

Planning Committee

Performance Information 1 April to 31 December 2019



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Summary Planning Statistics

Introduction

This statistical bulletin provides an overview of planning activity and includes performance information from 01 April to 31 December 2019. It provides an outline of Development Management performance and summary statistical information on council progress across the 3 statutory targets for major development applications, local development applications and enforcement cases. It also provides information relating to performance against corporate targets.



440 house
holder
applications
approved



>1,300
Residential
units
approved

5 outdoor leisure facilities
approved



93%

Approval rate



Major Decisions
Doubled



95
Committee
applications
approved
this year

51% of enforcement cases
resolved



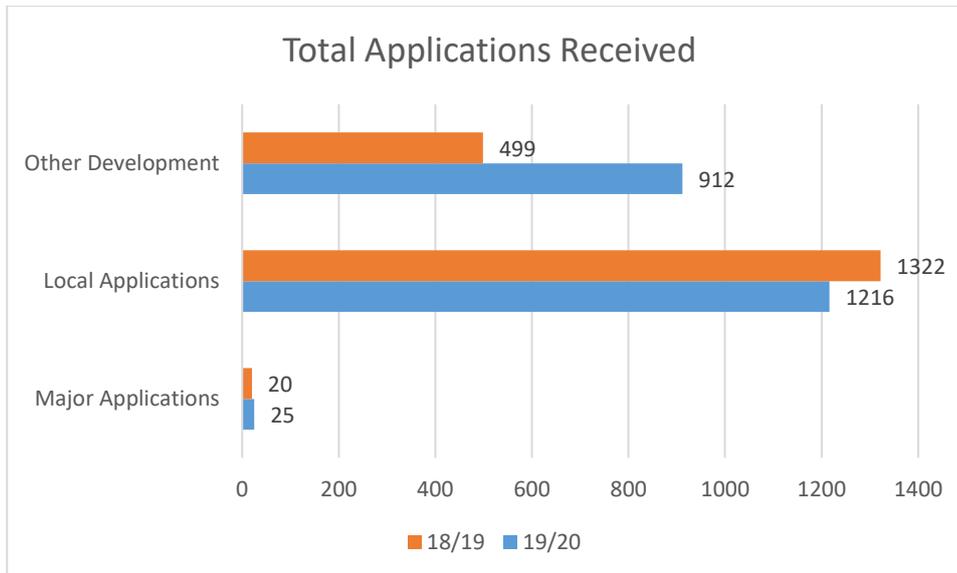
Enforcement

Targets exceeded
by 23%

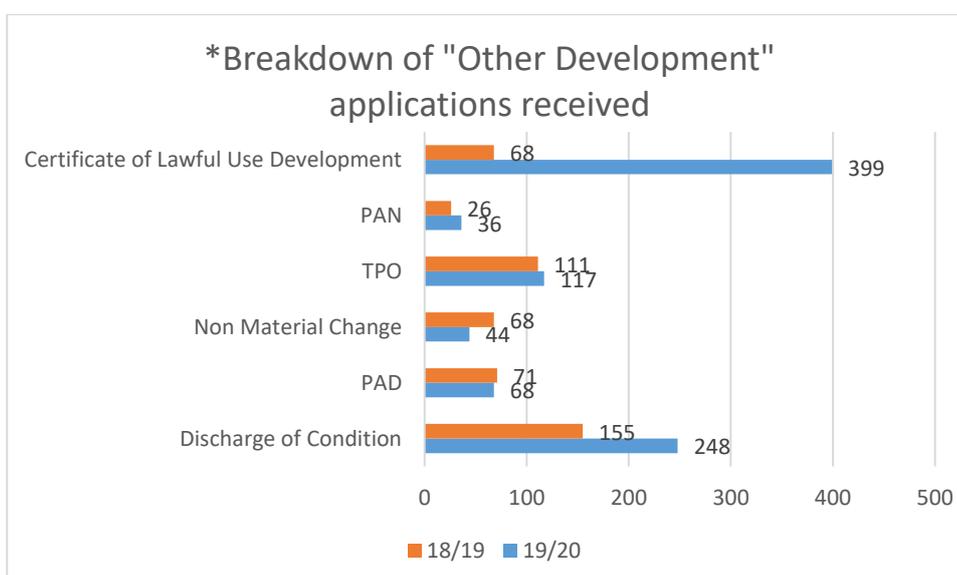
Overall Planning Activity

Applications Received

The total number of applications (Locals, Major and Other Development) received between 1 April and 31 December 2019 was 2,153, which excluding invalid submissions is almost a 15% increase over the same period last year. (1,841)



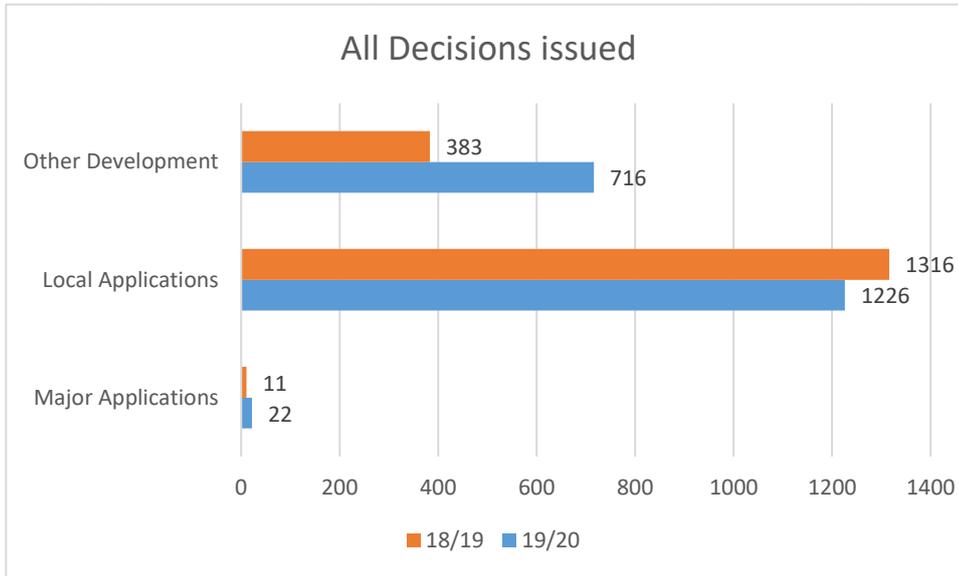
The number of **Local** Applications received has decreased by 8% (- 106) while the number of **Major** applications is up 20% (+5). **Other Development*** which is excluded from the statutory performance targets currently make up over 42% of applications /consents received. This is 15% more than last year and can mainly attributed to an increase in applications for Certificates of Lawful Use Development relating to Houses of Multiple Occupancy which show a 5 fold increase year on year (68 in 18/19; 399 in 19/20), and Discharge of Condition applications which have increased by 60% (155 in 18/19; 248 in 19/20). Those DoC applications do not attract a fee.



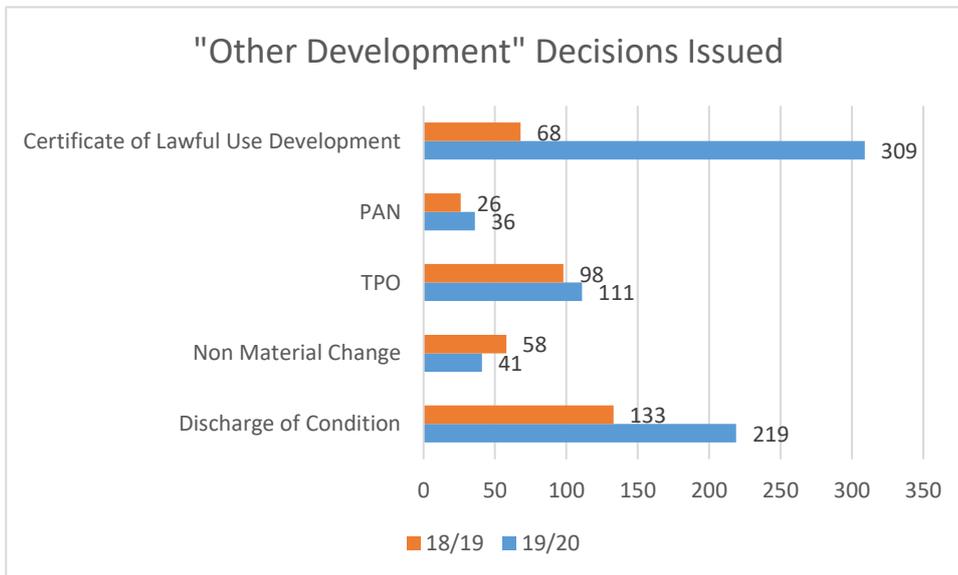
Overall Planning Activity (continued)

Decisions Issued

A total of 1,964 decisions were issued between 1 April and 31 December 2019, which is 14% more than the same period in 2018 when 1,710 decisions issued. 93% of applications were approved. The approval rate is currently 5% more than the same period last year.



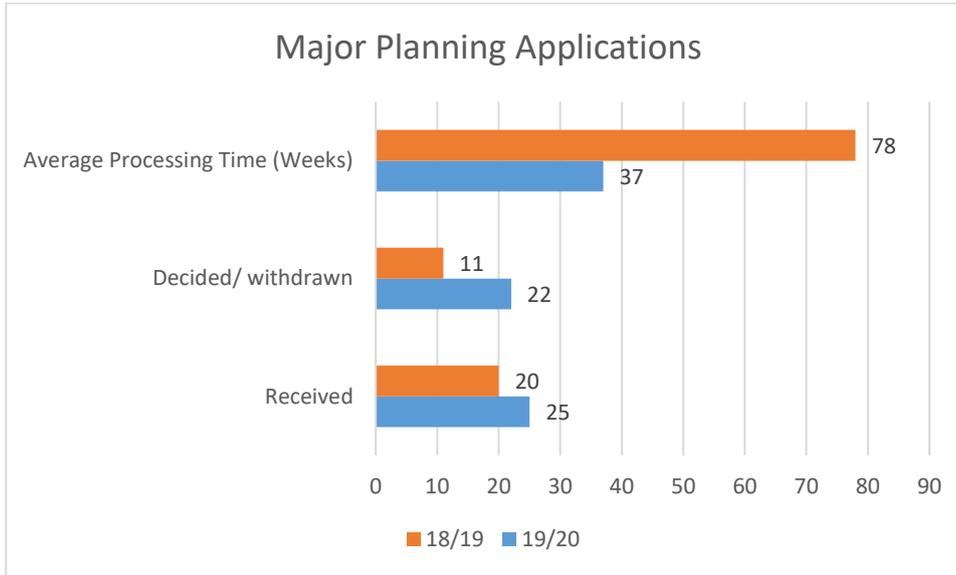
The overall % of "Other Development" decisions has risen by 14% in the past year again mainly attributable to decisions on CLUD and Discharge of Conditions applications.



Major Applications

The Statutory target is that major planning applications will be processed from the date valid to decision issued or withdrawal date within an average of 30 weeks.

Major applications have important economic, social and environmental implications. Most major applications are multiple housing, office block developments, hotels and civic types of development.



The number of major applications received up to 31 December 2019 is 25. There were 20 major applications received up to 31 December 2018. 22 major applications were decided during the period which is double the number decided in the same period last year (11). Last year the average processing time was 78 weeks, this year performance has improved to 37 weeks.

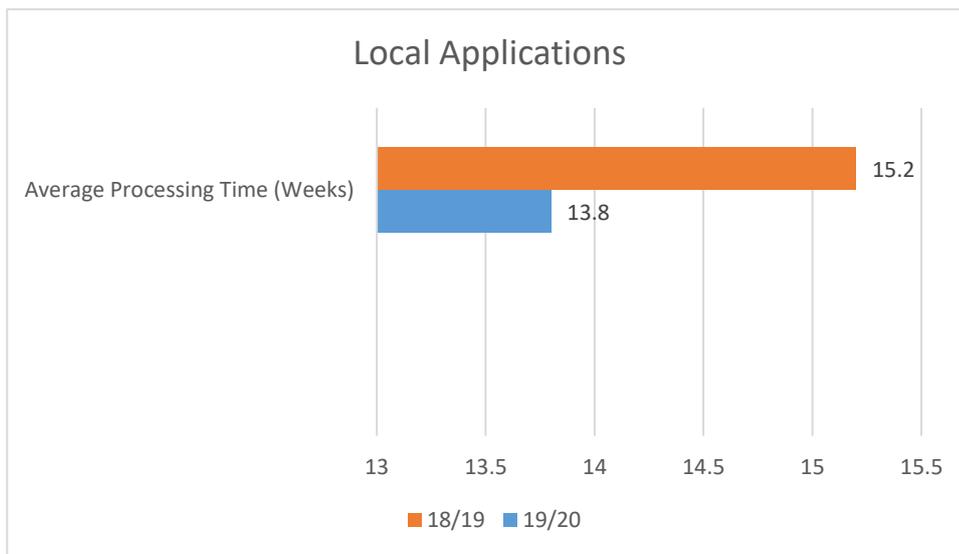
Major applications	Received	Decided/withdrawn	Average Processing Time (Weeks)	Target Processing Time (Weeks)	% of cases processed within Target
19/20	25	22	37	30	35%
18/19	20	11	78	30	31%

Local Applications

The Statutory target is that local planning applications will be processed from the date valid to decision issued or withdrawal date within an average of 15 weeks.

Local Planning applications are mostly residential and minor commercial applications and make up the vast bulk of measurable applications received (a total of 99%).

The number of local applications received is 1,216 which is a 9% decrease on the same period last year (1,322).



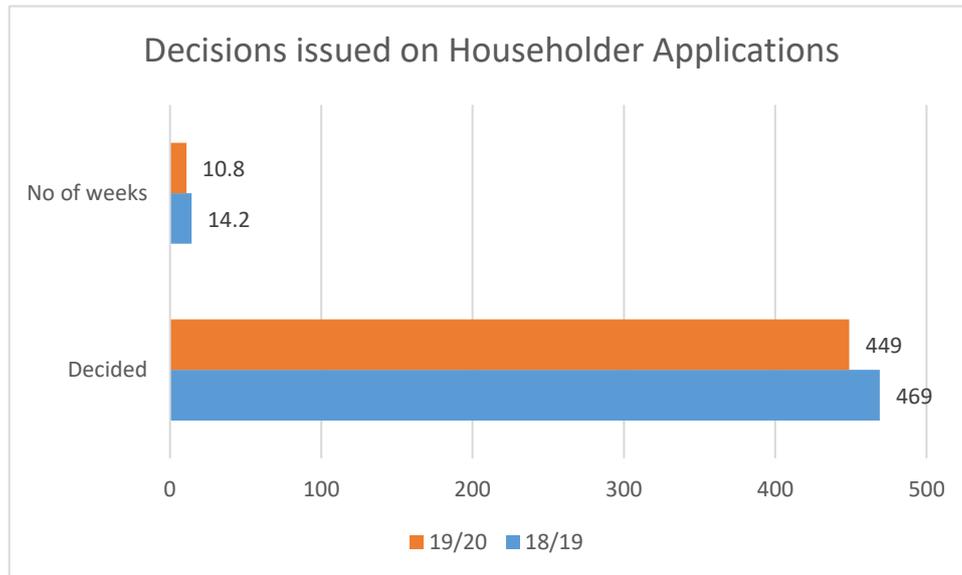
Local applications account for 64% of decisions issued which is 13% less than this period last year. 1,132 were decided in the period, 57 less than the same period last year. Last year the average processing time was 15.2 weeks whereas this year the average processing time is 13.8 weeks.

Local Applications	Received	Decided/withdrawn	Average Processing Time (Weeks)	Target Processing Time (Weeks)	% of cases processed within Target
19/20	1,216	1,226	13.8	15	55%
18/19	1,322	1,316	15.2	15	49%

Performance Indicators for Householder applications

The largest number of local applications processed relate to householder applications. These include extensions, conservatories, loft conversions, dormer windows, garages, car ports and outbuildings.

Our internal Key Performance Indicator for processing Householder applications is 12 weeks.



Performance up to 31 December 2019 is 10.8 weeks. In the same period last year performance was 14.2 weeks.

Processing

Time Taken to Validate

The time take to validate any planning application is a vital part of the planning process. The quicker an application can be validated the quicker the application is allocated to a case officer for processing. Delays with validation can have an impact on the ability to achieve statutory targets.

The internal target for validating a planning application is 10 days depending on its complexity. Currently the average time taken to validate a planning application is 8 days.

Site Visits

The time take to carry out site visits is also an important element of the application processing. As part of our operating principles we have introduced a target for this to be carried out within 21 days. The average for this year is 12 days.

Statutory Consultee Performance

Statutory consultees are organisations and bodies, defined by statute, who must be consulted on relevant planning applications (these include the majority of the Government Departments).

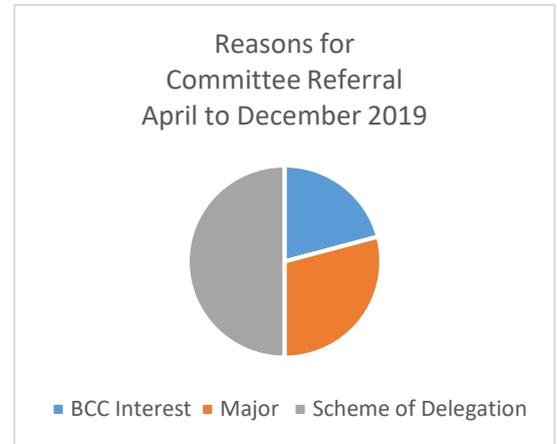
Available figures indicate that in up to 31 December 2019 33% of all consultation responses were returned outside the 21-day statutory deadline although this can vary across consultees with one consultee returning 53% of consultations outside the deadline.

Planning Committee

Between 1 April and 31 December 2019 the Committee considered a total of 109 applications, including 9 applications brought back to committee for reconsideration and 34 Major applications. There was one Pre determination Hearing during the period.

Committee has 95% approval rate.

In this period, the Committee decided against the officer recommendation (refusal) on 3 occasions.



Appeals

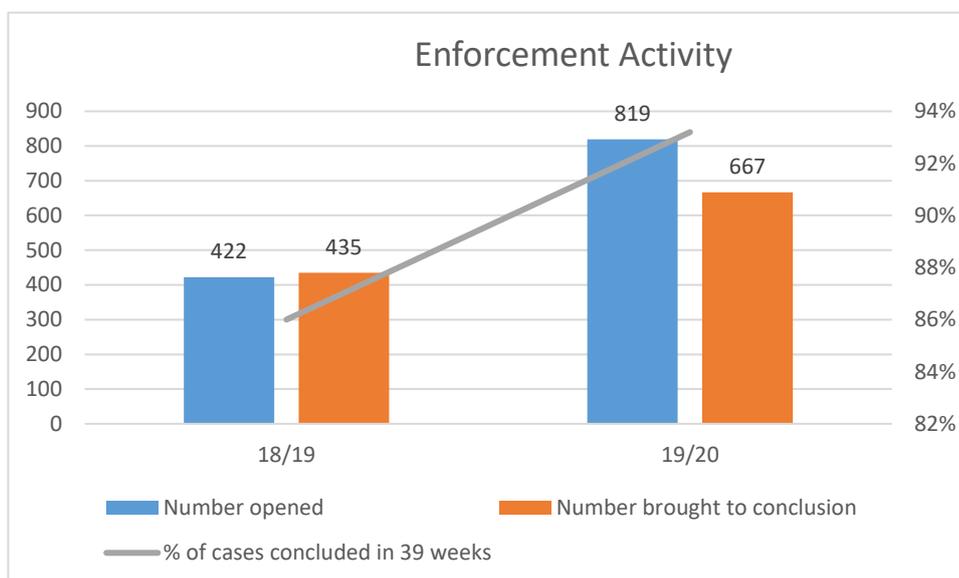
Appeals	New	Dismissed	Allowed	Split Decision	withdrawn
1 Apr to 31 Dec 2019	48	19	19	0	6

Up to 31 December 2019, 94 applications were refused planning permission, this is just over 7% of all applications decided. 48 new appeals have been submitted to the Planning Appeals Commission although it should be noted that as there is up to 4 months to submit an appeal the figures cannot be directly correlated. The number of appeals submitted is 19 more than the same period last year.

Up to 31 December there was a 50/50 split between appeal decisions allowed and dismissed. This is a higher than usual where it is expected that approx. 30% of appeals would be allowed. In accordance with the recommendations of the 2019 internal audit of the Planning Service, processes are being introduced to better understand appeal decisions so that lessons can be learned.

Compliance and Enforcement Activity

The Statutory target is that 70% of all enforcement cases are progressed to conclusion within 39 weeks of receipt of complaint.



The number of enforcement cases opened up to 31 December 2019 was 819 – an increase of 48% over the previous year.

The number of enforcement cases concluded during the period was 667, a 35% increase on the previous year.

Of the cases closed the two main reasons for closure were that no breach had occurred (23%) and that cases had been remedied or resolved. (51%). Eleven cases were immune from enforcement action, 97 cases subsequently granted planning permission and in 64 cases it was not considered expedient to pursue enforcement action as the breaches were considered minor in nature. There were 2 convictions relating to unauthorised advertisements that were not removed.

Up to 31 December 2019, 93% of enforcement cases reached conclusion within 39 weeks. This is 23% above statutory target.

Conclusion

Overall performance during this period is extremely positive with improvement across all areas. We are exceeding the statutory processing targets for both local applications and enforcement and while we are not yet meeting the performance target for processing major applications, overall performance has improved by 41 weeks, down from 78 to 37 weeks. We have also doubled the number of major decisions issued from 11 last year to 23 this period. Although performance continues to be impacted by overall relatively small numbers, longstanding applications, the finalisation of Section 76 Planning Agreements and delays from consultees, the improvements we have implemented to our Major application processes are clearly producing results and we fully expect this positive trend to continue as we project manage each application.

Another point to note is the significant increase in the number of "Other Development" applications submitted and subsequent increase in "Other Development" decisions. This work falls outside the statutory performance targets but currently make up over 42% of applications received. This is primarily due to the recently introduced HMO Licensing regime which requires confirmation that the use of any new HMO house is lawful in planning terms (CLUD). This trend is expected to continue over the next couple of years.

There has also been a significant increase in applications to Discharge conditions. This is viewed as a positive trend as developers move to implement planning approvals. It should be noted Discharge of Condition applications, and many forms of "Other Development" applications, do not attract a fee yet they cumulatively involve significant work. The Council is lobbying the Department for Infrastructure to introduce fees for those types of application.

Performance by statutory consultees remains a concern and we continue to engage locally and work with our consultees to ensure that all application but particularly major applications are not delayed because of this. In addition, and following a Departmental review into the planning system in Northern Ireland with particular focus on the role of statutory, a cross-government Planning Forum of senior leaders has now been established. The Department is also seeking to setup a Task and Finish Group to implement the recommendations of the review. We will ensure we are an active member of this group.

The Council has seen a significant rise in new enforcement complaints (up 48% over last year). The Council's planning enforcement function has recently been subject to an internal audit. The Planning Service will be working through its recommendations during the coming year with the aim of improving processes, communication with complainants and quality of customer service.

The role of a Planning Committee in Belfast City Council is a crucial one, as it is responsible for making considered decisions on significant, sometimes contentious planning applications. During this period the Committee has decided on a wide range of applications including over 1,100 residential units, 2 warehouse buildings, sport pitches, public realm improvements, student accommodation, restaurants, leisure facilities and telecommunication masts to name but a few.

The Planning Service is also updating its Improvement Plan, with many actions completed and new areas of work identified. This will be reported to the Planning Committee in the near future. One of the recommendations is to undertake a review of the Council's Planning Application Checklist, first published in November 2018, to understand what impact it has had on the quality of application submissions and processing times.

Recommendations

Recommendations arising from this performance report and ongoing improvement works are to:-

- Continue to monitor and report on performance to the Planning Committee;
- Continue to implement the updated Improvement Plan and Improvement Plan for Major planning applications;
- Continue to support the project to replace the NI Planning Portal;
- Review the Application Checklist to understand the impact it has had on the quality of planning applications and processing times;
- Implement the recommendations of the internal audit of planning enforcement; and
- Participate in the newly established regional forums to improve the role of statutory consultees in the planning application process.