

Oral Answers to NI Assembly Questions – Tuesday 11th May 2010

From <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/record/reports2009/100511.htm#5>

ENVIRONMENT

Planning Service: Staffing

1. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of the Environment how many jobs are likely to be lost as a result of the redeployment of Planning Service staff. (AQO 1203/10)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): The Department and its Planning Service are experiencing a difficult financial position in 2010-11, with a shortfall in the Planning Service budget of more than £8 million. A report has been prepared on how the Planning Service can live within its opening budget allocation. That report identifies 271 posts that are now considered surplus on account of affordability. I have considered the report and released it to the Committee for the Environment, TUS and all staff in the Department.

Today, senior staff from the Department are commencing a series of face-to-face briefings with staff in each Planning Service office. Before the formal process of redeploying staff in the Planning Service can commence, a number of stages must be completed, including consultation with the Committee for the Environment, DFP's corporate HR division, the TUS, affected staff, and other Departments that will be importing DOE staff. Now that I have considered the report prepared by the Department, the process will gain momentum.

The Northern Ireland Civil Service should be able to manage the workforce reductions in the Planning Service without the need for redundancies. Surplus staff will be redeployed to other suitable posts either in the Department, in so far as possible, or in another Department. The NICS has available a range of measures that are being used as required to help to minimise or avoid the need for redundancies.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Along with other members of the Committee for the Environment, I witnessed a presentation on this matter from Planning Service officials today. The picture that they and the trade union painted was of the Planning Service in crisis. We should be mindful that a fit-for-purpose Planning Service is needed if we are ever to get out of the present economic quagmire. Redeployments will undoubtedly lead to redundancies. Does the Minister recognise that a grave mistake has been made and that, in light of the fact that the decision will result in a Planning Service that is not fit for purpose and will lead to further crises affecting the economic recovery, the decision should be reviewed?

The Minister of the Environment: There is a difference between redeployments and redundancies, and, on Thursday 29 April, when Planning Service staff were protesting about redeployment, it was notable that 200 people in Quinn Insurance had just been told that they

were to be made redundant. There is a considerable difference between redeployment and redundancy. My prompt action will, as far as possible, protect staff against redundancy and ensure that people who work in the Northern Ireland Civil Service remain in it with the pay and conditions that they currently enjoy. In very difficult circumstances for all concerned, that is positive for individuals.

Mr Dallat: Of course we accept that there is a difference between redeployment and redundancy, and I wish good luck to the Quinn Insurance people who are losing their jobs. Nevertheless, many people in the Planning Service obtained academic qualifications and have a vocation to do what they do. Given that they are to be redeployed, is the Minister sure that adequate resources remain to ensure that another Audit Office report will not describe the Planning Service as not fit for purpose?

The Minister of the Environment: The Audit Office report was carried out with the staff in place. Consequently, we are seeking to challenge how the Planning Service has been doing things. We are introducing planning reform initiatives, and we want the Planning Service to work smarter than in the past. I have no apologies to make for wanting to drive through an agenda of change in planning, because such an agenda is absolutely necessary.

With respect to individuals with planning expertise who will be redeployed elsewhere, when the economy begins to recover and there is an upturn in planning applications, we intend to be in a position to offer planning jobs to those who wish to come back.

Therefore, we want to retain them in the Civil Service and to have the opportunity to avail ourselves of their planning skills in the future.

Mr T Clarke: I thank the Minister for the fact that we are looking at redeployment as opposed to redundancies. Given that a large number of planning applications are being held up under PPS 21, would bringing forward its review secure at least some of those Planning Service jobs for longer? Will the Minister update Members on why it is taking so long to review PPS 21?

The Minister of the Environment: The Planning Service has a deferred income. The more cases that are cleared, the more income there is — it is a chicken and egg situation. About £4.5 million in deferred income is outstanding.

I put PPS 21 to go before the Executive Committee at the end of last year. It is out of my hands and in the hands of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The First Minister has given it his clearance. The only thing holding back the putting in place of a better planning policy for rural dwellers is the deputy First Minister's office, and he can explain for himself why that is.

Planning Applications

3. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of the Environment what percentage of the target set for the processing of planning applications is currently being met by the Planning Service. (AQO 1205/10)

The Minister of the Environment: The Planning Service made significant improvement towards achieving public service agreement (PSA) and business plan targets. Statistics that were published for the third quarter up to December 2009 showed that the agency met and exceeded PSA 2011 and 2009-2010 agency business plan targets for processing intermediate applications — 79%, up from 65% in 2008-09. Minor applications stood at 81%, up from 68% in 2008-09. The service achieved 46% towards the major target of 50% of applications determined within 23 weeks, compared to 40.5% at the end of 2008-09. Early indications are that there has been continued improvement in the major category, which should be highlighted in the end-of-year position to be published in July this year.

Mr McCartney: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra.

I thank the Minister for his answer. In light of his earlier answer on the redeployment of staff, does he expect those percentages to increase or decrease as a result of redeployment?

The Minister of the Environment: I expect them to increase. I am demanding better service from the Planning Service because that is what the public demand. I know that staff will be under greater pressure, they will have to work harder and smarter, and all of that. That is what we expect of our public servants. This country is in a financial crisis. We have suffered the consequences of a global downturn. The public sector is not immune from that. Therefore, we must have higher expectations of everyone in the private and the public sector if we are all to see our way through and emerge from that crisis in better shape.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister advise Members whether all statutory agencies, such as the Environment Agency and Roads Service, are now delivering their responses to the Planning Service within the appropriate time frame?

The Minister of the Environment: Both agencies that were mentioned and others have considerably improved, but, in my opinion, they can improve further. So, yes, I will seek to put further pressure on those agencies to respond quicker. To turn the economy around and get the appropriate planning decisions out at an appropriate time, everyone will have to pull their weight including the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and Roads Service.

Written answers to Questions – Friday 14th May

From <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/qanda/2007mandate/writtenans/2009/100514.htm#7>

Planning Service Staff (AQW 6513/10)

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of the Environment how he plans to redeploy the technical staff who are included in the 269 Planning Service staff earmarked for redeployment.

Minister of the Environment: Technical staff identified as surplus will be offered the opportunity to be regraded and redeployed to another suitable discipline. It is expected that these posts will be mainly within the administrative grades. Initial redeployment will be within DOE after which staff will be made available to fill vacancies in other NICS Departments.

Planning Service Staff (AQW 6514/10)

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of the Environment (i) what discussions he has had with the Minister of Finance and Personnel in relation to the redeployment of 269 Planning Service staff; and (ii) what is the maximum number of redundancies that could arise as a result of redeployment.

Minister of the Environment: (i) Senior officials in my Department are engaged with the Department of Finance and Personnel in developing both a Regrading Scheme to enable Professional & Technical Planners to transfer voluntarily to the General Service discipline; and a Redeployment Scheme for all staff who become surplus which will create the opportunity for redeployment to vacancies in DOE and across the NICS.

(ii) The primary aim of management will be to ensure the absorption of surplus staff by means of redeployment either to other suitable posts in DOE or in another Department. It is expected that the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) should be able to manage the workforce reductions without the need for redundancies, although particular difficulties may arise in certain specialist grades or locations. The NICS has a range of pre-redundancy measures available which will be used, as required, to help minimise or avoid the need for redundancies. Trade Union Side is being consulted as appropriate.

Planning Service Staff (AQW 6516/10)

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of the Environment whether redeployed Planning Service staff will have to reapply for their jobs if the number of planning applications rises significantly.

Minister of the Environment: In developing the arrangements for the redeployment of professional planning staff to other duties in the NICS the department will seek to incorporate provisions that would enable those staff to be considered for future vacancies in planning.

Planning Applications (AQW 6517/10)

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications he has requested not to be processed due to the current economic climate.

Minister of the Environment: None. All planning applications are currently being progressed by Planning Service in line with its statutory obligations and Business Plan objectives.

About 2,500 planning applications are currently being held as deferred and are not being progressed awaiting the Executive's agreement on draft PPS21.

In addition there are about 1,500 major applications in the planning system longer than 12 months and approximately one third of these are not being effectively progressed because outstanding information is awaited from the applicants/agents, who, I understand, are finding

it difficult to provide this critically important information because of the additional financial implications during the current economic climate.

Planning Service Staff (AQW 6523/10)

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the criteria that will be used for the re-deployment of 270 Planning Service staff to other positions in the Civil Service.

Minister of the Environment: The department is approaching the redeployment of Planning Service staff in line with the standard terms and conditions for dealing with such situations in the NICS.

Redeployment will primarily be based on the need to retain those staff necessary to ensure key services to customers can be maintained and impact from the reduction in staff is minimised. The personal preferences of staff who volunteer for redeployment will be taken into account where possible. Random selection will be used only where no other option exists.

Planning Service Staff(AQW 6548/10)

Mr L Cree asked the Minister of the Environment (i) what action he intends to take in relation to the staffing levels of the Planning Service; and (ii) for his assessment of how this action will affect the career paths of planners and the transfer of planning functions to local authorities next year.

Minister of the Environment: The Department's Planning Service is experiencing a budgetary shortfall of just over £8m this year and cost reduction measures, which include a significant reduction in staffing numbers, are being considered. However, the Northern Ireland Civil Service should be able to manage the workforce reductions in the Planning Service through the redeployment of surplus staff either to other suitable posts in the DOE or in another NICS Department.

In relation to the career paths of specialist planners, where it is necessary to regrade and redeploy specialist planning staff to a general service post outside their professional discipline they can retain their planning status provided they can demonstrate 50 hours of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) over a 24 month period.

In this situation the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) would regard reading professional planning magazines or even working in a voluntary role with Planning Aid or attending a training course on a planning related issue as acceptable CPD.

In relation to the transfer of planning functions to local authorities, only staff in Planning Service at the time of transfer to local authorities will be in the affected group to transfer to the new employer. However, the Department will examine the scope for specialist planners to be considered for future vacancies in planning whether in central or local government.