

**MINISTERIAL STATEMENT ON THE WEIGHT TO BE ACCORDED
TO THE ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS ***

MONDAY 11 MAY, 2009

With your permission Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement to underline the importance that I attach to ensuring the planning system makes its contribution to the growth of our economy. Especially at this difficult time.

The Executive's Programme for Government makes economic growth and wealth creation our top priority, to be taken forward in a fair and sustainable manner. This strategic priority is echoed as a key theme underlying our planning system which seeks to deliver economic development while protecting and enhancing the environment.

As members will know, over the past few years there has been widespread pressure for reform of the planning system. We all recognise that it needs to adapt more flexibly and much more quickly to the many challenges facing us particularly in the current economic climate.

My Department has already achieved a range of process improvements. We have created two Strategic Project teams at Planning Service Headquarters which will handle all large scale investment proposals. To enhance their effectiveness these teams include specialists from Roads Service and the NIEA, two of our key consultees. That is contributing to faster and better decisions.

Many economically significant planning applications will be dealt with by the Strategic Projects teams; It is high-profile and important work.

It is vital that proposals that may bring investment be processed as quickly as possible. The achievement of that will require the commitment of everyone who is involved in the planning process. We need better planning applications that contain all the necessary information to allow a decision to be made.

The Strategic Project Teams also work alongside the Strategic Investment Board to ensure that capital-spend projects flow smoothly through the planning process. That partnership has been particularly effective in delivering new schools in the Belfast area, for example.

Furthermore, I am pleased to say that the Strategic Project teams processed 25 Article 31 applications in 2008-09. Those included a number of high priority cases such as the £29 million pound investment in the Public Record Office; the new Acute Hospital in Enniskillen, which cost £250 million; and Signature tourism projects at the Giant's Causeway and the Titanic Quarter, which have

* Check Against Delivery

a value of £110 million. Those were all processed in line with the six month target set in the Programme for Government, and they will give a boost to our economy's construction sector over the next few years.

More locally, my officials give priority to applications on which grant aid may depend and to those with an employment, community or public interest dimension.

Furthermore, working with the City Council in Londonderry, we piloted a streamlined consultation scheme for non-contentious planning applications. I am pleased to say that we rolled out this scheme out to all councils before the end of March, and approval decisions now take on average 24 working days to issue. That means that extensions and alterations are approved more quickly, as well as other planning issues such as agricultural buildings, advertisements and shop fronts. That will make life much easier for those who wish to get on with development and grow their businesses, particularly in small and medium-sized enterprises.

That more proportionate approach benefits councils and the Planning Service. Decisions are made faster, the economic and social benefits are realised more quickly, and council and departmental officials are able to focus on more important applications, particularly those with significant economic and social implications.

I also want to encourage developers to engage with local communities before an application is submitted. That applies to people who should discuss proposed house extensions with the neighbours and to developers who should engage with the local community and interest groups. Too often, it is only after an application has been submitted that people hear what is being proposed, and they often object to issues that could have been resolved, had the proposal been discussed beforehand.

As with the other process improvements that I have highlighted, I expect that such front-loading will ensure that applications have a smooth passage.

In addition to process improvements, there are some Planning Policy Statements in the pipeline that will facilitate economic development both in settlements and the open countryside. I look forward to publishing the revised and updated PPS4, which concerns economic development and has been awaiting Executive clearance since January 2009.

Draft PPS 21, which I published in November 2008, also contains policies for economic development in the open countryside, including farm diversification

The Executive are committed to the development of our tourist industry, and it is vital that we have the right planning policies in place to underpin appropriate tourism-related development projects. That is why I will soon bring forward draft PPS 16, which will set out the policy for tourism facilities and accommodation.

Subject to Executive clearance, PPS 18, on Renewable Energy, will be published before the recess.

The planning system cannot be expected to satisfy all interests all of the time. Economic growth, including major infrastructure provision, requires development. However, that development must be sustainable and take into account all relevant material considerations in the wider public interest.

My Department's guiding principal to development management is set out in Paragraph 59 of Planning Policy Statement 1 : General Principals:

'in determining planning applications... development should be permitted, having regard to the development plan and all other material considerations, unless the proposed development will cause demonstrable harm to interests of acknowledged importance'

Competing interests often emerge in the assessment of development proposals. That requires our planning system to balance important social, economic and environmental considerations. The weight given to those is a judgement that lies with the decision-maker and will vary with each planning application.

That brings me to the main purpose of my statement.

I want to give decision-makers the confidence and support to make judgements which will give greater weight to economic considerations where it is appropriate to do so. I want to give clarity and to leave no one in any doubt about how to deal with economic considerations.

This is not a change of policy. The purpose of this statement is to provide certainty and to give guidance so that the planning system can play a positive role in encouraging investment and kick-starting regeneration. To that end, the following paragraph clarifies the weight that should be accorded to economic aspects in the making of planning decisions.

Full account shall be taken of the economic aspects of a planning proposal, including the wider benefits to the regional or local economy, alongside social and environmental aspects, in so far as they as they are material considerations in the determination of the planning application to which they relate. In cases where the economic benefits of a proposal are significant, substantial weight shall be afforded to them in the determination of that planning application.

However, in order that my officials can do that and determine planning applications without delay, it is essential they have all the relevant information about development proposals at their disposal. It is, therefore, up to everyone involved in the planning process, including developers, agents and public representatives, to ensure that all information about the economic benefits is provided at the outset.

In these difficult economic times, I want to make sure that our planning system plays a full and positive role in assisting economic recovery so that we can benefit from the better times when they come.