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NISRA

Northern Ireland
Statistics and Research Agency

Gníomhaireacht Thuaisceart Éireann
um Staitisticí agus Taighde

Northern Ireland Planning Statistics

User Survey 2023 - Report



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Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Key Points | 4 |
| Introduction | 4 |
| Background to Planning Statistics | 5 |
| User Survey - 2023 | 5 |
| Methodology | 5 |
| Summary of Responses | 6 |
| Further Actions based on User Survey Results | 111 |
| Appendix 1 – User engagement Survey | 122 |

Key Points

The Northern Ireland (NI) Planning Statistics User Survey was setup on [NI Direct](#) and circulated by Analysis, Statistics and Research Branch (ASRB) with the Department of Infrastructure (DfI) to those listed on the readership list for the statistical product. Alongside this the survey was placed on the DfI website, the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) Facebook page, and X (formerly Twitter) by each organisation.

In total, twenty-two responses were received. These responses are summarised in this report, with the key findings presented below.

- NI local and central government are key users of NI Planning Statistics.
- NI Planning Statistics are primarily used in policy development/review and as general information.
- The majority of respondents access NI Planning Statistics through the DfI website link and the email circulated to the readership list.
- The top products fully or mostly meeting users' needs are the infographic, the statistical bulletin and the excel statistical tables.
- Almost half of respondents said that they agreed with the proposed change to the quarterly bulletin.
- Over three quarters of respondents stated that they would like to see planning statistics made available in a dashboard format.

Introduction

ASRB within DfI is responsible for producing and disseminating a range of official and National Statistics relating the Department's travel, transport and planning functions.

The [Code of Practice for Statistics](#) requires all producers of official statistics to ensure that the statistics service the public. The framework for this Code is based on three pillars (each containing several principles and detailed practices):

- Trustworthiness
- Quality; and
- Value.

'Value' means that the statistics and data are useful, accessible, relevant, and support understanding of important issues. Under this pillar, the 'Relevance to users' principle states that. 'Users of statistics and data should be at the centre of statistical production; their needs should be understood, their views sought and acted upon, and their use of statistics supported.' Further details of how ASRB work to meet the requirements of the Code can be found in their published [User Engagement Strategy](#).

This report presents the results from the Northern Ireland (NI) Planning Statistics user survey which was conducted over the summer 2023.

Background to Planning Statistics

The [NI Planning Statistics bulletin](#) is a national statistics publication produced by ASRB on a quarterly and annual basis. The publication presents a summary of NI planning volumes and processing information for councils and the Department for Infrastructure. The report provides an overall view of planning and enforcement activity across NI with some data series dating back to 2002/03; it also includes summary statistics on council progress since transfer of powers in 2015 and reports against the three statutory targets set out in the [Local Government \(Performance Indicators and Standards\) Order \(Northern Ireland\) 2015](#).

Provisional quarterly bulletins are published for the first three quarters of each financial year, with a final annual bulletin produced during June/July, immediately following the respective financial year.

User Survey - 2023

ASRB undertook a user survey to invite feedback on the NI Planning Statistics annual and quarterly official statistics publication; this was carried out during July and August 2023. The survey included questions on:

- Types of users.
- User needs, are needs being met?
- Accessibility of results / publication.
- Resources utilised by users.
- Proposal to change quarterly publication.
- Additional formats.

The survey was designed to gather information that would provide a greater understanding of who the users of the published data are; to find out what the information is primarily used for; what users reason of the range of data published; to gauge satisfaction with the content of the publication and possible future products; and to gather views on the proposal to change the quarterly publication.

The results from the survey will be used to review the content of the current publication and other related products and help identify areas where there is scope for improvement.

Methodology

ASRB maintain a readership list for planning statistics; each quarter this is used to circulate details of new publications. The readership list contains email addresses for approximately 180 users from various sectors including central government, local government, academia, business, media, voluntary sector and others. This list was used to issue a link for the user survey which was carried out through NI Direct Citizen Space. Furthermore, a reminder email was later issued.

It is important to note that this list does not contain details of all users of planning statistics; it only holds details of users who have opted to be included on the mailing list. Therefore, users that access information independently on the website would not be known to ASRB and have not been directly surveyed. To manage this DfI announced the survey on the DfI website, alongside placing it on x (formerly Twitter) and posting reminders. NISRA also placed the survey on its Facebook page and x account.

The results of this survey are the collective views of those who responded and should not be considered as representative of all users.

The user consultation opened on the 27 July 2023 and closed on the 31 August 2023.

In total, twenty-two responses were received. This report provides a summary of the responses received.

Summary of Responses

Users

The twenty-two respondents recorded the capacity in which they primarily use the statistics. Over half (55%) of respondents came from NI local government (7 responses; 32% of respondents) or central government (5; 23%) (Table 1).

Table 1: Respondents reported they primarily use the planning statistics as a member of:

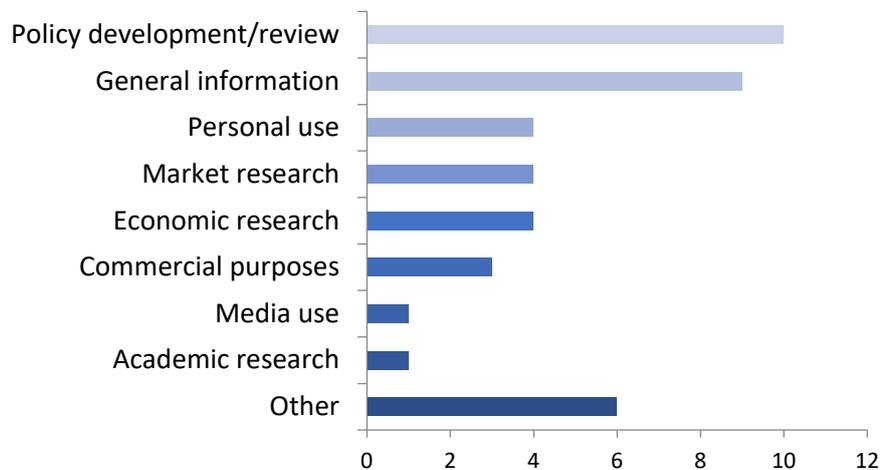
| Answer Option | Total | Percent |
|--------------------------------|-------|---------|
| NI central government | 5 | 23% |
| NI local government | 7 | 32% |
| Other public sector | 2 | 9% |
| The community/voluntary sector | 1 | 5% |
| Academia/research | 1 | 5% |
| The media | 0 | 0% |
| Private sector | 3 | 14% |
| The general public | 2 | 9% |
| Other | 1 | 5% |
| Not Answered | 0 | 0% |

Uses of planning statistics

The top two uses of planning statistics were reported to be 'Policy development/review' (10; 45%) and 'General information' (9; 41%). Four of the 6 respondents who selected 'Other' mentioned in a comment that they used the statistics to monitor performance. 'Market research', 'Economic research' and 'Personal use' received 4 responses each (18%) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Respondents reported that they use planning statistics for:

Note: Respondents could select more than one option.

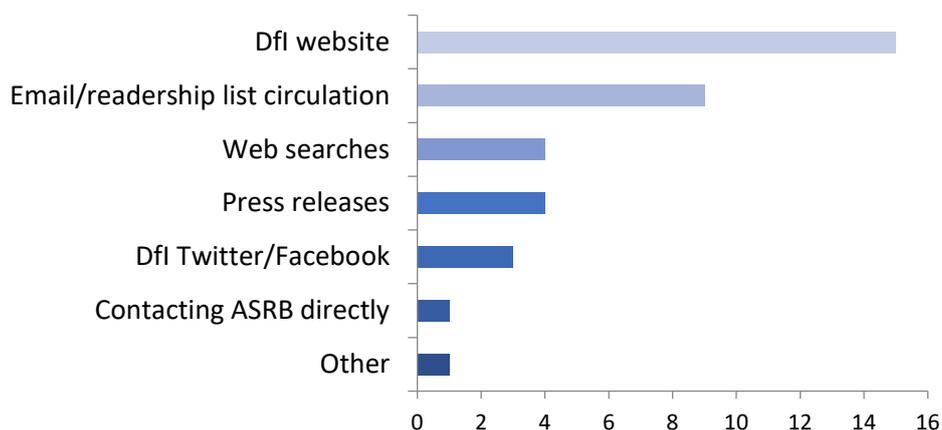


Accessing planning statistics

The majority of respondents stated that they accessed the statistics directly through the DfI website (15; 68%), while 41% (9) reported that they accessed through ‘Email/readership list circulation’. Among the other reported means of access were ‘Web searches’ (4, 18%), ‘Press releases’ (4, 18%) and ‘DfI Twitter/Facebook’ (3, 14%) (Figure 3).

Figure 2: How do you access NI Planning Statistics information?

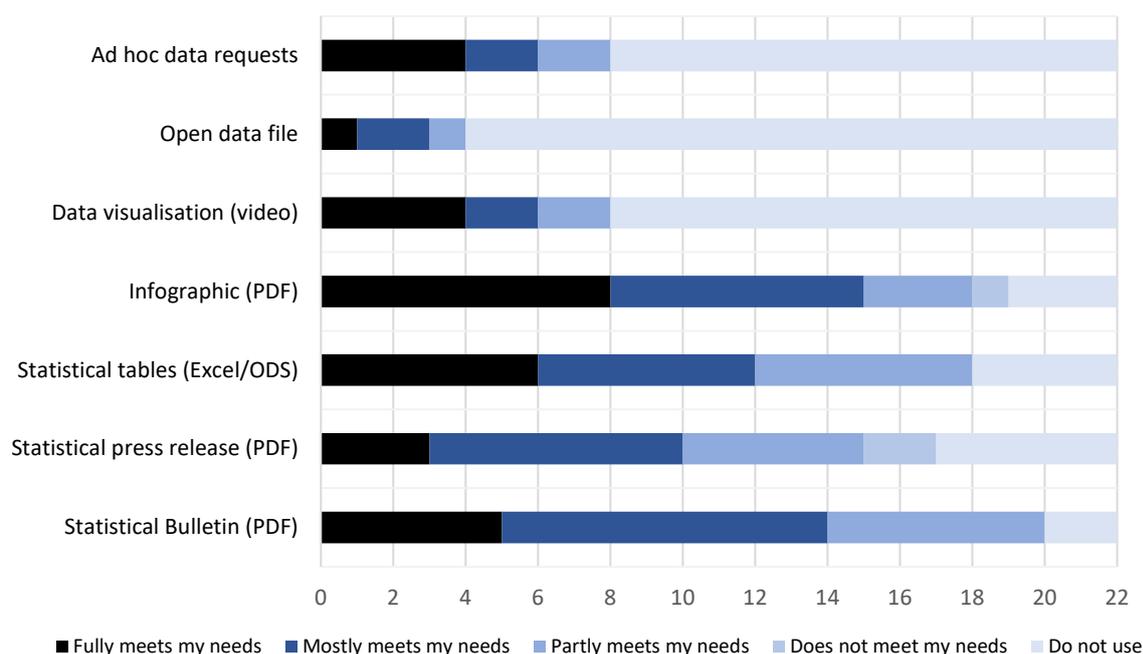
Note: Respondents could select more than one option.



Products

Planning statistics are made available through several different products including the statistical bulletin, press release, excel tables, infographic, video, open data file and ad hoc data requests. Users were asked, where applicable, how each of these resources met their needs (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Statistical products – meeting user needs



The top statistical products fully or mostly meeting user needs were reported to be the infographic (15; 68%), the statistical bulletin (14; 64%) and the tables (12; 55%).

The majority of respondents indicated that they did not use the open data file (18; 82%). Similarly, 64% of respondents (14) said that they did not use the data visualisation video, with the same number saying they did not use ad hoc data requests.

Proposed change to quarterly bulletin

In the consultation ASRB proposed to reduce the level of content published within the quarterly planning statistics bulletin. The proposal would change the format of the publication and focus content primarily on performance in relation to the three statutory targets; high level planning activity (applications received, decided, withdrawn) and the number of live applications. No change was being proposed to the excel tables, press release or data visualisation. Additionally, no change was proposed for the annual report.

Almost half of respondents (10; 45%) said that they agreed with the proposed change to the quarterly bulletin. Six respondents said that they were ‘Unsure’ (27%), with a further 6 reporting that they did not agree with the change (Table 2).

Table 2: Respondents view on the proposal to change the quarterly publication

| Option | Total | Percent |
|--------|-------|---------|
| Yes | 10 | 45% |
| No | 6 | 27% |
| Unsure | 6 | 27% |

Five of those who stated that they did not agree with the change left comments explaining their choice:

- *“The overall statistics are very useful, particularly the breakdown across councils, the residential information provided under development type and the renewable energy statistics which will become increasingly important with the new Energy Strategy and in the context of climate change. It is not clear if the current information on development types - particularly residential and urban and rural information and renewable energy statistics, is proposed to be removed. If so, this would be disappointing and a big loss as this information has proved invaluable to be able to call on this information for various reasons.”*

Response: Some high-level information will be retained in the infographic and Chapter 1 of the bulletin. All the data will remain in the data tables that accompany the bulletin.

- *“By not publishing the full detail of performance, there is the potential for the misuse and misinterpretation of information.”*

Response: The change will impact on the statistical bulletin only. All data as previously published will remain in the data tables.

- *“Planning has a significant impact on the environment. As much detail is required as the public need to ascertain overturns at committee stage.”*

Response: The change will impact on the statistical bulletin only. All data as previously published will remain in the data tables. The [NI Planning Monitoring Framework](#) which provides some detail on planning committee overturns will remain unchanged.

- *“The other analysis regarding numbers and types of applications are also helpful (major/local/residential /renewable energy etc). Video and bulletin are particularly helpful.”*

Response: The change will impact the statistical bulletin only. All data previously published will remain in the data tables and there will be no change to the video.

- *“Unless the statistical tables behind the table remain available.”*

Response: The proposal states that there would be no change to the data tables; however, to ensure that all figures previously reported within the bulletin is directly available from the data tables, the tables will be enhanced to include percentage change values over the most recent quarter and year.

Only one of the 6 users who selected 'Unsure' left a comment.

- *“Provided the excel tables are provided as is, this change will not represent a difficulty.”*

Response: The tables are being retained and enhanced – see response above.

Ten agreed with the proposal to change, with four commenting.

- *“Consider that the quarterly bulletins could be shorter and more focused. When the quarterly bulletin is rationalised - it may also be worth considering whether the annual publication could also be rationalised, albeit not to the same degree.”*

Response: This will be considered in the future, however before any change would take place ASRB would engage with users.

- *“We are content with the streamlining of the statistics provided that they focus on the right things. It’s also useful to benchmark performance against other councils with a view to understanding where improvement can be focused. The statistics are very high level and are somewhat limited in terms of what they capture. The focus on average processing times for Major and Local applications only tells part of the story. For example, there should be greater publicity and more focus on the % of applications that approved - planning often gets a very negative press that its overly negative when it comes to decision making, yet the reality is that a very high proportion of applications are approved. There should also be greater focus on the quantitative outcomes of the planning process. It is also important to highlight the performance of statutory consultees as they are an integral part of the planning process, and this provides context to overall performance of the system.”*

Response: Data on number of applications received, decided, approved, approval rates and processing times will be available from the published data tables. This information can be used alongside other planning information to provide a fuller report on planning performance at a regional/local level. DfI publish information on statutory consultation in the [‘Oversight and Performance Monitoring’](#) section of the website.

- *“I would welcome the Department reporting their own performance in addition it would assist in transparency the following matters being reported. Successful PAC determinations. The turnaround time of the PAC. Statutory consultation response times.”*

Response: Departmental performance is reported in section 2 of the [data tables](#). Some detail on planning appeals is available from the [NI Planning Monitoring Framework](#); with other detail available from the [Planning Appeals Commission \(PAC\)](#) website and [annual reports](#). DfI publish information on statutory consultation in the [‘Oversight and Performance Monitoring’](#) section of the website.

- *“In providing statistics it is important to provide some local context. There is a tendency for Councils to be ranked and compared which is understandable but not so when local circumstances in terms of for example resources, schemes of delegation etc... are so very different. Whilst intention to streamline statistics is noted, more regular information on Appeals outcomes would be of some assistance internally.”*

Response: The statistical bulletin provides details primarily on the range data, reporting the highest and lowest values. This is not intended to be interpreted as ranking for league table purposes, but it is to show the range of values for a particular piece of information. In the statistical bulletin ranking is discouraged and it is noted that data should be used with caution when comparing with other geographies due to various local factors influencing data. Some detail on planning appeals is available from the [NI Planning Monitoring Framework](#); with other detail available from the [Planning Appeals Commission \(PAC\) website](#) and [annual reports](#).

Other formats

Seventeen of the 22 respondents (77%) stated that they would like to see planning statistics made available in a dashboard format. Five (23%) expressed interest in HTML reporting. Two respondents selected ‘Other’, with their comments indicating that they were content with the current products.

Further Actions based on User Survey Results

ASRB is committed to continuous engagement with customers and users to ensure that the statistics and analyses produced meet their needs; and to enable our customers and users to inform future priorities, plans and outputs. ASRB extend thanks to all who took the time to complete the user survey and provide valuable feedback. The actions informed by this survey that ASRB plan to take forward are listed below.

- Reduce the content of quarterly Statistical Bulletin focussing primarily on the three legislative targets and high-level planning activity. **Plan to implement October 2023.**
- Enhance data tables to include percentage change over the latest quarter and year. This ensures that all figures that were previously reported within the bulletin are available directly from the published tables. **Plan to implement October 2023.**
- Carry out a user survey again in 2025. **Planned for Summer/Autumn 2025.**
- Continue to engage with users, being mindful of their needs. Consider/implement where possible/viable improvements to statistical reporting. **Ongoing.**
- Consider developing / implement as resource permits dashboard to report planning statistics. **To be considered and scheduled into work programme.**
- Develop planning statistics bulletin to reported in html format as resource permits. **This area of work will be ongoing.**

Appendix 1 – User engagement Survey

Background

The Department for Infrastructure's Analysis, Statistics and Research Branch (ASRB) publish the Northern Ireland Planning Statistics which provide an overview of planning activity in Northern Ireland, as well as a summary of individual council activity.

Provisional quarterly bulletins are published for the first three quarters of each financial year, with a final annual bulletin produced during June, immediately following the respective financial year.

Why your views matter

ASRB are proposing to reduce the content of the quarterly bulletin and are interested in understanding more about users' views on the quality of the publication and how it is used. This is important, as it will help us continue to develop and provide a high quality service which meets users' needs.

Your views are very important to us and we thank you in advance for taking part in this survey. It should only take five minutes to complete.

If you have any queries please contact us at: ASRB@nisra.gov.uk

User information

1. Please complete the following statement: I primarily use these statistics as a member of:

(Required)

- NI central government
- NI local government
- Other public sector
- The community/voluntary sector
- Academia/research
- The media
- Private sector
- The general public
- Other

If 'other', please specify below:

2. What do you use the Northern Ireland Planning Statistics for? (please select all that apply)

(Required)

- Policy development/review
- Academic research
- Market research
- Economic research
- Media use
- Commercial purposes
- Personal use
- General information
- Other

If 'other', please specify below:

3. How do you access Northern Ireland Planning Statistics information? (please select all that apply)

(Required)

- Web searches
- DfI website
- Email/readership list circulation
- DfI Twitter/Facebook
- NISRA Twitter/Facebook
- Press releases
- Hard copy printed documents
- Contacting ASRB directly
- Open Data NI
- Other

If 'other', please specify below:

Meeting user needs

4. The Northern Ireland Planning Statistics are provided in the various formats listed below. Where applicable, to what extent does each source meet your needs? (Required)

| | Fully meets my needs | Mostly meets my needs | Partly meets my needs | Does not meet my needs | Do not use |
|--|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|------------|
| Statistical bulletin (PDF) | | | | | |
| Statistical press release (PDF) | | | | | |
| Statistical tables (Excel/ODS) | | | | | |
| Infographic (PDF) | | | | | |
| Data visualisation (video) | | | | | |
| Open data file (available on Open Data NI) | | | | | |
| Ad hoc data requests | | | | | |

Please provide any further comments you have in relation to your answer(s) above.

ASRB are proposing to reduce the level of content published within the quarterly planning statistics bulletin. The proposal is to change the format of the publication and focus content primarily on performance in relation to the three statutory targets; high level planning activity (applications received, decided, withdrawn) and the number of live applications.

This change to the quarterly bulletin would provide space for staff to explore and develop more innovative ways for the future reporting of planning statistics. No change is being proposed to the excel tables, press release or data visualisation. Additionally, no change is proposed for the annual report.

We would welcome users' views on this proposal.

5. Do you agree with this proposal for change? (Required)

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

If no, please provide details of how this reduction in content would impact on you/your organisation.

Please provide any further comments you have in relation to this proposal.

6. As we move forward would you like to see planning statistics made available in any of the following ways?

- Dashboard
- HTML reporting
- Other

If 'other', please specify below:

Further comments

7. Is there anything else you could add which you feel might help to improve the Northern Ireland Planning Statistics?

Thank you for your response.