
Ed Humpherson, Director General for Regulation

Siobhan Carey
Chief Executive
Northern Ireland Statistics Research Agency

7 May 2020

Dear Siobhan

ASSESSMENT OF STATISTICS ON PLANNING ACTIVITY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Thank you for inviting us to assess the Department for Infrastructure's [Northern Ireland Planning statistics](#) against the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#). We have completed the assessment and have today published our Assessment Report covering these statistics. I am grateful for the positive contribution and engagement from your team throughout the assessment process, especially over the last few weeks at this particularly challenging time.

During our assessment we found that the statistics are produced independently and presented impartially, providing a good view of the overall trends in planning in Northern Ireland. Users are generally happy with the presentation, content, and quality of the statistics, and are positive about the level and forms of engagement provided by the statistics team as well as reporting that they have confidence in the quality of the planning statistics produced.

We have identified several ways that the statistics should be strengthened further, to ensure that they fulfil the expectations of the Code. There are four requirements we are asking the statistics team to focus on:

- Enhance the impact and insight of the planning statistics for a wider range of users and facilitate their further reuse, for example through making use of more innovative forms of presentation including interactive content and maps;
- Investigate the feasibility of linking planning approvals to house building completions data and collaborate with other statisticians as necessary to help answer key questions and enable a better understanding of the NI planning statistics in relation to the overall UK planning picture;
- Improve the information it publishes on its future planned developments and details of relevant user meetings so that other users are kept informed and have opportunities to comment on proposals;
- Demonstrate a higher level of assurance around data quality and any associated methods changes during the transition period to the new planning portal, setting out how any potential impact on data quality or methods will be mitigated.

As is the situation with many statistics producers at the moment, the impact of COVID-19 on statistical production over the coming months is uncertain. We understand there may be an impact on the capacity of planning offices to process planning applications, the effects of which may be seen in the forthcoming publications in June/July and September this year. There may also be a need to delay the publication of quarterly planning statistics, to allow councils more time to carry out their regular data quality assurance. We are reassured that the statistics team is keeping the situation under review and will identify any changes in quality or statistical trends that may be related to COVID-19, highlighting these in the published statistics.

We judge that the Northern Ireland Planning statistics can be designated as new National Statistics once we have confirmed that the four requirements set out in the report have been met. Addressing the requirements will demonstrate that your statistics meet the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality and public value and comply with the Code of Practice for Statistics. We have agreed that the team will report back to us by October 2020 outlining how they have addressed the requirements.

I am copying this letter to Michael Thompson, Lead Statistician DfI; Tracy Power, Director of Analysis NISRA; and Ruth Fulton, Chief Statistician's Office.

Your sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed Humpherson', written in a cursive style.

Ed Humpherson
Director General for Regulation