

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

The content of this ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the Official Report (Hansard) process.

Environment

NORTHERN AREA PLAN 2016: PLANNING APPEALS COMMISSION REPORT

Published on Thursday 3 July 2014

Mr Mark Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): Development plans inform the general public, statutory authorities, developers and other interested bodies of the policy framework and land use proposals that will be used to guide development decisions in their area. They provide a basis for rational and consistent decisions and provide a measure of certainty about which types of development will and will not be permitted.

The Northern Area Plan 2016 (NAP) is one of the last two plans due to be adopted before planning functions transfer to local councils in April 2015. The Plan covers the council districts of Ballymoney, Coleraine, Limavady and Moyle. This area also comprises the new Causeway Coast and Glens District. The adoption of the Plan will ensure an adequate supply of development land to meet needs beyond the notional end-by date of the Plan in December 2016. As such, it will provide a sound basis for the new Council to prepare future plans under the reformed system provided for under the Planning (NI) Act 2011.

The Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) has recently completed its Report on the Examination in Public into objections to the Draft Northern Area Plan 2016. The final reports were delivered to the Department on 30th May and 5th June 2014. These reports contain the PAC's recommendations to the Department on the objections which were made to Draft NAP.

It had been normal practice for my Department to consider the contents of the PAC Report on a development plan, and then release the PAC recommendations at the same time as the Plan is adopted. This approach allowed an adoption statement, which contains my Department's decision on each of the recommendations, to be published along with the PAC Report.

However, during 2012 in the case of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) and also the Banbridge, Newry & Mourne Area Plan (BNMP), a decision was made to release the PAC Report at an early stage in advance of Plan adoption. This was done because of the considerable length of time since the draft Plan, the complexity of objections received, the forthcoming changes to local councils and to the planning system, and primarily to introduce further certainty about potential development opportunities in the area before the final Plans were adopted.

With similar circumstances pertaining to the Northern Area Plan, I have decided to follow the precedent of BMAP and BNMP and consequently I am now releasing the PAC Report relating to the Northern Area Plan. I believe it is the right thing for the Department to do in terms of openness and transparency. In many cases, it will help to remove uncertainty for the local community, the development industry, the Councils and other elected representatives.

It is important, however, to clarify the status of the PAC Report. As I have already stated, this Report only contains the recommendations of the Planning Appeals Commission, on objections received and they do not give the final position with regard to the objections that were made to the draft Plan. My Department is in the course of preparing NAP for adoption, and will be assessing the PAC recommendations before reaching final decisions, and these decisions will only be known when the Plan is adopted early next year.

One advantage that I envisage arising from my decision to publish the PAC Reports is that in instances where the PAC state that they 'recommend no change to the draft plan as a result of the objections, it is more likely, although not guaranteed, that these recommendations will be accepted by my Department. Consequently, if a planning application is submitted on a site where it is likely the proposals in the draft plan will not be changed as a result of PAC recommendations, the application will be decided on basis of the Plan, but also with regard to all other material considerations. However, in other cases, where the PAC recommendation will require further consideration by my Department, the public cannot make any assumptions as to the development status of sites until such times as the final report is issued and the Plan adopted.

The PAC Report on the Plan will be published on the planning website www.planningni.gov.uk today, Thursday 3rd July 2014.

To conclude, I must emphasise, this is not re-opening the debate about the issues in the Plan. In order to allow resources to be focused on the adoption of Plan, neither I nor my officials will be entering into correspondence or discussions on any matters relating to the recommendations contained in the PAC Report for NAP.

**MARK H DURKAN MLA
MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT**