



## **Planning Service Customer Service Statement**

3 December 2009

(Updated 9 September 2010)



An Agency within the Department of the

**Environment**

[www.doeni.gov.uk](http://www.doeni.gov.uk)

# Planning Service Customer Service Statement

## Introduction

This Customer Service statement has been produced to inform you of the level of service you may expect when you deal with the Planning Service.

Our aims are to ensure:

- staff treat you with courtesy and professionalism;
- facilities are comfortable and accessible, and;
- advice and guidance is readily available, easy to understand, accurate and up-to-date.

## 1. Planning Service

Planning Service is an Agency within the Department of the Environment and is responsible for implementing Government's planning policies. In doing so the Agency promotes the Government's key themes of sustainable development and creating a better environment. The aim of the Planning Service is to plan and manage development in ways which will contribute to a quality environment and seek to meet the economic and social aspirations of present and future generations.

The Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government highlights the key goals and actions the Executive will take to drive forward priority areas. It includes a detailed Public Service Agreement (PSA) Framework, which sets out the actions and targets departments will take in support of the Executive's priorities. Growing the economy is the Executive's top priority over the lifetime of this Programme for Government. As Planning Service plays a key role in supporting the growth of the economy its key actions and targets are detailed in objective eight of PSA target 22 – "Deliver a modern effective planning system in partnership with key stakeholders including consultees which meets the needs of the whole community and the economy while protecting the environment."

To fulfil these aims Planning Service produces development plans as blueprints for local development, manages development within these areas by processing planning applications, and carries out enforcement against breaches of planning control, in accordance with planning policy.

### 1.1 Development Plans

Development plans set out a local framework for the development and use of land. In Northern Ireland they are prepared by Planning Service in consultation with local councils and other interested parties.

Development plans usually cover a 15 year period but can be reviewed and amended as necessary during this time. Their aim is to ensure that there is sufficient land available to meet the anticipated needs for housing, employment and community facilities etc. whilst at the same time protecting significant

landscape and environmental features. The contents of development plans are important considerations in determining planning applications.

There are various types of development plans:

- Area Plans – these cover one or more council areas and are the main type of Development Plan;
- Local Plans – these cover a smaller area, such as a town centre;
- Subject Plans – these deal with a particular type of development within a particular area.

## **1.2 Development Management**

Development Management is the process Planning Service uses to make decisions on whether to permit development proposals to build on land, or change the use of buildings or land. In coming to a decision, Planning Service will consider the relevant development plan, Planning Policy Statements and supplementary planning guidance.

The Agency will also take account of the specific circumstances of the site and surrounding area, any responses from relevant consultee organisations, the views of the District Council and the relevant planning history. In addition, Planning Service must consider all representations received on the proposed development, including objections, petitions and letters of support.

Most applications for planning permission are made to the local Divisional Planning Office for the area. Planning applications should be submitted with properly completed application forms, accurate drawings and all other supporting information necessary to enable Planning Service to make a decision on whether to approve or refuse it.

Applicants will often employ an agent to compile and submit this information and deal with any issues associated with development. The Planning Service website contains a range of advice and guidance on completing applications for planning permissions and consents. The Agency has also produced a Good Practice Guide ([http://www.planningni.gov.uk/best\\_practice.htm](http://www.planningni.gov.uk/best_practice.htm)) which explains how we, with the co-operation of applicants, agents and consultees can manage an efficient development management system.

## **1.3 Enforcement**

The Planning Service will investigate all complaints it receives in relation to unauthorised development. In determining the most appropriate course of action in response to alleged breaches of planning control, the Agency will take into account the extent of the breach and its potential impact on the environment. In some cases the nature of the breach will be minor with no adverse impact on the environment or the amenity of occupiers of adjacent properties.

Other breaches of planning control may be resolved through negotiation including remedial works, such as the removal of the unauthorised structure or the submission of a retrospective planning application to regularise the situation. This approach successfully resolves a high proportion of breaches of planning control in an appropriate way.

In the instances where remedy cannot be achieved then Planning Service may bring an enforcement case to the Courts. Our approach to enforcement is explained fully in our Enforcement Strategy and in Information Leaflet 10 – A Guide to Enforcement in Northern Ireland, which are available on our website - [http://www.planningni.gov.uk/advice\\_enforcement.htm](http://www.planningni.gov.uk/advice_enforcement.htm) .

## **2. Contact with our staff**

In carrying out their duties, our staff are required to behave in a professional and courteous manner, whether the contact is in person, on the phone or through correspondence with you.

Staff are required to be helpful, polite and efficient. Staff in our offices will wear name badges and those on site visits will identify themselves as employees of the Department on request.

Our staff have a right to go about their duties safely and without obstruction or threat of abuse or physical harm. If subjected to such behaviour they have the right to discontinue the telephone call or meeting.

## **3. Visiting our Offices**

We will ensure that the public areas of our offices are kept clean and comfortable and are maintained to a safe standard. All our public spaces are compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act. We will provide easy to read signs, ramp access and an induction loop, where required.

All our offices operate standard opening hours which are:

Monday	9.30 – 4.30
Tuesday	9.30 – 4.30
Wednesday	9.30 – 4.30
Thursday	10.30 – 4.30
Friday	9.30 – 4.30

Customers are encouraged to book an appointment to see a member of staff or view a file through our open file system by ringing NI Direct on – 101 (N.I only) or (028) 9151 3101. If you have booked an appointment we will see you within 5 minutes of your appointed time. If you haven't booked an appointment we will aim to see you within 20 minutes.

Photocopying facilities are available on request and we will display details of photocopying charges in our reception areas. We will also make information leaflets and planning application forms available to you.

#### **4. Informing the Public**

The service you receive from the Planning Service, when you might be affected by a development proposal, is just as important as the service you get when you apply for planning permission.

Details of new planning applications in your area are published weekly in local newspapers and on our website. Occupiers of adjoining land are also notified of the proposal by post. This gives anyone who may be affected by a planning application an opportunity to write to Planning Service with details of why they might object to or be in support of the application. Copies of such letters, known as, 'representations' are placed on the planning application file and are made available for public viewing.

##### **4.1 Open File System**

The Planning Service is required by law, to keep a copy of all planning applications received, together with copies of any plans and drawings, environmental statements etc. associated with the application. This register of information is known as the 'Planning Register.'

In addition to the Planning Register we also operate an Open File Policy which means that the planning application file is available for viewing by the public. The amount of information available on the file at the early stages of processing is unlikely to include more than held on the planning register.

To view the register or the application file customers are encouraged to book an appointment with the relevant office by ringing NI Direct on – 101 (N.I only) or (028) 9151 3101 and asking to speak with the Open File Correspondence Team. If you wish to view an application which is being processed by Strategic Projects Division at the Headquarters building, you should telephone 028 9041 6700 to make an appointment.

##### **4.2 Planning Clinics**

Planning clinics help give you access to details of planning applications and general planning advice in the District towns, other than the one where the Divisional Planning Office is located.

Planning clinics are not 'branches' of the divisional office and should not be used to submit planning applications and other documents or to view historical files. Please note that photocopying facilities are not available at the clinics. The locations, times and dates of planning clinics are advertised in local newspapers and members of the public should phone their relevant Divisional Planning Office to arrange an appointment.

## **5. Accessing Information and Advice**

We will provide clear and straightforward information about our services and those of related service providers in a variety of ways, including on the internet. We will ensure our contact information is accurate, up-to-date, and clear and it will be available from our website and on all our printed material. The information will include an office address, telephone enquiry number, textphone number and email address, where relevant.

### **5.1 Telephone**

Telephone calls to Planning Service's Divisional Planning Offices are handled through Government's NI Direct customer service system. Through NI Direct we aim to answer 80% of telephone calls within 20 seconds and to resolve enquiries immediately at the first point of contact. Telephone enquiries which may be complex will be referred by the NI Direct customer service agents to Planning Service staff who will respond to the enquiry as soon as possible and within 1 working day.

### **5.2 Textphone**

The Agency operates a textphone service which can be accessed on 028 9054 0642.

### **5.3 Internet**

The Planning Service website can be accessed at [www.planningni.gov.uk](http://www.planningni.gov.uk) . This comprehensive website contains a wide range of contact information, forms, advice and guidance on the planning system, planning legislation, Planning Policy Statements and fees. The website also provides details of planning applications due to go to Councils and a number of interactive tools which enable users to track planning applications online.

### **5.4 Alternative Formats**

Agency and departmental publications can be provided in alternative formats upon request. Where cost is prohibitive, we can make reasonable adjustments to ensure the information is imparted to the person who has requested it.

### **5.5 Information Requests under the Freedom of Information Act, Environmental Information Regulations and the Data Protection Act**

The Freedom of Information (FoI) Act 2000 gives the public a right of access to recorded information held by public authorities, including Planning Service, subject to a few legal exemptions. This enables you to have a better understanding of Planning Service and its work through improved access to information.

Other legislation also provides access to certain types of information held by Planning Service. Of particular relevance are the Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) 2004 which extend the public's access to environmental information and the Data Protection Act (DPA) 1998, which gives individuals the right to know personal information held about them.

We will respond to requests for information made under FoI or EIR within 20 working days and under DPA, we will respond within 40 working days. Where this is not possible we will write to you advising you of the reason. For full details on how to request information under this legislation please refer to the Planning Service website: [http://www.planningni.gov.uk/about\\_foi](http://www.planningni.gov.uk/about_foi) .

## **6. Correspondence**

We will respond immediately to correspondence, where it is possible to do so. If more time is required to prepare a full reply we will acknowledge your email or letter within 3 working days of receiving it and then respond fully within 15 working days. On occasions where we are unable to meet this deadline we will write to you explaining why and, if possible, indicate when you can expect to receive our full response.

## **7. Monitoring our Performance**

Details of the Agency's operational targets are published annually in the Planning Service's Corporate and Business Plan and our performance against these targets is reported in our Annual Report. In addition we publish official planning statistics on our development management activity through quarterly and annual statistical publications. These statistical reports are available from the Planning Service website – <http://www.planningni.gov.uk/about-statistics.htm>

## **8. What to do if you are not happy**

Planning Service takes all complaints and concerns very seriously and places great importance on what our customers have to say. If you feel that any aspect of our service falls short of what you reasonably expect, we would like to hear from you.

### **8.1 Complaints**

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction about how we have carried out a service including:

- how we have handled your enquiries or your correspondence;
- how we have processed an application, or;
- how our staff have behaved.

In all cases we will:

- deal with your complaint promptly;
- investigate your complaint fully and fairly;
- provide a full explanation of the circumstances, and;
- apologise when we are at fault.

Full details of our complaints procedure can be found in our reception areas, on our website: <http://www.planningni.gov.uk/leaflet02-complaints-procedure.pdf> or, if you prefer, a copy of our complaints leaflet can be posted to you on request.

If you are an applicant and disagree with a decision on your planning application, this does not normally fall within the complaints procedure and you should refer to the Appeals section below.

## **8.2 Appeals**

If an applicant disagrees with the Planning Service's decision on an application, he/she may appeal a refusal of planning permission or a condition attached to the planning permission, to the Planning Appeals Commission within six months of the date of receipt of the decision notice.

If your application is not determined within eight weeks from submission, or 16 weeks where an environmental statement is required to accompany the application, you may lodge an appeal with the Planning Appeals Commission.

## **9. Improving our service**

We welcome your views and there is a variety of ways in which we receive feedback from our customers. These include formal and informal customer surveys, comment cards, complaints and responses to consultations. Using this information we will seek to identify opportunities to improve our service to customers.

Customer Comments cards are located in the reception areas of all our offices. Feedback can also be submitted via our website at - <http://www.planningni.gov.uk/feedback.htm>

If you have recently had a planning application processed, you can participate in our online Development Management Customer Survey by visiting [http://www.planningni.gov.uk/about\\_customer\\_service.htm](http://www.planningni.gov.uk/about_customer_service.htm) and then clicking on "Customer Survey".

Details of all current consultation exercises can be viewed at - [http://www.planningni.gov.uk/news\\_consultation](http://www.planningni.gov.uk/news_consultation) .

## 10. How to get in touch

Our contact information is set out below or you can use our textphone service on: 028 9054 0642.

Division	Address	Phone	Fax	Email
<b>Headquarters</b>	Millennium House 17-25 Great Victoria Street Belfast BT2 7BN	(028) 9041 6700	(028) 9041 6802	<a href="mailto:planning.service.hq@doeni.gov.uk">planning.service.hq@doeni.gov.uk</a>
<b>Ballymena</b>	County Hall 182 Galgorm Rd Ballymena Co. Antrim BT42 1QF	101 (N.I Only) (028) 9151 3101	(028) 2566 2127	<a href="mailto:ballymena.planning@doeni.gov.uk">ballymena.planning@doeni.gov.uk</a>
<b>Belfast</b>	Bedford House 16-22 Bedford St Belfast Co. Antrim BT2 7FD	101 (N.I Only) (028) 9151 3101	(028) 9025 2828	<a href="mailto:belfast.planning@doeni.gov.uk">belfast.planning@doeni.gov.uk</a>
<b>Craigavon</b>	Marlborough House Central Way Craigavon Co. Armagh BT64 1AD	101 (N.I Only) (028) 9151 3101	(028) 3832 0004	<a href="mailto:craigavon.planning@doeni.gov.uk">craigavon.planning@doeni.gov.uk</a>
<b>Downpatrick</b>	Rathkeltair House Market Street Downpatrick Co. Down BT30 6EA	101 (N.I Only) (028) 9151 3101	(028) 4461 8196	<a href="mailto:downpatrick.planning@doeni.gov.uk">downpatrick.planning@doeni.gov.uk</a>
<b>Londonderry</b>	Orchard House 40 Foyle Street Londonderry Co. Derry BT48 6AT	101 (N.I Only) (028) 9151 3101	(028) 7131 9777	<a href="mailto:londonderry.planning@doeni.gov.uk">londonderry.planning@doeni.gov.uk</a>
<b>Omagh</b>	County Hall Drumragh Avenue Omagh Co. Tyrone BT79 7AF	101 (N.I Only) (028) 9151 3101	(028) 8225 4009	<a href="mailto:omagh.planning@doeni.gov.uk">omagh.planning@doeni.gov.uk</a>
Sub Division	Address	Phone	Fax	Email
<b>Coleraine</b>	County Hall Castlerock Road Coleraine Co. Londonderry BT51 3HS	101 (N.I Only) (028) 9151 3101	(028) 7034 1434	<a href="mailto:coleraine.planning@doeni.gov.uk">coleraine.planning@doeni.gov.uk</a>
<b>Enniskillen</b>	County Buildings 15 East Bridge Street Enniskillen Co. Fermanagh BT74 7BW	101 (N.I Only) (028) 9151 3101	(028) 6634 6550	<a href="mailto:enniskillen.planning@doeni.gov.uk">enniskillen.planning@doeni.gov.uk</a>

## 11. Helpful Information

### Annual Reports

[http://www.planningni.gov.uk/about\\_reports.htm](http://www.planningni.gov.uk/about_reports.htm)

### Complaints Procedure

<http://www.planningni.gov.uk/leaflet02.htm>

### Corporate and Business Plan

[http://www.planningni.gov.uk/about\\_reports.htm](http://www.planningni.gov.uk/about_reports.htm)

### Current Planning Service Consultations

[http://www.planningni.gov.uk/news\\_consultation.htm](http://www.planningni.gov.uk/news_consultation.htm)

### Customer Service

[http://www.planningni.gov.uk/about\\_customer\\_service.htm](http://www.planningni.gov.uk/about_customer_service.htm)

### Enforcement Strategy

[http://www.planningni.gov.uk/advice\\_enforcement.htm](http://www.planningni.gov.uk/advice_enforcement.htm)

### Feedback

<http://www.planningni.gov.uk/feedback.htm>

### Freedom of Information

[http://www.planningni.gov.uk/about\\_foi](http://www.planningni.gov.uk/about_foi)

### Good Practice Guide

[http://www.planningni.gov.uk/best\\_practice.htm](http://www.planningni.gov.uk/best_practice.htm)

### Information Leaflet 10 – A Guide to Enforcement in Northern Ireland

<http://www.planningni.gov.uk/leaflet10.htm>

### Ombudsman

The Ombudsman

Freepost BEL 1478

Belfast, BT1 6BR

**freephone:** 0800 34 34 24

**e-mail:** [ombudsman@ni-ombudsman.org.uk](mailto:ombudsman@ni-ombudsman.org.uk)

**website:** [www.ni-ombudsman.org.uk](http://www.ni-ombudsman.org.uk) 

### Planning Appeals Commission

Planning Appeals Commission

Park House

87-91 Great Victoria Street

Belfast, BT2 7AG

**Tel:** 028 90244710

**Fax:** 028 90312536

**E-mail:** [info@pacni.gov.uk](mailto:info@pacni.gov.uk)

### Planning Service Statistics

<http://www.planningni.gov.uk/about-statistics.htm>

### Programme for Government Northern Ireland

<http://www.pfgbudgetni.gov.uk/>