

## **MAJOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS AND THE DEVELOPMENT PLAN SYSTEM**

**STATEMENT BY SAMMY WILSON MP, MLA,  
MINISTER OF THE ENVIRONMENT**

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On 11 May I made a Statement to the Assembly on the weight to be accorded to the economic aspects of development proposals. I underlined then the importance that I attach to ensuring that the planning system makes its contribution to the growth of a dynamic, innovative and sustainable economy – especially in these difficult times of global recession.

The primary purpose of my earlier Statement was to instil in decision-makers the confidence to make judgements that would give greater weight to economic considerations where it was appropriate to do so, while continuing to protect and enhance the environment. I wanted to ensure that the planning system would play a full and positive role in encouraging investment.

In making this Statement today I want to clarify how proposals for significant economic development can be taken forward in the context of the delays experienced in producing a full coverage of up to date development plans for Northern Ireland.

As we have all recently witnessed, changes in the economy can take place on a time scale that is significantly shorter than that experienced for the production of new development plans. Indeed, as members will be aware, delays in the progress of a number of new development plans have been compounded by a number of complex legal challenges. As a consequence I am concerned that this may result in some significant development opportunities being lost.

I recognise that in Northern Ireland development plans take too long to prepare. In addition they can be overly detailed so that the strategic vision and direction can become obscured. As a result, in some cases they are no longer able to provide the basis for an effective planning framework for today's fast changing society. The system must therefore be improved in order to enable planning, as a whole, to become more effective in managing the development process.

That is why I intend, as part of an overall package of planning reform, to bring forward proposals for a new local development plan system with the key aim of speeding up the whole process through plans that are more streamlined, quicker to prepare, more strategic in nature and importantly more responsive to change.

But this will inevitably take time to achieve. In the interim, I want to ensure, as far as possible, that when significant economic development proposals come forward that are clearly in the public interest, they are not unnecessarily stalled.

The Planning Service is already giving consideration to available procedural options where such strategic issues arise. For example in Omagh and Strabane

Districts officials have engaged with Invest Northern Ireland and the local Councils to identify shortages of land for economic development and, where this occurs, to actively participate in bringing forward suitable solutions.

The Article 31 application process provides a mechanism through which suitable proposals can then be considered by the development management system, rather than delaying matters pending preparation of a new local plan. I highlighted the success of this approach, linked to the excellent work of the Strategic Projects Teams in Planning Service HQ, in my earlier statement in May and it has helped deliver key development proposals such as the Coca Cola all-Ireland Headquarters at Lisburn by this method.

I also have concerns about prospective significant economic development proposals being frustrated through the inappropriate application of prematurity considerations in places where new draft area plans have been issued but not yet adopted.

I appreciate that prematurity is clearly an important consideration in areas where considerable work has been undertaken to produce new draft plans. However, it is only one of a number of factors to be weighed by the Department in reaching its decision on individual proposals. Other matters, including the planning history of a site, distinguishing factors and administrative fairness must also be considered.

It is clear to me that immediately following the publication of the Joint Ministerial Statement in January 2005 that extensive use was made by officials of prematurity considerations in determining proposals often resulting in a refusal of planning permission. However, since that time more thought has been given to the approach adopted and as a result it has been considerably refined.

To further reinforce this position I am today instructing officials that prematurity should only be employed as a reason of refusal in cases where the Department can plainly demonstrate that an approval of planning permission would clearly prejudice or undermine the development plan process or key elements of the plan itself. I am also pleased to advise that such cases have diminished as thankfully most draft area plans are now progressing well towards their ultimate adoption.

I am confident that the clarification I am providing today, together with my 11 May Statement, will ensure there is sufficient flexibility in the planning system to effectively deal with significant economic development opportunities that may arise. This together with the determination of Planning Service to process all proposals in a speedy and efficient manner should ensure that it makes a positive contribution to our economic recovery.