

Written Ministerial Statement

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Environment

Publication of Planning Appeals Commission Reports on the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 (BMAP) and Banbridge, Newry and Mourne Area Plan

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Mr Attwood (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 Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015, commonly known as BMAP, is the largest plan ever published by my Department, covering an area which contains over 35% of the Northern Ireland population. It includes the City Council areas of Belfast and Lisburn, and the Borough Council areas of Carrickfergus, Castlereagh, Newtownabbey and North Down.

Work on BMAP commenced in 2001, over 11 years ago. The draft plan was published in November 2004, a plan amendment followed in February 2006, and the BMAP public inquiry began in April 2007 and finished in May 2008.

The Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) delivered their reports on the Inquiry to my Department over a period of time. The first report was received in January 2009, with the last report delivered three years later in January 2012. These reports contain the PAC's recommendations on the objections which were made to draft BMAP.

It is 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 allows an adoption statement, which contains my Department's decision on each of the recommendations, to be published along with the PAC Report.

However, with regard to BMAP, some extracts of the BMAP PAC Reports have already been released to assist some specific Article 31 public inquiries. I have therefore decided to follow this limited precedent and depart from normal practice and, consequently I am releasing all the PAC Reports that relate to BMAP. My reasons are as follows:

First, I understand that in these difficult economic times, any measures that I can take to introduce further certainty about potential development opportunities in the Belfast Metropolitan Area will be welcomed in the interim period before BMAP is finally adopted. This is a radical change of approach by the Department and I believe it is the right thing 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. To publish now – not wait any longer given the length of time since the plan process began – is right and necessary.

Second, I recognise that the forthcoming Reform of Public Administration and the resulting transfer of the majority of planning functions to fewer and larger Councils will impact on development plans such as BMAP, which do not easily fit into the new Council groupings. Indeed by 2015 Councils will have powers to prepare new style development plans for their area. In these circumstances, it is only fair to the Councils and an aid to good planning for the Plans to be published now.

I will now turn to the status of the reports. As I have already stated, these reports only contain the recommendations of the Planning Appeals Commission, on objections received and they do not give the final position with regard to the 3000 objections that were made to the draft Plan. My Department is in the course of preparing BMAP for adoption, and will be assessing the PAC recommendations before reaching final decisions, and these decisions will be known when the Plan is adopted 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 I cannot guarantee it - 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.

My Department has also recently received the PAC Reports for the Banbridge, Newry and Mourne Area Plan, and I am taking the same approach for that plan. The PAC reports on the plans will be published on the planning website www.planningni.gov.uk today, Wednesday 6 June 2012.

To conclude, I must emphasise, this is not re-opening the debate about the issues in the two plans. Resources will be focused on the adoption of plans.

Consequently, to demonstrate that the content of the Plan is not up for grabs I and my officials will not be entering into any discussions relating to the recommendations contained in the PAC Reports for BMAP or the Banbridge Newry and Mourne Plans.

I believe this departure from the orthodoxy around plans is a very different way to go about local development plans. I am rightly told to be decisive, that planning must enable development, that good planning is 'Plan-led',

that individuals and investors welcome certainty. I agree. That is why I am proceeding in this way.