

Chief Executive's Department



Our reference SW/as

Date 30 January 2015

Minister Mark Durkan MLA
Department of the Environment
Private Office
8th Floor, Goodwood House
44 - 58 May Street
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Dear Minister

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM – TRANSFER OF PLANNING FUNCTIONS

The Council's Shadow Strategic Policy and Resources Committee has recently considered its revenue costs for 2015/16 and this included detailed costs connected with the transfer of planning related functions.

The report had identified an additional budget requirement of **£735,000**, which the Council feels is required, in addition to the DOE's budget allocation proposals, to ensure an effective and fit for purpose planning system transfers into the Council and that a high level of service delivery can be achieved.

It should be noted that the budget estimates take account of both the recent due diligence and reconciliation work undertaken by Deloitte, as well as the Council's own detailed analysis of the projected costs of planning for Belfast.

The Council is aware of the stringent financial and budgetary pressures currently facing the Department and the steps already taken to secure resources for the transferring planning functions including the recent movement in budget allocations.

Notwithstanding that, the Committee agreed that I should write to you to bring to your urgent attention the fact that the Committee considers that the allocation is not 'rates neutral' in terms of the provision of a fit for purpose planning service that can deliver all the functions proposed in the new planning system.

Budget Allocation

In relation to the £735,000 additional budget identified, the Council has agreed the need to enhance the skills and staff structure from what is currently being transferred to ensure that the transferred service is effective. This includes the appointment of a Director of Planning and Place; a post dedicated to overseeing the development of spatial plans and policies and dedicated legal support.

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Other areas of shortfall in current departmental funding includes the cost of producing the Area Development Plan, other core support costs (eg ICT) and accommodation. I appreciate that some of these costs fall to the Department of Finance and Personnel so I have copied this letter to the Finance Minister.

Planning Portal

The Council is aware that the Department has agreed to continue to host and oversee the management of the Planning Portal up until 2019. However there is less certainty about the development and costs associated with the future replacement of this ICT system post 2019. This will be a critical financial consideration in the future; therefore the Council would seek assurances that the Department will lead discussions on the options for the future system and the associated governance and funding arrangements which will be required.

These issues have been highlighted by the Council's Chief Executive to the Department's Chief Planner. However, the Members asked that these issues also be brought to your attention. They also requested that an urgent meeting be set up with you and a cross party delegation.

I would stress that the Council remains fully committed to working in partnership with the Department to ensure the seamless transfer of powers and the continued delivery of an effective and efficient planning service for the City.

Industrial De-rating Grant

I appreciate that the Department is still considering the impact of its budget allocation. However our position is that the de-rating grant should be made in full and we would appreciate early confirmation of the Department's final position so that we can set the district rate within the legislative timeframe.

The Chief Executive's office will be in touch with your office to see if an early date can be established for you to meet a cross party delegation.

Yours sincerely



Councillor Christopher Stalford

Chair of Shadow Strategic Policy and Resources Committee
Belfast City Council

Copy to: Minister Simon Hamilton MLA, Department of Finance and Personnel