

Committee Inquiry into the Planning Appeals Commission

Purpose of the Inquiry

The Public Accounts Committee will undertake an inquiry into the findings and recommendations contained in the Northern Ireland Audit Office report *A Strategic Review of the Planning Appeals Commission*, published on 21 May 2026.

The Inquiry will examine whether public resources allocated to the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) have been managed economically, efficiently and effectively, and whether the governance, accountability and operational arrangements provide appropriate assurance regarding the effective use of public resources.

The Inquiry will also examine the action taken and proposed by the Department of Justice, the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS), the PAC and other relevant bodies in response to the NIAO's findings and recommendations.

The Committee will have regard to the PAC's statutory independence and will not seek to question or review the merits of individual planning decisions, unless it illustrates wider systemic issues.

The Committee will consider, in particular:

- **Performance and backlogs:** the scale and causes of the PAC's caseload and delays, across the Commission's functions, particularly in complex Hear and Report Cases; the impact on the wider planning system; the local economy and whether current arrangements for clearing outstanding cases and managing future workloads are effective and sustainable
- **Value for money, resources and workforce capacity:** whether the PAC has been provided with, and has made effective use of, the financial, staffing and other resources required to discharge its statutory functions; the adequacy of workforce and succession planning, and whether its funding and fee arrangements support effective efficient and financial sustainable delivery.
- **Governance and accountability:** whether the current governance, sponsorship and accountability arrangements between the PAC, NICTS and the Department of Justice provide sufficient clarity and assurance over PAC performance and the use of public resources, whilst preserving the Commission's independence in individual decision making.
- **Leadership, culture and collaboration:** whether leadership, organisational culture, stakeholder engagement and collaboration between the Commission, the Department for Infrastructure, councils and other parts of the planning system support effective case progression, openness to challenge and system-wide improvement.

- **Future roles and capacity:** the implications of DfI's appointment of independent inspectors for the Commission's capacity, roles and responsibilities, including the potential for duplication.
- **Response to the NIAO report:** the adequacy and timeliness of action taken or proposed by the Commission, NICTS, the Department of Justice, the Department for Infrastructure and other relevant bodies to implement the NIAO's recommendations on governance, managing backlog and delay funding and fees, and collaboration across the planning system.
- **Future assurance:** whether the actions taken and proposed are sufficient to address the issues identified by the NIAO and provide assurance that the PAC can deliver its functions effectively, efficiently and sustainably.

Evidence

The Committee intends to take oral and written evidence from relevant organisations and individuals, which may include:

- the Comptroller and Auditor General and representatives of the Northern Ireland Audit Office;
- the Department of Justice;
- the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service;
- the Chief Commissioner and representatives of the Planning Appeals Commission;
- the Department for Infrastructure;
- relevant professional and stakeholder bodies; and
- other persons or organisations the Committee considers capable of assisting its Inquiry.

The Committee may call for persons, papers and records in accordance with its powers.