Planning Performance Continues to Improve

The provisional Northern Ireland Planning Development Management Statistics July – September 2013 is published today.
~ Thursday, 19th December 2013

The report reveals improvements in processing time performance across all of the main categories of planning application. Over the current quarter, the average processing times for Major, Intermediate and Minor categories of planning application reduced by 4, 2 and 1 week/s respectively compared to the equivalent quarter in 2012/13. In addition, the 2013/14 Programme for Government interim target to process 75% of Large Scale Investment Applications within 6 months was exceeded in the first half of the year with 93% of all such applications being processed within this timescale. However, despite the improved performance recorded for Major applications, the average processing time of 25 weeks recorded during this second quarter was still 5 weeks in excess of their 20 week target. Final performance against targets will be assessed at the end of the 2013/14 year.

These performance levels were achieved against a backdrop of further falls in planning applications with a 7% reduction recorded this quarter compared to the same period in 2012/13. This reduction is similar in magnitude to the previous year’s quarter 2 reduction of 6% and may suggest some leveling out in the rate of decline that has been witnessed in recent years.

The approval rate for decisions issued during quarter 2 was 94%, up one percentage point on the equivalent quarter last year.
The key points to note in the bulletin are:

1. Applications received
   - In the second quarter of 2013/14, DOE Planning received 2,728 planning applications. This is a decrease of 7% compared with the equivalent quarter in 2012/13 (2,928).
   - Applications for full planning permission make up three quarters of applications received (76%), similar to the same period last year (77%).
   - Applications for residential development continue to fall, although only by 5%, from 1,528 in the second quarter of 2012/13 to 1,453 in the equivalent quarter of 2013/14. This represents the smallest quarter 2 fall in recent years and, considered alongside the similarly small 4% decrease in residential applications observed during the first quarter, provides some further evidence of economic recovery.

2. Applications decided
   - DOE Planning issued decisions on 2,906 applications in the second quarter of 2013/14, down by 14% on the same quarter last year (3,382).
   - The number of decisions issued for full planning permission was 2,292. These types of planning application make up almost four fifths (79%) of all decisions issued during the second quarter of 2013/14.

3. Applications approved
   - Overall, 94% of decisions issued for planning applications in the second quarter of 2013/14 were approved, one percentage point higher than for the same period in 2012/13.

4. Applications received for residential development
   - The majority of applications received by the Department are still for residential development, accounting for over half (53%) of all applications received in the second quarter of 2013/14.
   - In urban areas, the number of residential applications decreased by 12% from 587 to 518 during quarter 2. This is in contrast to the 17% increase observed in quarter 1 although it is too early to determine whether the latest figures indicate a return to a decreasing trend.
The number of residential applications in rural areas fell very slightly, from 941 to 935 (less than 1%). Interestingly, rural areas represented just under two thirds (64%) of all residential applications.

5. Applications decided for residential development
- In urban areas, the number of decisions fell by 15%, from 749 to 633; compared with rural areas where the number of decisions fell by 8% from 1,087 to 995.

6. Renewable energy applications
- Renewable energy applications include wind turbines, wind farms, solar panels, biomass burners, hydroelectric schemes etc. The vast majority of renewable energy applications received in the second quarter of 2013/14 were for single wind turbines (133 out of 151 renewable energy applications received or 88%).
- The number of decisions issued against renewable energy applications decreased by 13% from 180 in the second quarter of 2012/13 to 156 in the second quarter of 2013/14. Almost nine tenths of renewable energy applications were approved (87%).

7. Enforcement Statistics
- In the second quarter 2013/14, there were 717 enforcement cases opened and 753 enforcement cases closed, representing an increase of 3% on cases opened but a decrease of 14% on cases closed compared to the same quarter last year.
- The main reason for an enforcement case being closed was because, following investigation, it was deemed that no breach had actually occurred. This accounted for over one-third (35%) of closed cases during the second quarter.

8. Results for Key Performance Targets
- DOE Planning have a key commitment under the Programme for Government to ensure that 90% of large scale investment (LSI) planning decisions are made within 6 months and applications with job creation potential are given additional weight. However, this target is being phased in over a 3 year period with 75% representing the interim target for 2013/14. For the first 6 months of the 2013/14 year, there were 29 LSI applications where a decision was either reached or it was
possible for a decision to have been reached within the 6 month processing target. Of these, 27, or 93%, were processed within 6 months.

- There are three separate annual targets depending on application type. The annual processing target for Major planning applications (predominantly housing developments, commercial and retail development) is to process to decision or withdrawal in an average of 20 weeks. In quarter 2 2013/14, the average processing time for major applications was 25 weeks, markedly lower than the 29 weeks achieved for same period last year.
- The annual processing target for Intermediate planning applications (predominantly single houses) is to process to decision or withdrawal in an average of 18 weeks. In quarter 2 2013/14, the average processing time for intermediate applications was 16 weeks compared with 18 weeks in quarter 2 2012/13.
- The annual processing target for Minor planning applications (predominantly alterations and extensions to houses) is to process to decision or withdrawal in an average of 12 weeks. In quarter 2 2013/14, the average processing time for minor applications was 11 weeks compared with 12 weeks in quarter 2 in 2012/13.

Results for operational targets

- There are two annual targets for the validation of a planning application. The first is to validate 85% of applications within 6 days and the second is to validate 95% of applications within 10 days. In quarter 2 2013/14, 95% of planning applications were validated within 6 days and 98% were validated within 10 days.
- There are a further two annual targets for the time taken to issue a decision after last Council consultation. The first is to issue 85% of decisions within 2 weeks and the second is to issue 95% of decisions within 4 weeks. In quarter 2 2013/14, 89% of decisions were issued within 2 weeks of last Council consultation and 95% were issued within 4 weeks of last Council consultation.
- There are two key annual targets for enforcement activity. The first is for 95% of high priority cases to be discussed and certified within 2 working weeks. In quarter 2 2013/14, 84% of high priority cases were discussed and certified within 2 weeks compared to 75% in same period last year. The second is to process to a conclusion 70% of enforcement cases within 39 weeks. In quarter 2 2013/14, 69%
of enforcement cases were brought to a conclusion within this time period compared to 65% in equivalent quarter last year.

Notes to editors:

1. This is the latest in a regular series of Quarterly Development Management Statistics Bulletin.
2. There are ten performance targets covered in the report, covering Planning performance in relation to the processing of planning applications and enforcement activity. Note that the definition of large scale investment applications has been reviewed and has now been extended to include not only headquarters applications but all such applications also received in local offices and identified as such by planning staff.
3. Planning is organised into 5 area offices and a Headquarters, details of which are available in appendix 4 of the bulletin.
4. The records of all applications from 1st July 2013 to 30th September 2013 were transferred in December 2013 from a live database and inspected for consistency in coding before figures were finalised for publication.

   Department of the Environment
   Analytical Services Branch
   Department of the Environment
   Room 6-10
   Clarence Court
   Belfast BT2 8GB

   Telephone: 028 9054 0907
   E-mail: stats.planning@doeni.gov.uk
   Website: www.planningni.gov.uk

   Further breakdowns of the figures presented in the bulletin are also available on request.

6. All media enquiries should be directed to the Department of the Environment Press Office on 028 9025 6058. For out of office hours, please contact the Duty Press Officer on pager 07699 715 440 and your call will be returned.