

APPENDIX 2b

NIAO Report – Recommendations

Recommendation 1

We recommend that the Department and councils work in partnership to review the current LDP timetables to ensure they are realistic and achievable, and identify what support councils need to meet them.

The Department may wish to consider whether the remaining steps of the LDP process could be further streamlined to ensure plans are in place as soon as possible.

Recommendation 2

We recommend that the Department and councils continue to put an enhanced focus on improving the performance of the most important planning applications. This should include a fundamental analysis of the factors contributing to delays.

Recommendation 3

To ensure credibility within the system, we recommend that the Department and councils investigate differences in enforcement case outcomes, to ensure cases are being processed consistently across Northern Ireland.

Recommendation 4

We recommend that in instances where delegation rates fall below 90 per cent, councils should review their processes to ensure that they represent the best use of council resources.

Recommendation 5

We consider that some of the overturn rates are so high, that they require immediate action both from councils and the Department to ensure that the system is operating fairly and appropriately.

Recommendation 6

There is a need for full transparency around decision-making. We recommend that 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.

We recommend that where a planning committee makes a decision contrary to planning officials' advice, the official minutes of the meeting should contain details of the planning considerations that have driven the decision.

Recommendation 7

Planning committees should ensure that they regularly review a sample of their previously determined applications, to allow them to understand the real-world outcomes, impacts and quality of the completed project. Councils should ensure that they review a range of applications, to ensure that it is not only focused on those applications that tell a good news story about how the system is working. Lessons learned from this process should be shared across all councils.

Recommendation

Councils should consider the introduction of compulsory training for members of planning committees, including procedures where training requirements have not been met.

The Department should ensure that training provided to planning committee members is consistent across all councils and sufficient to allow elected members to fulfil their duties.

Recommendation 8

We recommend that the Department and councils work in partnership to ensure that the planning system is financially sustainable in the longer term.

Recommendation 9

The Department has a key role to play in the improvement of the planning system in Northern Ireland. We are concerned that the Department has been too slow to respond to the challenges facing the planning system and to provide leadership and support for the system as a whole. In our view, all those involved in the planning system need to act now to engender trust.

Recommendation 10

We recommend that the Department should coordinate an assessment of the key skills and experience gaps across the planning system.

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.

Recommendation 11

We recommend that the Department and councils seek urgent clarification from DAERA on the appropriateness of ammonia thresholds in making planning decisions.