

Report on	Measures to improve performance in the processing of Local and Major planning applications.
Date of Meeting	5 th March 2024
Reporting Officer	Karen Doyle, Head of Local Planning
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Is this report restricted for confidential business? If 'Yes', confirm below the exempt information category relied upon	Yes	
	No	x

1.0	Purpose of Report
1.1	The purpose of this report is present Members with new measures to improve the performance of the Planning Department in Mid Ulster District Council.
2.0	Background
2.1	It is a statutory target that Major planning applications will be processed within 30 weeks and Local applications will be processed with 15 weeks. Mid Ulster District Council has not met the Major target for processing times and, since planning powers were transferred to Local Government, Mid Ulster District Council has only met the yearly Local target for processing applications within 15 weeks on three occasions, the last reporting year being 2019/2020.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	In March 2022, the Public Accounts Committee issued a report, "Planning in Northern Ireland". It states that "since the transfer of functions in 2015, planning authorities have failed to deliver on many of their key targets, particularly on major and significant development". The Committee heard that there are opportunities to improve application quality, but these have not been taken either centrally or locally".
3.2	When a planning application is received, it shall contain the following information as required by Article 3 of The Planning (General Development Procedure) Order (NI) 2015: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An application form; • A certificate of ownership; • Site location plan and other necessary plans and drawings; • A plan showing neighbouring land owned; • Pre Application Community Consultation where it is a Major planning application; • An Access statement or a Design and Access Statement where necessary; • The appropriate planning fee.

3.3	<p>The above list is the minimum requirements and thus sets a very low bar for what is deemed a valid planning application. There are many instances where additional information is required to assess a planning application in accordance with planning policy but which are not required by legislation. For example, PPS 7 Policy QD 2 requires a Design Concept Statement with the submission of a planning application for a residential development. PPS 15 Policy FLD 3 requires the submission of a Drainage Assessment where certain thresholds are met, FLD 5 details the need for a Flood Risk Assessment.</p>
3.4	<p>In Mid Ulster it is an accepted practice that those submitting planning applications will do so without the documents which are required by planning policy, simply to get the process underway. In accordance with published legislation, we must accept these applications, however we regularly are placed in a position of having to wait several weeks, if not months, to receive the required information following a request from the case officer. This has the inevitable outcome of delaying the processing of a planning application which puts our case officers under pressure to deliver on the statutory targets for Major and Local applications.</p>
3.5	<p>In Mid Ulster we generally have a positive working relationship with those who submit planning applications in our district. To deliver timely planning decisions that will benefit our district, the Committee are being asked to consider the introduction of a localised checklist to help improve both the quality of the initial planning application and the speed with which the planning applications can be processed.</p>
3.6	<p>There are a number of benefits with the introduction of a localised validation checklist including;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The submission of all necessary information will ensure the case officer, consultees and the public are provided with as much information as possible in order to consider the proposal, in full, from the outset; • Applicants are fully aware of the information that is required and the associated costs of procuring the required reports prior to the submission of a planning application; • A reduction in processing times when applications are frontloaded with all the necessary information; • A reduction in costs to Mid Ulster District Council. If an application is frontloaded with the necessary information there will be a reduction in costs of readvertising planning applications, re-notifying neighbours and objectors by mail.
3.7	<p>Compounding the poor performance in Mid Ulster is the number of deferred applications we are currently either assessing or holding for the submission of additional information. At present we are currently carrying a case load of 173 deferred cases. The assessment of these deferred cases can take a considerable amount of time and when they are deferred three or four times by Committee, as has happened in a number of cases, this adds to the considerable workload they are currently facing. It is largely the responsibility of the Principal planner to discuss the local applications with each case officer and with a target output of c.130 local cases each month this adds to the pressures they face.</p>

3.8	<p>The introduction of a checklist will significantly reduce the amount of time case officers spend each month either calling or emailing an agent/applicant to chase the submission of the information that is required. There are a number of occasions where a case officer has asked for the information repeatedly over a number of months, the application is taken with a recommendation to refuse and the committee agree to defer the application to allow the applicant a further chance to submit the outstanding information. This situation needs to be addressed to allow the Planning department the opportunity to meet those statutory Major and Local processing targets.</p>
3.9	<p>The Planning Committee are being asked to consider the introduction of a validation checklist in Mid Ulster. A validation checklist will have two parts and will require an application to be considered: -</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "valid" i.e. it meets the regional legislative requirements as outlined in 3.2 above, and 2. "acceptable", i.e. all other necessary supporting information has been submitted with the application at the submission stage.
3.10	<p>Examples of supporting information include;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biodiversity checklist • Drainage assessment • Flood risk assessment • Parking survey • Transport assessment • Transport assessment form • Design Concept Statement
3.11	<p>In advance of the introduction of a validation checklist an agreement is being sought from the Committee for officers to hold a workshop with those who submit planning applications in Mid Ulster including, applicants, agents and developers. The purpose of the workshop is to facilitate engagement with our customers. Key to the success of a checklist is a "buy in" from customers, and an assurance to our customers, that officers will act in a consistent manner when seeking the submission of additional information which is required to process a planning application in an expedient manner.</p>
3.12	<p>Following the workshop Members are being asked to agree to the preparation of a draft Good Practice Guide which will be prepared by officers and presented before the Planning Committee prior to its final publication on the website.</p>
4.0	Other Considerations
4.1	Financial, Human Resources & Risk Implications
	Financial:

	Cost of delivering workshops, though these can be delivered in Council facilities eg, Burnavon, Ranfurly House, Seamus Heaney HomePlace
	Human: Officers are required to deliver the workshops, devise a validation checklist and prepare a Good Practice Guide for publication on the Council website.
	Risk Management: None identified at present.
4.2	Screening & Impact Assessments
	Equality & Good Relations Implications: None identified
	Rural Needs Implications: None identified
5.0	Recommendation(s)
5.1	Members are being asked to consider the introduction of a validation checklist as a tool to improve the processing times of planning applications.
6.0	Documents Attached & References
	None