

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT

MAY 11, 2009

PLANNERS TO GIVE GREATER WEIGHT TO ECONOMIC ASPECTS, WILSON CONFIRMS

Greater weight will be given in future, where appropriate, to the economic consideration of planning proposals, Environment Minister Sammy Wilson confirmed today.

In a statement to the Assembly, the Minister told MLAs he had decided to clarify the situation to ensure planners could play a full and positive role in assisting economic recovery.

Mr Wilson explained: **“I want to give decision makers the confidence and support to make judgements which will give greater weight to economic considerations wherever it is appropriate to do so.**

“I want to give clarity and leave nobody in any doubt about how to deal with economic considerations.

“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.

“Where the economic benefits of a proposal are significant then substantial weight should be afforded to them.”

The Minister said planners often faced competing interests when assessing development proposals and had to balance important social, economic and environmental considerations.

He told MLAs the weight given to these aspects was a matter of judgment for the decision maker and would vary with each planning application.

Mr Wilson insisted: **“This is not a change of policy.**

“It is instead about providing certainty and giving guidance so that the planning system can play a positive role in encouraging investment and kickstarting regeneration.”

The Minister said in order to do this it was essential planners had all the relevant information about development proposals at their disposal.

He urged everyone involved in the planning process including developers, agents and public representatives to ensure all information about the economic benefits was supplied at the outset.

Mr Wilson said the Planning Service had already introduced a number of measures to facilitate economic growth.

These included:

:: The creation of two strategic project teams within Planning Service headquarters to handle large scale investment proposals

:: The rollout of a streamlined consultation scheme to speed up the processing of non-contentious planning applications across all council areas. This had resulted in approvals now taking 24 working days on average to issue.

In addition, the Minister said he was urging developers to engage with local communities before submitting an application.

He said: **“Too often it is only after an application is submitted that people hear what is proposed.**

“Often they object to issues that could have been resolved if the proposal had been discussed beforehand.”

The Minister added a number of planning policy statements would also facilitate economic development including the revised and updated PPS4, draft PPS21 which contains policies for economic development in the countryside including farm diversification, draft PPS18 on renewable energy and draft PPS16 which will set out the policy for tourism facilities and accommodation.

Notes to Editors

1. A full copy of the Minister's statement is available with this press statement.
2. For media enquiries, contact DOE Press Office on 02890 241172