
Ed Humpherson, Director General for Regulation

Siobhan Carey, CBE
Chief Executive and Registrar General
Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
(by email)

15 December 2020

Dear Siobhan

Assessment of Northern Ireland Planning Statistics

We have reviewed the actions that your team has taken to address the requirements in Assessment Report number 350: Statistics on Planning in Northern Ireland.

On behalf of the Board of the UK Statistics Authority, I am pleased to confirm the awarding of National Statistics designation for Northern Ireland planning statistics.

These statistics are valuable as they provide relevant and trusted information on planning activity in Northern Ireland, and enable users to better understand the planning performance of Northern Ireland councils against statutory targets.

The team responsible for producing the statistics at the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) has responded very positively to the Requirements of our report. The team has made changes that enhance the accessibility of the statistics and the insight that they provide, increasing their appeal to a wider range of users. Users can now more easily access a range of data on which the statistics are based and will be more aware of planned future developments of the statistics, including those related to the transition to the new planning portal. In general, we welcome the team's proactive approach to the continuous improvement of the planning statistics.

We are particularly pleased with the progress in exploring the feasibility of linking planning and house building data in NI, and the coordinating role that the team has played in building broad support for this work with statisticians across the UK. Being able to better understand the flow of planning approvals through to house builds was an issue raised by some users during the assessment, but also numerous users across the UK that we spoke to during our 2017 systemic review housing and planning statistics. The work undertaken by DfI statisticians to date is a significant step forward in addressing users' key questions in this area, and we welcome the team's continued engagement in cross-government discussions about this work.

We have included more detail about our judgement in an annex to this letter, which has been adapted from the DfI statisticians' published action plan for meeting the assessment requirements. I, or my team, would be happy to talk to you or your colleagues through any aspects of this letter or Code compliance more generally.

National Statistics status means that official statistics meet the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality and value and is something to be celebrated. For future releases, we invite you to include a statement alongside the statistics which reflects the National Statistics status.

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

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed Humpherson', with a stylized, cursive script.

Ed Humpherson

Director General for Regulation

Annex A: Review of actions taken in response to Assessment Report 350: Assessment of Northern Ireland Planning Statistics, produced by the Department for Infrastructure, Northern Ireland (Dfi)

ASSESSMENT FINDING:	REQUIREMENT :	Dfi EVIDENCE NEEDED AND ACTIONS REQUIRED:	Dfi EVIDENCE / ACTION TO ADDRESS REQUIREMENT	Assessment team judgement following review of evidence
<u>VALUE</u>				
1. Dfi should enhance the impact and insight of the planning statistics for a wider range of users and facilitate their further reuse. Dfi should do this by:	a) exploring the use of maps and new forms of interactive presentation	<p>Evidence needed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence that exploratory work has been carried out seeking options and viability for use of maps and interactive presentation of planning statistics. Document all exploratory work, or, • Detailed plan to introduce new interactive content, and/or • New interactive content <p>Actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore the example using Power BI from the Ministry of Housing, 	<p>Power BI</p> <p>Power BI development has been largely self-investigated and developed and quality checked by the team members. We were successful in securing some training and this was completed by the Assistant Statistician during early September 2020. ASRB have developed Power BI content and are currently in the final steps of quality assurance ahead of intended publication. At present it is not possible to share an active link to the new content however screenshots are attached separately to illustrate the developments.</p> <p>Planning Data Visualisation</p> <p>The Planning Statistics data visualisation is available on the Planning Statistics landing page under the 'Data Visualisation' heading.</p>	<p>We've been pleased by Dfi's progress in this area. The video that Dfi has developed helps to bring the quarterly headline results to life in an accessible way, and will appeal to a broader range of users. The new interactive dashboard will allow users to run their own queries on the planning statistics for planning applications, approvals, refusals and enforcement measures over different time periods, for different local areas. The team has committed to publish the Power BI content as soon as possible after overcoming a technical barrier. The interactive</p>

		<p>Communities & Local Government. Gather information on what software is required to develop and publish data in this format.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check internal software availability. • Staff to receive relevant training on new software. • Ensure interactive content can be placed on Departmental website. • Develop interactive content. • Publish new content 	<p>NINIS</p> <p>Planning data is available on the NI Neighbourhood Information Service and this data is provided regularly to the NINIS team, with quarterly data provided following the release of each publication for renewable content, and finalised annual data provided after the publication of annual reports for the full suite of published planning applications and enforcement data. However, due to circumstances at the NINIS end, the data presented</p> <p>Update from the team 22/10: NISRA colleagues in NINIS have updated the MAPS area bringing all NI planning statistics held on NINIS up to date.</p>	<p>and accessible nature of the dashboard is likely increase the appeal of the planning statistics to a broader range of users. The team has also worked with NISRA to overcome previous issues NISRA had in ensuring interactive planning data on the separate NINIS website was completely up to date.</p> <p>Overall, these improvements will improve the value of the statistics for a wider range of users and facilitate reuse of the planning statistics.</p>
	<p>b) improving the accessibility of underlying data from the bulletin</p>	<p>Evidence needed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence that statisticians have sought to introduce direct links to excel tables within statistical publication, or, • Introduction of direct links to 	<p>As discussed by email, development of direct links was at an advanced stage but due to legislative web accessibility guidelines, there was a tension between the assessment requirement and accessibility requirements. An agreed compromise sees links now point to the relevant quarterly publication landing page, rather than the generic Planning</p>	<p>These improvements, along with other improvements to the accessibility of data on NINIS, and the now published ad hoc data requests, mean that users can now more easily access the data on</p>

	<p>specific excel tables within publication.</p> <p>Actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore feasibility of having direct links to excel tables in publication rather than to a landing page. • Update process documentation with new process. • Introduce new links to Q1 2020/21 publication. 	<p>Statistics landing page. See links in most recent publication.</p> <p>We have updated our process documentation to reflect these changes and these are attached separately.</p>	<p>which the statistics are based.</p>
<p>c) publishing the full range of available outputs, including the statistics key messages video and ad hoc analyses produced in response to users' requests.</p>	<p>Evidence needed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence that statisticians have sought to publish Planning Statistics key message video on Departmental website. • Publication of Planning Statistics key message video. • Publications of ad-hoc analyses produced in response to user requests on 	<p>Planning Statistics key message video is now available on DfI website under the 'Data Visualisation' heading.</p> <p>Ad hoc requests now have a webpage and are updated regularly with new requests.</p>	<p>The key messages video is engaging and highlights the key trends in an accessible way.</p> <p>As well as enhancing transparency, the publication of specific ad hoc requests gives an insight into the types of analyses that can be obtained from the planning data and promotes their value and reuse by a wider range of users.</p>

		<p>Departmental website.</p> <p>Actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore feasibility of publishing Planning Statistics key message video on Departmental website and publish if feasible. • Create new webpage for publication of ad-hoc requests and upload requests periodically. 		
<p>2. Dfl should set out its plans for the future development of the planning statistics in light of forthcoming changes to the planning portal, for example through a published work plan. It should also publish summary</p>	<p>a) published workplan detailing future development of planning statistics</p>	<p>Evidence needed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publication of Planning Statistics work plan. <p>Actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a workplan for Planning Statistics and detail future developments such as new planning portal. • Web development to host new content 	<p>ASRB published an action plan to advise users of our progress towards the requirements which developed out of this assessment.</p> <p>In addition, ASRB keep a detailed work programme which lays out the requests and priorities that the Branch is currently working towards. This has always been kept internally but has now been developed for publication for the first time following the assessment process. The work plan lays out at a high level the requests in the same format as the ASRB internal work programme and illustrates likely developments up to end of 2022/23</p>	<p>The team published an action plan for addressing the assessment requirements, which they have developed to indicate future work plans, and used colour-coding to denote progress against the various tasks. The plan will be a useful tool for communicating the team's future developments to users. For example, the plan</p>

<p>information from its key user meetings so that other users are kept informed and have opportunities to comment on proposals.</p>			<p>and their timescales. This will be updated as new work emerges both on an ad hoc basis from the wider viewpoint and annually from ASRB's annual work programme development exercise. This work plan has now been published, alongside the action plan.</p> <p>New content has been created and is now being published on the Dfl website on a quarterly basis. The Planning Statistics data visualisation is available on the Planning Statistics landing page under the 'Data Visualisation' heading. Power BI interactive content has been developed and is currently being finalised with the intention of publishing in due course. No direct link is available at present but screenshots from the content have been attached separately to show the developments.</p> <p>The new NI Planning Portal section has been expanded in the publication as far as currently possible, this will be reviewed ahead of each publication and updated to reflect the most up to date position. As development of the new systems gets underway this section will include more detail but presently the detail is limited given the very early stages of the project (see page 7 of most recent report)</p>	<p>tracks progress for transitioning to the new planning portal and includes other initiatives such as exploring feasibility of RAP processing, the development of new interactive content, and to signal planned engagements and meetings with other GSS statistics producers with an interest in linking housing and planning data.</p>
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	<p>b) publish summary information from key user group and welcome feedback from other users.</p>	<p>Evidence needed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publication of summary information from key user group meetings <p>Actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summarise minutes from previous key user group meetings and publish. • Web development to host new content 	<p>Key user group minutes are now published on Dfl website.</p>	<p>Minutes of the team's key user group meetings are now published on the Dfl website. This provides transparency around Dfl's development planning and prioritisation for users. Dfl runs a continuous user feedback survey which is available from the bulletin and the team's workplan includes details of a more detailed and targeted user engagement exercise in Summer 2021 to obtain further feedback.</p> <p>The team has published details of previous user feedback along with the team's responses on the Dfl webpages. The team is also part of the GSS cross-government housing and planning group, which publishes separate outputs from its</p>

			<p>meetings and will also seek user feedback on new outputs. Dfl has also joined the NI Housing Executive House Condition Survey working group to contribute insights on development from the planning side.</p> <p>All of these activities together should help the team gain a good understanding of the user base for these statistics</p>	
<p>3. To enhance the public value of the NI planning activity statistics, Dfl should investigate the feasibility of linking planning approvals to house building completions data. Dfl should collaborate with other UK and NI statisticians</p>	<p>a) investigate the feasibility of linking planning approvals and house building completions data</p>	<p>Evidence needed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Production of scoping paper <p>Actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish appropriate contact points within central and local government, including DfC and LPS. • Explore accessibility, timeliness and quality of required data and establish if 	<p>A scoping paper has been published detailing investigations into the potential of this concept.</p> <p>As detailed in the scoping paper, there are some wider developments which may support this concept. Dfl statisticians are part of a cross-government working group, working to improve the trustworthiness, quality and value of housing and planning statistics across the UK, which most recently met on the 17 September 2020. At that meeting, how to measure the extent to which planning permissions then equate to houses being built on the ground was an agenda item. Each relevant member of the group provided a current position for the regions</p>	<p>Dfl has published a detailed feasibility review of the available evidence on linking planning and housing data. The paper considers the range of NI data sources held across multiple departments and the extent such work has previously been done across the UK. The team has engaged with a wide variety of housing and planning producers and stakeholders across the UK, and built support for this development work,</p>

<p>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, and publish its findings.</p>		<p>there would be any access issues and if data access agreements would be needed.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scope out if there has been any previous work carried out to link building control completions with planning approvals. 	<p>across the UK, with all at varying positions in relation to this area. Members agreed to setup a sub-group to scope out areas of work in linking planning and housing data and to share ideas and experiences, which should help this idea on a wider basis.</p>	<p>which was a key issue for users we spoke to during our housing and planning systemic review. As a result of Dfl's engagement, ONS has set up a new GSS housing and planning subgroup that has met to consider developing this work, with further progress requiring buy-in from a range of departments and producers. Despite having already carried out the feasibility work and having limited resource to take the project further forward alongside other planned developments in 2020/21, Dfl is a member of the new GSS subgroup and has committed to champion further exploration of this work alongside other priorities.</p>
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<p>b) collaborate with other UK and NI statisticians where necessary to answer key questions and provide clarity in relation to NI planning statistics within the UK planning picture. Publish any findings.</p>	<p>Evidence needed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detail of any collaboration and additions made to publication • Maintain presence on relevant working groups <p>Actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Links to other jurisdictions within publication, taking views of other NS to guide suitable depth of content 	<p>Section detailing other jurisdictions has been expanded to reflect that in the England Planning Statistics publication, which is currently designated as NS (see page 28 of most recent publication).</p> <p>Dfl statisticians are part of a cross-government working group, working to improve the trustworthiness, quality and value of housing and planning statistics across the UK, which most recently met on the 17 September 2020.</p> <p>ASRB staff have secured a place on the NI Housing Executive's (NIHE) House Condition Survey working group. This is a key survey reporting on social housing in Northern Ireland and ASRB presence on this working group will ensure a key link between planning data expertise and social housing data. This group is due to meet for the first time in October 2020 ahead of the next House Condition Survey. The House Condition Survey is a National Statistic.</p> <p>ASRB staff also attend the Strategic Planners Group at various key points, most recently in 2019. Future attendances will occur as an avenue to maintain links to Heads of Planning within councils but due to circumstances in 2020</p>	<p>We have been impressed by the extent of engagement that the team has carried out with a range of housing and planning statistics producers and stakeholders in a relatively short time, and in challenging circumstances during the pandemic. Informed by this engagement, the statistics now include considerable additional detail about related statistical products across the UK and the work of the cross-government housing and planning group. The team has also transparently set out details of future planned meetings with the various stakeholders on its published forward work plan and committed to continue engagement on the theme of linking planning and housing data.</p>
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		there has not been a suitable opportunity to date. ASRB are keep up to date through the Dfl Key Users Group and attendance at this meeting is organised through this group.	
QUALITY			
4. To demonstrate its continuous commitment to assured official statistics Dfl should enhance the level of assurance that it seeks around planning data quality ahead of the transition to new planning portal. It should publish for users, details of its level of assurance, any potential impacts on data quality or methods, and how these impacts will be mitigated.	<p>Evidence needed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publish updated QAAD, taking into account progress of new Portal development and adjust risk accordingly. • Publish updated BQR annually. • Introduction of updated user guidance quality information moving forward. <p>Actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review quality documentation and update annually: • QAAD • BQR • User guidance in publication and published tables 	<p>All quality information has been updated to reflect current position. Risk rating in QAAD has been amended given Portal development risk potential, with likelihood of further amendment as further development occurs.</p> <p>User guidance in the most recent publication and tables has also been updated, including a short note on latest Portal development.</p> <p>ASRB has also been in contact with Planning Portal development team to arrange a meeting on data transfer and testing processes, to ensure ASRB are best placed to manage that risk in respect to planning statistics. ASRB liaise closely with the Planning Portal team and are awaiting their contact at a suitable time in the Portal development process.</p> <p>Updated QAAD</p> <p>Updated BQR</p>	<p>The team has appropriately updated the published QAAD and quality information to reflect the current data quality position, adding more details about the potential data quality risks and planned mitigations during the transition. The team has committed to keep its quality judgements under review and update the supporting guidance as the transition to the new planning portal moves forward over the next year. This will ensure that users of the statistics are fully informed of the statisticians' assurances around data quality during the transition to the new system.</p>

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