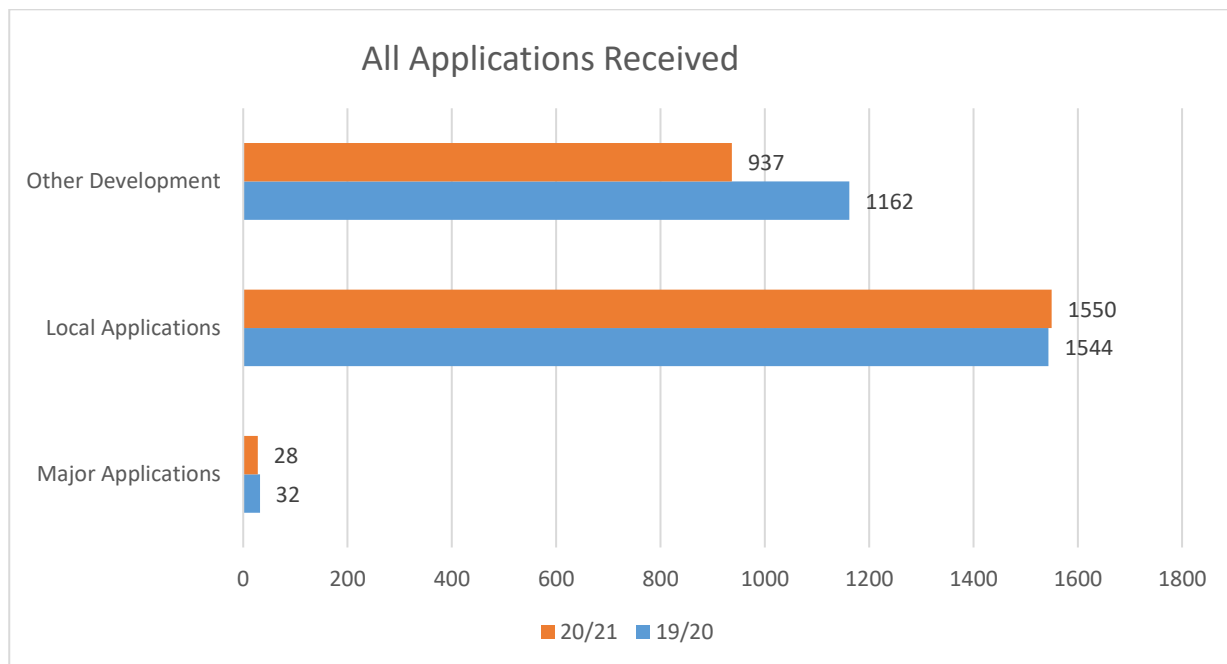
**Enforcement**

**66% cases  
concluded within  
39 weeks**

# Overall Planning Activity

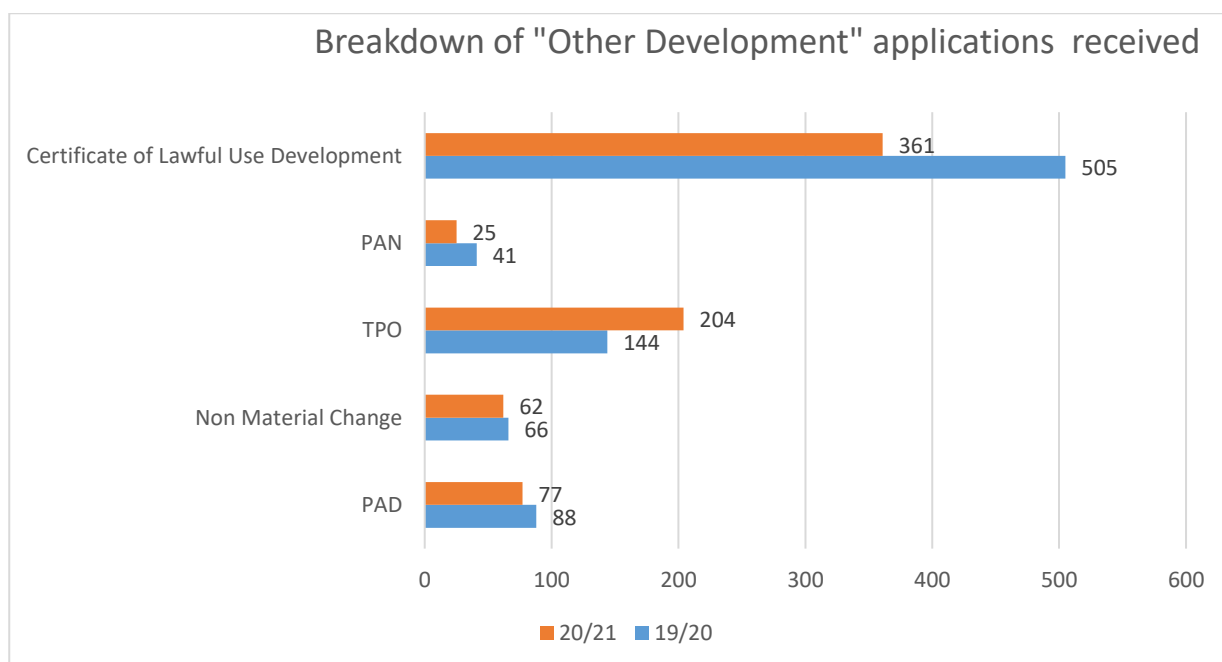
## Applications Received

The total number of valid applications (Locals, Major and Other Development) received between 01 April and 31 March 2021 was 2,515 –an 8% decrease over the same period last year (2,738).



Compared to the same period last year the number of **Local** Applications received was broadly similar while the number of **Major** applications was down 12% (-4).

**Other Development\*** which is excluded from the statutory performance targets makes up over 59% of applications/consents received. This was 19% down on the previous year and can mainly be attributed to a decrease in applications for Certificates of Lawful Use Development relating to Houses of Multiple Occupancy (505 in 19/20; 361 in 20/21), and Discharge of Condition (DoC) applications which have decreased by 34% (318 in 19/20, 209 in 20/21 ).



**\*Other Developments** include applications for: Certificates of Lawful Development, works to trees, Non-Material Changes, Discharge of Conditions, Proposal of Application Notices (PANs) and Pre-Application Discussions (PADs). Many of these application types do not attract a fee.

## Pre-Application Discussions

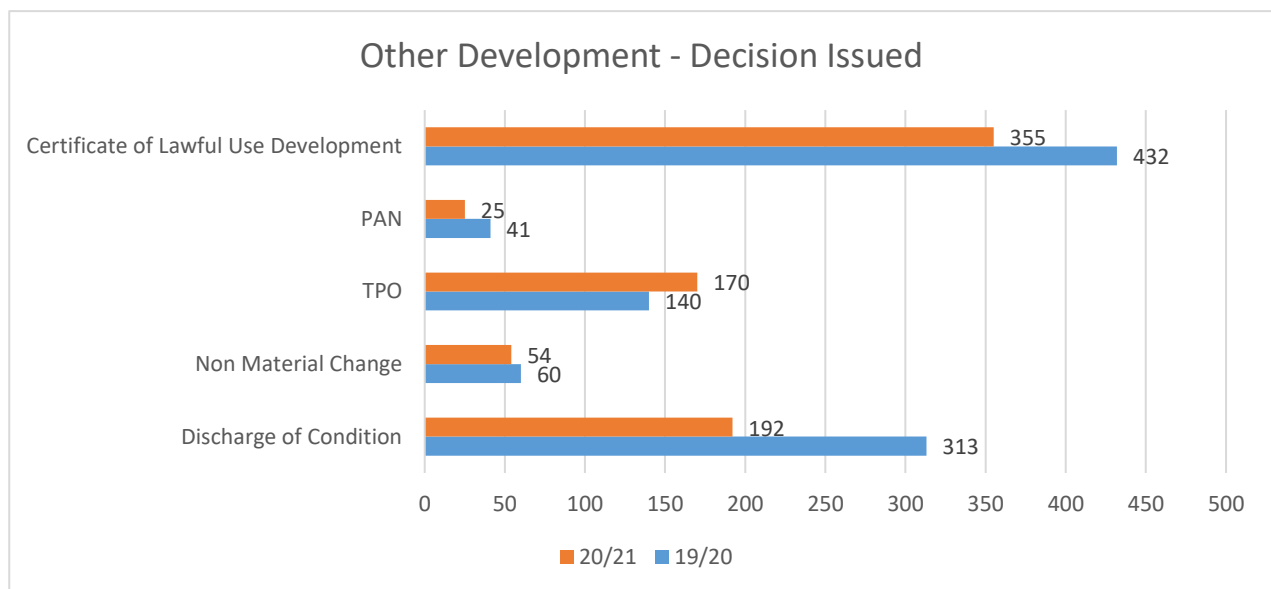
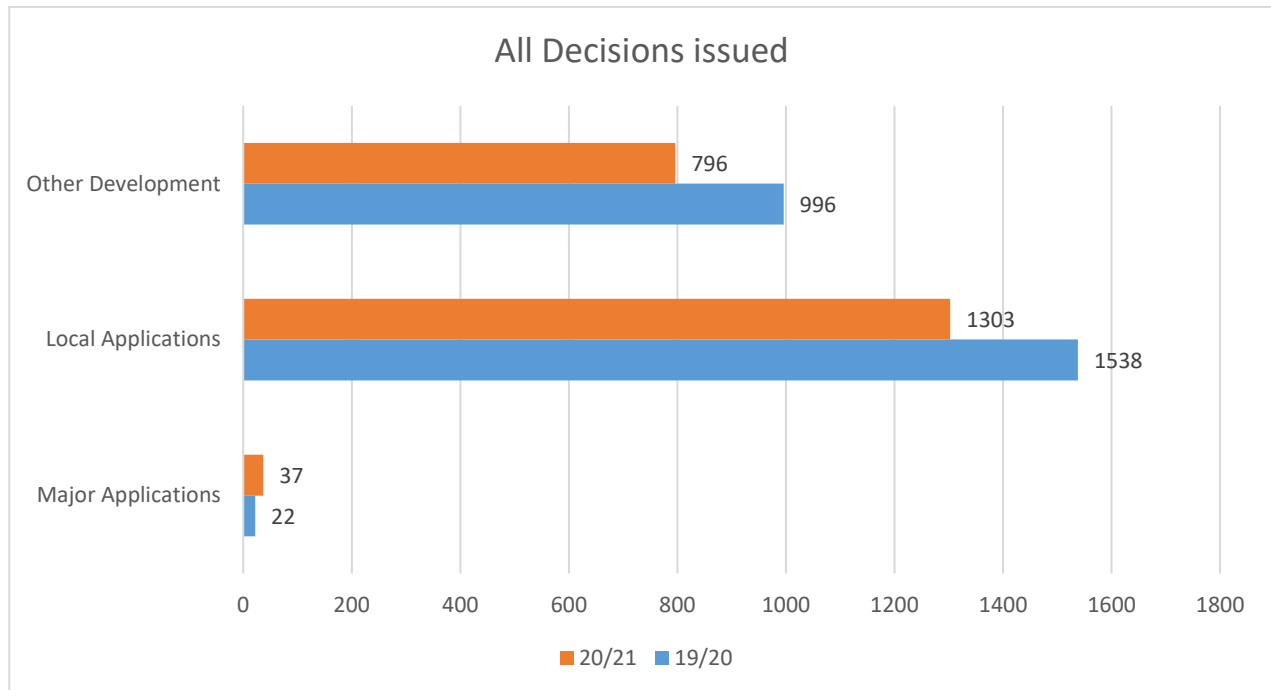
Pre-Application Discussions (PADs) are a very important part of the planning application process. PADs provide an opportunity for the applicant to discuss their proposals with a Planning Officer before they make their application. This allows issues to be identified early and the quality of proposals to be improved. In turn, this results in more timely decision making and better outcomes on the ground. This "frontloading" of the application process contributes significantly to the performance and effectiveness of the Planning Service.

In 2020/21 the Planning Service received 77 PADs, including 12 PADs for Major development and 65 PADs for Local development. There were 29 PADs concluded, all for Local development.

## Overall Planning Activity (continued)

### Decisions Issued

A total of 2,132 decisions were issued between 1 April and 31 March 2021, which is 16% less than the same period in 2019/20 when 2,556 decisions issued.



95% of applications were approved in 2020-21. This is the same approval rate as the previous year.

# Major Applications

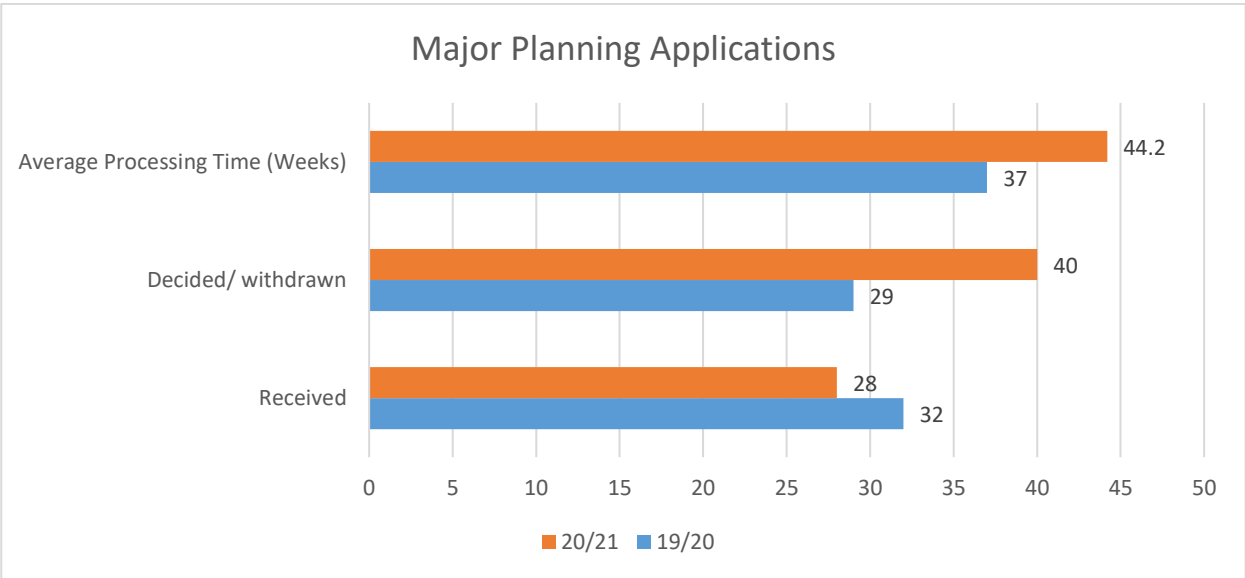
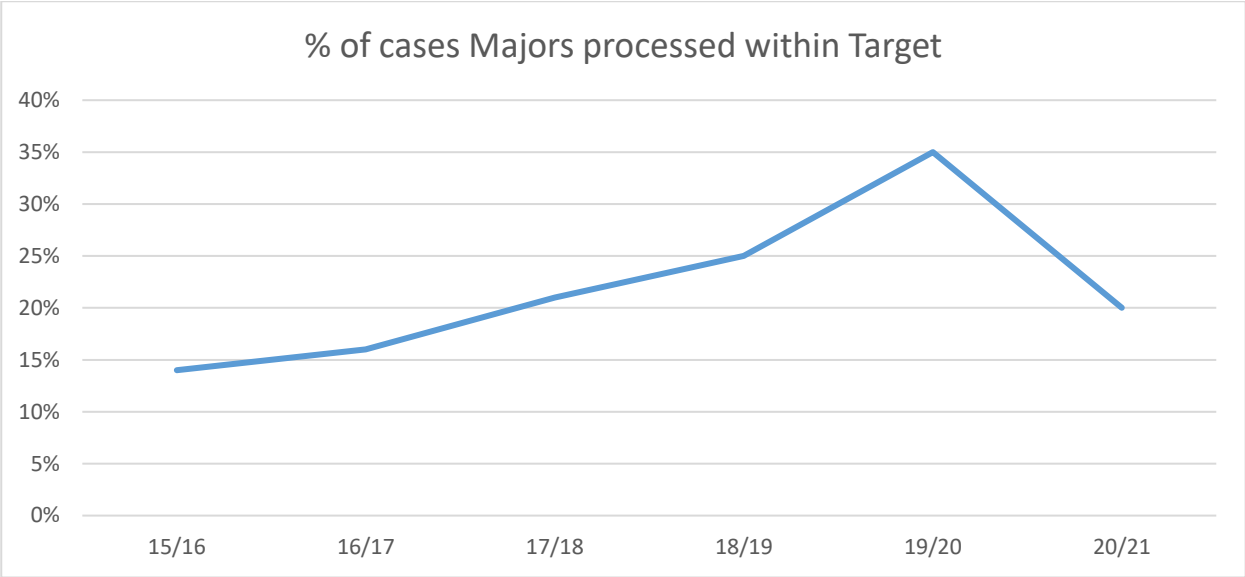
**The Statutory target is that major planning applications are processed from the date valid to decision issued or withdrawal date within an average of 30 weeks.**

Major applications can have important economic, social and environmental implications. Most major applications are housing schemes of 50 units or more, larger office block developments, hotels and civic types of development.

The number of major applications received up to 31 March 2021 was 28. This is four fewer than the same period last year. 40 major applications were processed during the period which is 38% more than in the same period last year (29) and the second highest return since the Council became a Planning Authority in 2015. Performance was 44.2 weeks, slightly down on the return of 37 weeks the previous year. This compares to a regional average of 61.8 weeks. (during the first 9 months of 20/21) [NI Planning Statistics Quarter3 2020-21 Bulletin]

Major applications	Received	Decided/ withdrawn	Average Processing Time (Weeks)	Target Processing Time (Weeks)	% of cases processed within Target
20/21	28	40	44.2	30	20%
19/20	32	29	37	30	35%
18/19	30	23	41.4	30	25%
17/18	21	30	52	30	21%
16/17	27	38	57.6	30	16%
15/16	35	56	54.4	30	14%

**Major Application Performance over last 5 years**



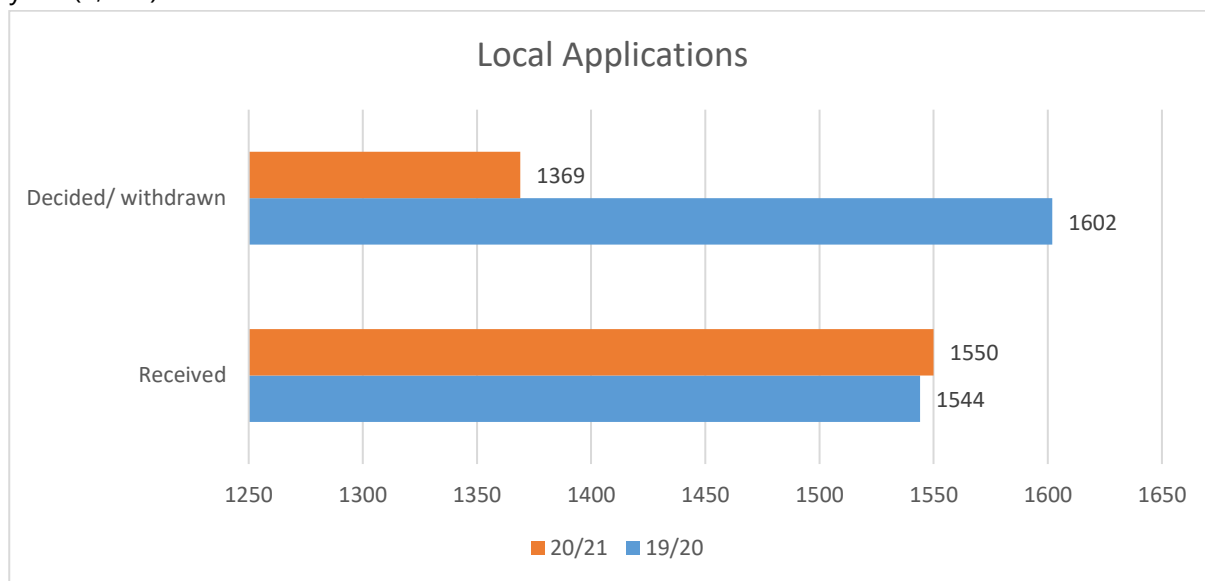


## Local Applications

**The Statutory target is that local planning applications are processed from the date valid to decision issued or withdrawal date within an average of 15 weeks.**

Local Planning applications are mostly householder, residential and minor commercial applications. However, they can also include more complex residential schemes up to 49 units and larger commercial proposals. Local applications make up the vast bulk of measurable applications received (a total of 99%).

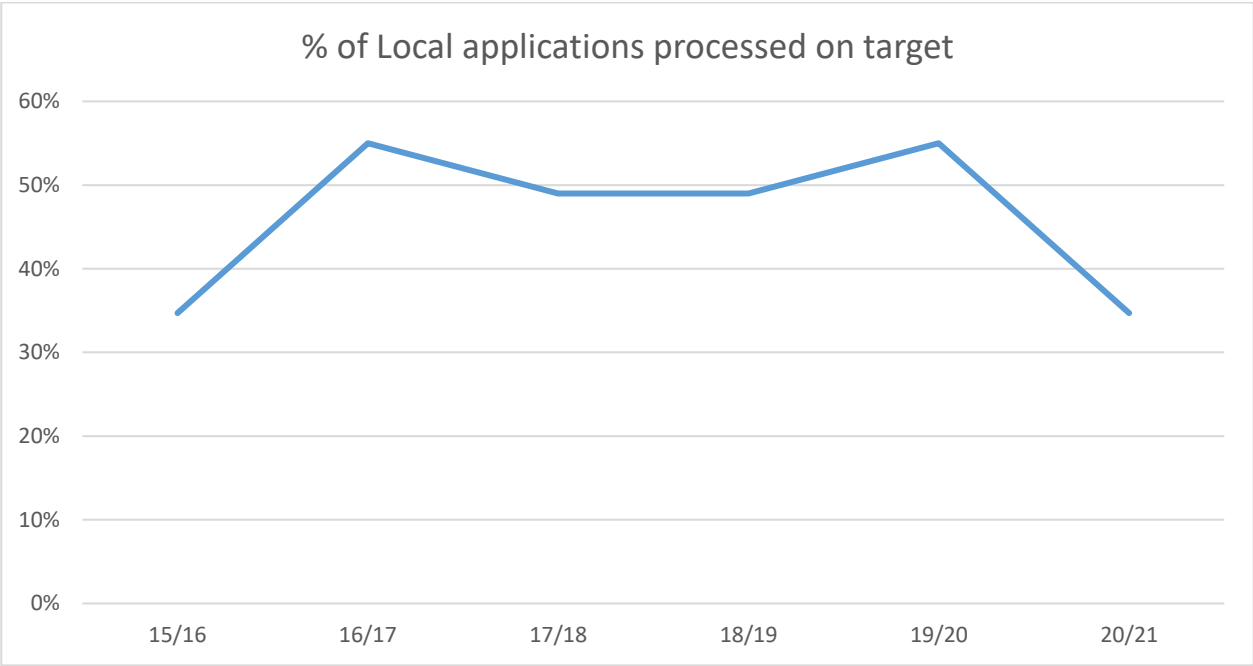
The number of local applications received is 1,550 which is only two less than the same period last year (1,544).



Local applications account for 63.5% of all decisions issued which is 1.5% less than this period last year. (65%). 1,368 applications were decided/withdrawn in the period, 234 fewer than the same period last year. Last year the average processing time was 14 weeks whereas this year the average processing time is 19 weeks, which is 4 weeks over the target of 15 weeks. This compares to a regional average of 17.8 weeks. (during the first 9 months of 20/21) [NI Planning Statistics Quarter3 2020-21 Bulletin] This reduction in performance was due to the pandemic.

### Local Application Performance over last 5 years

Local Applications	Received	Decided/ withdrawn	Average Processing Time (Weeks)	Target Processing Time (Weeks)	% of cases processed within Target
20/21	1,542	1,368	19.2	15	34.7%
19/20	1,544	1,602	14	15	55%
18/19	1,731	1,850	15.2	15	49%
17/18	1,557	1,850	15.3	15	49%
16/17	1,759	1,727	15.6	15	48.8%
15/16	1,788	1,313	19.6	15	37.4%



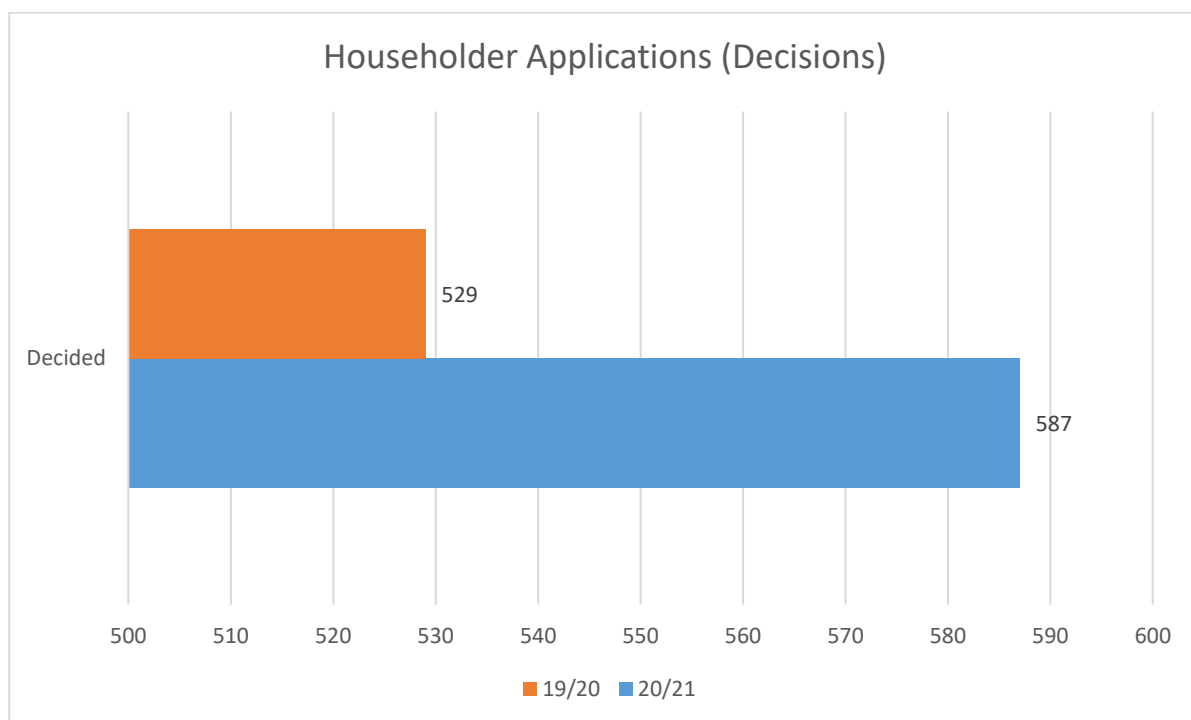
## Performance Indicators for Householder applications

The largest number of local applications processed relate to householder applications. These include domestic extensions, conservatories, loft conversions, dormer windows, garages, car ports and outbuildings.

In 2020-21 there were 676 householder applications received, which is 26% more than the previous year (535). This is reflective of a nationwide increase in domestic proposals, almost certainly linked to the pandemic and people's desire for more accommodation.

The number of householder decisions increased by 11% from 529 in 2019-20 to 587 in 2020-21.

Our internal Key Performance Indicator for processing Householder applications is 12 weeks. Performance up to 31 March 2021 was 15 weeks. In the same period the previous year, performance was 10.4 weeks.



# Processing

## **Time Taken to Validate**

Validation is the process of checking whether all the information which is legally required to be submitted with an application has been provided. The time take to validate a planning application is a vital part of the planning process. The quicker an application can be validated the quicker the application is allocated to a case officer for processing.

The internal target for validating a planning application is 10 days depending on its complexity. In 20-21 the average time taken to validate a planning application was 5.5 days.

## **Site Visits**

The time taken to carry out site visits is also an important element of the application process – the sooner we visit the site the sooner we can form a view as to whether a proposal may be acceptable or not. As part of revised working arrangements introduced to maintain the safety of staff during the pandemic, we were unable to carry out site visits in Q1 due to the pandemic the data for 2020/21 is unrepresentative.

## **Statutory Consultee Performance**

Statutory consultees are organisations and bodies, defined by legislation, who must be consulted on certain types of planning applications (these are mostly Government Departments).

Available figures indicate that up to 31 March 2021 over 60% of statutory consultation responses were returned outside the 21-day statutory deadline. The Department for Infrastructure has established a Planning Forum which is examining ways to improve the role of statutory consultees in the planning application process. Belfast City Council is one of three councils on the Planning Forum representing local government.

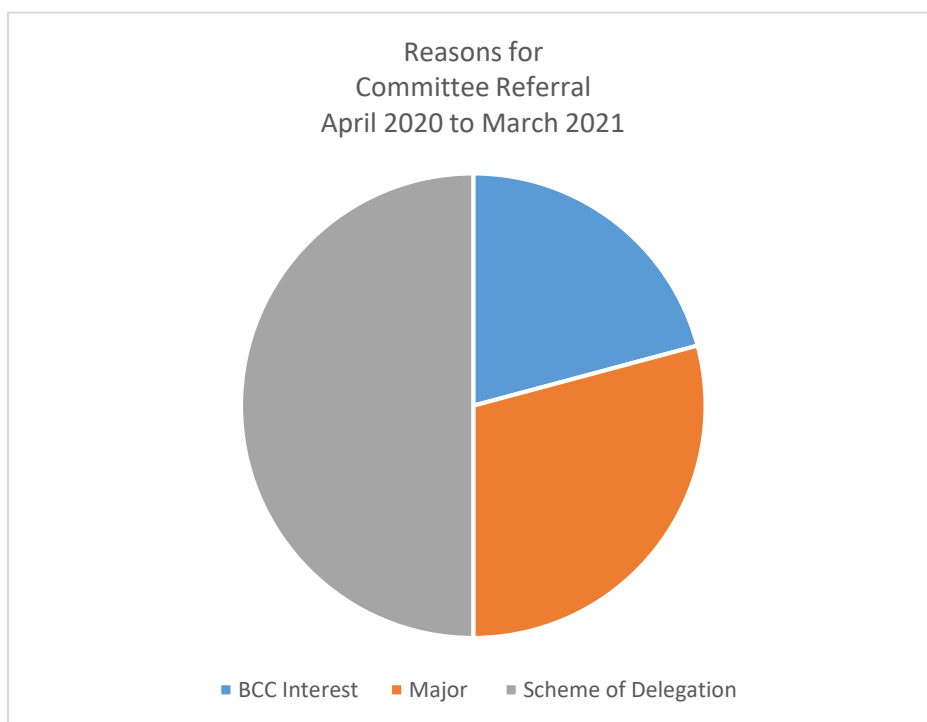
## Planning Committee

Between 01 April and 31 March 2021, the Committee considered a total of 106 applications, including 11 applications brought back to committee for reconsideration and 31 Major applications.

There was three Predetermination Hearings during the period.

Committee has a 95% approval rate.

During this period, the Committee decided against the officer recommendation (Refusal) on two occasions.



## Appeals

Appeals	New	Dismissed	Allowed	Split Decision	withdrawn
1 Apr to 31 March 2021	20	18	10	0	2

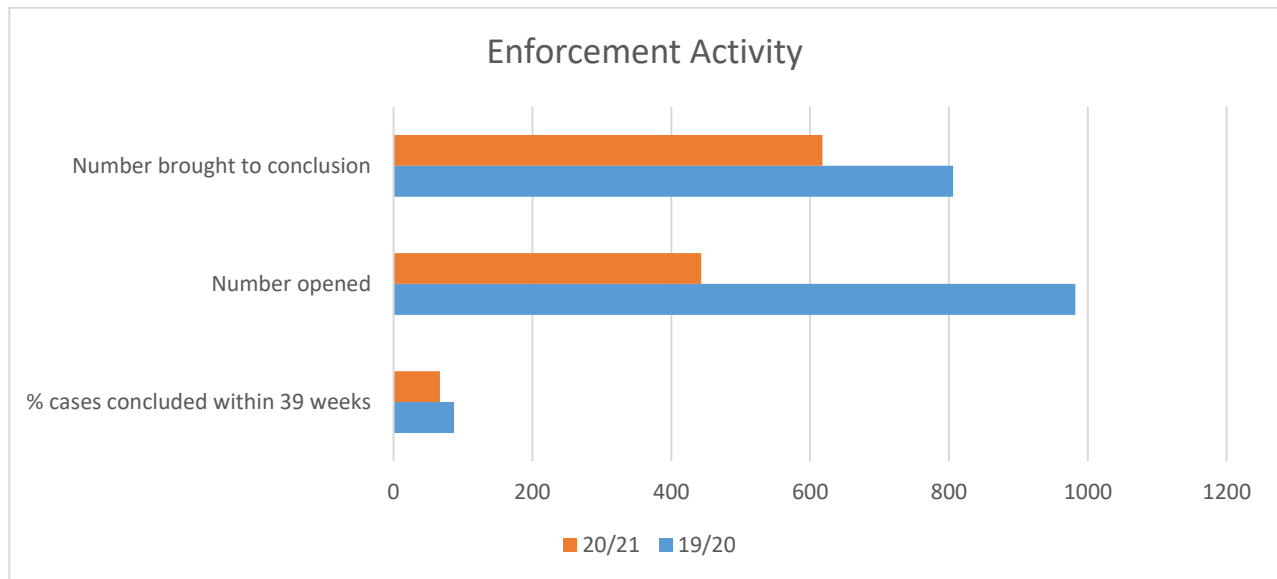
Applicants have the right to appeal refusal of planning permission or the imposition of a planning condition within 4 months of the date of the decision. Appeals are made to the Planning Appeals Commission.

Up to 31 March 2021, 106 applications/consents were refused permission, this is 5% of all applications decided. 20 new appeals were submitted to the Planning Appeals Commission although it should be noted that as there is up to 4 months to submit an appeal the figures cannot be directly correlated. The number of appeals submitted was 35% down compared to the previous year.

Up to 31 March 2021, approximately 36% of appeals were allowed/upheld. (It is expected that approximately 30% of appeals would be allowed). There have been no Committee decisions appealed this year.

# Compliance and Enforcement Activity

**The Statutory target is that 70% of all enforcement cases are progressed to conclusion within 39 weeks of receipt of complaint.**



The number of enforcement cases opened during 2020/21 was 443 – a decrease of 54% over the previous year. The number of enforcement cases concluded during the period was 618, 23% less than the previous year.

Of the cases closed the two main reasons for closure were that no breach had occurred (26%) and that cases had been remedied or resolved. (38%). –3.5% of cases were immune from enforcement action, 6% were subsequently granted planning permission, and in 15% of cases it was not considered expedient to pursue enforcement action as the breaches were considered minor in nature or it was not considered in the public interest.

The number of live enforcement cases at the end of 2020/21 was 346 compared (with a peak of 550) and 485 at the end of 2019/20.

Up to 31 March 2021, 66.6% of enforcement cases reached conclusion within 39 weeks. This was 3.5% below the statutory target and was due to prioritisation being given to reducing the total number of live complaints on hand. The average time taken to process an enforcement case to conclusion is 10.4 weeks.

## Conclusion

Performance for 2020/21 was inevitably impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This was particularly felt during Q1 and Q2. During the initial part of the year, there was limited access to the office for staff, limited IT capacity for staff to work from home, representations submitted by post could not be considered, site visits could not be carried out and some staff were furloughed. This reduced the number of applications, PADs and enforcement cases which could be processed which inevitably increased overall processing times.

Despite these significant challenges, Belfast City Council's Planning Service adapted quickly and has been operating a full service (other than public access to planning reception) since the second half of Q2. Notably, this has included the promotion of electronic submissions for applications and PADs. Unfortunately, progress was stalled again when the regional NI Planning Portal IT system was unavailable for 7 working days (and 11 calendar days) in Q3 due to technical issues, which meant that applications could not be processed and decisions could not be issued during that time.

The Planning Service has been able to process a significant number of planning applications and enforcement complaints. It decided 40 Major applications – the second highest return since planning was transferred to Belfast City Council in 2015. It also decided nearly 1,400 Local applications and processed more householder applications than the previous year.

The pandemic initially resulted in a backlog of enforcement complaints. The focus has been on clearing this backlog to improve the handling of new complaints. Whilst this has meant that the processing target has been missed for the first time since 2015, it has allowed the Planning Service to reduce enforcement complaints to a more manageable level which will have significant benefits moving forward in terms of management of cases.

The Planning Service continues to work through and develop its Improvement Plan, with many actions completed and important new areas of work identified. The most significant area of improvement work relates to implementation of a new planning IT system to replace the outgoing Planning Portal. This will provide much enhanced back-office systems for processing planning applications and enforcement complaints, as well as a new public website interface. This will allow customers to submit fully online applications for the first time in Northern Ireland and is expected to go live during the Spring of 2022.

One of the actions in the Improvement Plan was to undertake a review of the Council's Planning Application Checklist, first published in November 2018, to understand what impact it has had on the quality of application submissions and processing times. This review was completed in February 2021 and demonstrated that the Application Checklist has had a very positive impact on improving the quality of planning applications and processing times. It has also begun to shift the culture and attitude of customers towards submitting much better-quality planning application at the outset of the process. The Department has already confirmed that it will adopt this model through changes to the legislation to improve information requirements for new planning applications. The checklist is to be extended to all planning applications other than householder, advertisement and minor commercial applications.

Other initiatives included in our Improvement plan is new "FastTrack" process for the most straightforward applications and this is already showing a positive impact on processing times. We also continue to implement the enforcement audit recommendations with an impending relaunch of the enforcement service, new customer guidance and new Enforcement Operating Principles.

An updated Improvement Plan for the Planning Service is provided alongside this performance report.



# Recommendations

Recommendations arising from this performance report and ongoing improvement works are to:-

- Continue to monitor and report on performance to the Planning Committee;
- Continue to implement and update the Planning Service's Improvement Plan;
- Roll out Phase 3 of Application Checklist;
- Support the implementation of the replacement NI Planning Portal (expected to go live in Spring 2022);
- Continue to monitor the impact of Fast Track processes;
- Continue to implement the recommendations of the internal audit of planning enforcement.