

Reforming the Planning System in Northern Ireland

August 2009



Reform of the Planning System in Northern Ireland: Your chance to influence change – Consultation Paper July 2009

In July 2009, Environment Minister Edwin Poots launched far reaching proposals to reform the planning system in Northern Ireland with the aim of developing a more effective and responsive planning system that will help achieve sustainable growth for the region. It is hope that a more efficient planning system will also help the Department of Environment achieve the targets set out in the Executive's Programme for Government 2008-2011.

Mr Poots believes that "a reformed planning system should enable more timely decision making in ways which are transparent, demonstrably fair and deliver better quality development decision."

The proposals impact on every stage of the planning process and require not only new and revised processes and procedures, but also fundamental changes in attitude from planners, developers, agents, consultees, representative bodies, elected representatives, communities and individuals alike.

In 2011, the responsibility for the majority of planning functions are due to move from the Department of the Environment ('the Department') to 11 new District Councils, meaning that local representatives will be responsible for the majority of planning applications. The newly proposed framework is designed to act as a "strong and effective" tool for the new District Councils, to help them deliver a more efficient and reliable planning system.

The Department recognises that a change in the planning system is needed to respond to many of the challenges currently facing Northern Ireland which include promoting sustainable development, economic development and environmental protection, addressing climate change and meeting demands for more social and affordable housing.

The proposals outlined in the consultation paper include the following which are of particular interest:-

1. Reform of Planning Policy Statements in light of the transfer of planning functions to the new District Councils in 2011;
2. The introduction of a new local development plan system;
3. The creation of three tier hierarchy of development, consisting of regionally significant, major and local schemes;
4. Measure proposals to enhance development management in conservation areas, areas of townscape or village character;
5. Introduction of performance agreements, pre-application community consultation and pre-determination council hearings to help improve performance and efficiency by focusing resources according to the processing needs of different categories of development;
6. Reduction of the time limit for planning from six months to two months,

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7. Introduction of increased fees for retrospective planning applications as a means of discouraging development without planning permission,
8. Creation of a new criminal offence for any wilful development carried out without the appropriate planning permission in order to discourage unauthorised development,
9. Increase in developer contributions towards infrastructure in order to help deliver social development and economic growth,
10. Ensure a change in attitude from stakeholders and encourage a development of the planning system culture to ensure there is sufficient capacity within the planning system and
11. Improve engagement with communities by allowing full and open consultation in order to maximise confidence in the planning system.

It is anticipated that these proposals will create a more responsive and streamlined planning system and will improve efficiency and certainty regarding planning timescales. Furthermore, they provide a firm platform for economic growth and strategic investment for Northern Ireland by creating a more transparent and certain planning system.

The consultation period for these proposals closes on 2 October 2009.

Should you have any queries in relation to the above proposals or indeed, any current planning queries or issues, please contact Karen Blair or Maria O'Loan.

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