

REPORT FROM NILGA/PLANNING SERVICE SEMINAR, ARMAGH CITY HOTEL, 18 DECEMBER 2008

Agenda Item: 7

Summary: A joint NILGA/Planning Service seminar was held on 18 December 2008. The purpose of the event was to allow local government representatives and Planning Service officials to discuss ongoing work on planning and the emerging proposals on planning reform, and to develop a way forward.

Action required: To note

Background

1. A joint NILGA/Planning Service Seminar was held on 18 December in the Armagh City Hotel. There were around 65 participants, representing local government and Planning Service. The main purpose of the event was to allow local government representatives and Planning Service officials to discuss ongoing and transitional work on planning, as well as the emerging proposals on planning reform, and to develop a way forward.
2. Heather Moorhead (NILGA Chief Executive) gave an overview of the RPA structures and their progress to date. This was followed by Mary MacIntyre (Divisional Planning Manager) who touched on current relationships between central and local government and gave updates on the recommendations contained in the BearingPoint review of revised council consultation arrangements and on the streamlined consultation scheme operating with Derry City Council. Councillor Helen Quigley gave a very positive review of the streamlined consultation process from a local government perspective.
3. Marianne Fleming (Director, Planning Service) gave a presentation on the planning functions transferring to district councils and on the emerging proposals for reform of the planning system. This was followed by a number of workshops focusing on development planning, development management and oversight arrangements.

Key Outcomes

4. A more detailed read-out from the event is being prepared by NILGA to assist in contributing to the forthcoming planning reform consultation but, in brief, some of the key issues raised included:
 - how existing development plans would be dealt with on transfer to new councils;
 - oversight arrangements – whether there should be a general power (under section 129 of the Local Government Act 1972) to direct a council to take appropriate action or to allow the Department to act as the planning authority if the council has failed to fulfil its planning obligations, or whether the Department should retain section 129 while using specific intervention reserve powers under planning legislation, as in England. The workshop agreed that the NILGA position was the second of these 2 options: i.e. section 129 plus reserve powers (option c in the paper previously presented to SLB);
 - service delivery models – general view expressed that each council should have its own planning department, although concern was expressed about staffing resources;
 - the role of the Regional Development Strategy and regional planning policy post-RPA. There was discussion on whether the development plan should be ‘in general conformity with’ the RDS, with a preference expressed for the plan to ‘have regard to’ the RDS;
 - the role and status of planning policy statements post-RPA. It was commented that planning policy statements are currently so detailed that they would constrain local control and flexibility and would need to be revised to be more strategic.

5. Feedback from the workshops was generally positive and overall the day was considered to be very constructive.