

2021

Northern Ireland Planning Statistics – Quality Assurance of Administrative Data Sources

This quality report assesses the administrative source used by Analytical Statistics and Research Branch (ASRB) within the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) to produce Northern Ireland Planning Statistics. It provides links to the source provider, information on the quality assurance and audit arrangements for all the administrative data sources used in the production of planning statistics. It also assesses the risk of data quality concerns and the public interest profile of the statistics produced.



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Northern Ireland Planning Statistics – Quality Assurance of Administrative Data Sources

Summary

ASRB, DfI, carried out a quality assessment of the Applications and Enforcements modules within the Northern Ireland Planning Portal application. These are the administrative data sources which are used to produce the Northern Ireland Planning Statistics.

The assessment found that the level of risk of quality concerns in this source is low and that the public interest is low which suggests that the appropriate level of assurance required for these statistics is **A1 - Basic Assurance**. Full details are reported below.

Introduction

In 2015 the UK Statistics Authority published a [regulatory standard for the quality assurance of administrative data](#). The standard was developed in response to concerns about the quality of administrative data and in recognition of the increasing role that such data is playing in the production of official statistics. The standard encourages risk based judgements and supports a proportionate approach.

The standard is supported with an [Administrative Data Quality Assurance Toolkit](#) which provides useful guidance to statistical producers about the practices they can adopt to assure the quality of the data they utilise.

In accordance with this toolkit, ASRB have carried out a quality assurance of administrative data (QAAD) assessment on the Northern Ireland Planning Portal (NIPP) application – the administrative data source used to produce the Northern Ireland Planning Statistics.

QAAD assessment of Northern Ireland Planning Portal

This assessment of the NIPP as an administrative data source has been carried out in accordance with the [UK Statistics Authority Quality Assurance of Administrative Data \(QAAD\) Toolkit](#).

The administrative data source investigated has been evaluated according to the toolkit's risk and profile matrix (Figure 1) reflecting the level of risk to data quality and the public interest profile of the statistics.

Figure 1: UK Statistics Authority quality assurance of administrative data (QAAD) risk and profile matrix

Level of risk of quality concerns	Public interest profile		
	Lower	Medium	Higher
Low	Statistics of lower quality concern and lower public interest [A1]	Statistics of low quality concern and medium public interest [A1/A2]	Statistics of low quality concern and higher public interest [A1/A2]
Medium	Statistics of medium quality concern and lower public interest [A1/A2]	Statistics of medium quality concern and medium public interest [A2]	Statistics of medium quality concern and higher public interest [A2/A3]
High	Statistics of higher quality concern and lower public interest [A1/A2/A3]	Statistics of higher quality concern and medium public interest [A3]	Statistics of higher quality concern and higher public interest [A3]

Note: A1 to A3 = Levels of assurance in the QA matrix

Source: UK Statistics Authority, [UK Statistics Authority Quality Assurance of Administrative Data \(QAAD\) Toolkit](#)

The toolkit outlines four practice areas associated with data quality. These are detailed in Table 1:

Table 1: UK Statistics Authority toolkit four practice areas associated with data quality

Operational context & admin data collection	Communication with data supply partners	QA principles, standards and checks by data suppliers	Producers' QA investigations & documentation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • environment and processes for compiling the administrative data • factors which affect data quality and cause bias • safeguards which minimise the risks • role of performance measurements and targets; potential for distortive effects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • collaborative relationships with data collectors, suppliers, IT specialists, policy and operational officials • formal agreements detailing arrangements • regular engagement with collectors, suppliers and users 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • data assurance arrangements in data collection and supply • quality information about the data from suppliers • role of operational inspection and internal/external audit in data assurance process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QA checks carried out by statistics producer • quality indicators for input data and output statistics • strengths and limitations of the data in relation to use explanation for users about the data quality and impact on the statistics

Source: UK Statistics Authority, [UK Statistics Authority Quality Assurance of Administrative Data \(QAAD\) Toolkit](#)

This report considers these four practice areas and outlines the process taken from initial collection of information through to the publication of the statistical release. It identifies potential risks in data quality and accuracy as well as details of how those risks are mitigated.

Data supplier

Northern Ireland Planning Portal (NIPP).

Operational context and administrative data collection

The 1931 Planning and Housing Act (NI) was the first piece of planning legislation in Northern Ireland. Planning functions were the responsibility of the 37 local government areas consisting of County Borough Councils, County Councils, and Borough and Urban District Councils. Subsequently the 1944 Planning (Interim Development) Act (Northern Ireland) gave an important statutory baseline to the development control system.

Following the 1970 Macrory Commission review of local government, planning became a central government responsibility under the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1972. The Town and Country Planning Service was established in 1973 within the Ministry of Development and then within the Department of Housing, Local Government and Planning before being absorbed into the Department which became the sole planning authority in Northern Ireland responsible under the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 for planning matters.

The most recent reform of the planning system in Northern Ireland is set within the context of local government reform which saw responsibility for the majority of planning functions move from the Department to the new 11 councils in April 2015. Local representatives became the decision takers on the majority of planning applications and set the context for these decisions through their local development plan functions. Central government also has a new role to play in the oversight of a two-tier system of planning.

[The Planning Act \(NI\) 2011](#) received Royal Assent on 4 May 2011 and it provided for the transfer of the majority of planning functions from central government to district councils on 01 April 2015. It also brings forward a number of reforms to the planning system.

The planning system makes sure the right things are built in the right places, be it houses, shops, parks, community centres or energy plants. But it is also about the ability to shape and change the

character, look and feel of the places where we live, work or visit. Responsibility for planning in Northern Ireland is shared between the [11 local councils](#) and the [Department for Infrastructure \(Dfi\)](#).

The councils are responsible for:

- Local development planning – creating a plan which will set out a clear vision of how the council area should look in the future by deciding what type and scale of development should be encouraged and where it should be located;
- Development management – determining the vast majority of planning applications;
- Planning enforcement – investigating alleged breaches of planning control and determining what action should be taken.

Dfi is responsible for:

- Determination of regionally significant and ‘called-in’ planning applications;
- Regional Development Strategy (RDS);
- Regional planning policy;
- Planning legislation;
- Performance management;
- Oversight and guidance for councils.

At present a unitary administrative system (NIPP) is used by the Department and councils to record details of planning applications and enforcements that are received. NI Planning Statistics use data from the Applications and Enforcements modules from this unitary system. These modules of the NIPP hold information on all NI planning application activity (applications received, application status, decisions issued, etc.) and planning enforcement activity.

Data Type

Unit - Individual records of planning applications and enforcement activity.

Data Content

ASRB run extracts from the NIPP to obtain planning applications and enforcement data. The planning applications extract contains details of all live applications in the system, details of applications that have been created / updated during a specific time period (e.g. Received, decided or withdrawn). The enforcement extract contains details of all live enforcements in the system alongside details of enforcement cases that were opened, closed, concluded or where court action was taken.

Data Supply

Statistical staff within ASRB have an internal link that enables them to run extracts from the NIPP independently. This is supported by Digital Services Branch (DSB) staff within the Department.

ASRB notify planning authorities (11 councils and Dfi – the data suppliers) in advance of the dates they plan to lift extracts on.

Use of Data

ASRB use the data extracted from the planning portal to produce national planning statistics for Northern Ireland. A publication is then published which reports on planning activity across NI. Since the 1st April 2015 (following the transfer of planning powers out to councils) this report also provides summary statistical information on council progress across the three statutory targets for major development applications, local development applications and enforcement cases. The publication also provides information relating to Departmental performance against the quantitative Corporate Business Plan Target.

Information is published quarterly primarily at NI level with further breakdowns at council, parliamentary constituency and urban/rural levels.

Information relating to number of planning applications received, decisions issued, withdrawals and processing times is contained within published data.

The publication is highly relevant to internal policy customers and councils. Standards set out in the [Local Government \(Performance Indicators and Standards\)' Order \(NI\) 2015](#) are monitored through this publication.

In terms of external users the information published is regularly referred to in local newspapers (generally immediately after new information is released). At an overall level there is limited media interest, mainly at a localised level, with interest limited to a niche user base. For example the information is used by planning staff when reporting to their respective council committees. The statistics produced are not considered to be economically sensitive.

As the producers of the statistics ASRB meet regularly with key users of the statistics, and also meet occasionally with Heads of Planning and other users to get feedback on the information provided, as well as periodically attending Strategic Planning Group to detail any new developments. [Minutes](#) of meetings held with DfI key users are published following each meeting. ASRB also carried out an informal [key user survey during Summer 2019](#) to seek the feedback of both internal and external users and their needs. For general ad hoc/bespoke customers, ASRB engage when providing a query response by including a link to a [short survey](#) welcoming their feedback on the service provided. Results to this survey are collated and analysed on a quarterly basis.

From the transfer of planning powers from the 1st April 2015 the planning publication was revised to incorporate reporting on the three new targets. Over time there has been a number of additional outputs included to meet user needs, e.g. legacy applications information, variation of urban/rural splits and processing times across the suite of data tables. Some of this is informed by face to face contact with users but much is also informed through frequent requests for information.

A [Planning Monitoring Framework](#) has been developed by DfI in collaboration with local planning authorities, and has been informed by best practice in other jurisdictions. The framework includes a list of nine indicators, some of which are new and have not been reported on before. Seven of the indicators draw on data from the NIPP, with three directly relating to the statutory targets reported in the existing NI Planning Statistics publication.

See publications at: [DfI Planning Statistics](#).

Data Source Information

The NIPP system is used by the councils and the Department to process planning applications and consents, enforcement cases, property certificates, tree preservation orders etc. The system came into operation in 2010 when the Department was the sole planning authority for NI and is reaching the end of its operational life. The current system is coming to end of contract and procurement for a new system concluded with the Department and ten councils awarding a contract for a new regional planning IT system in 2020. It is expected that this new system will go live in 2022. Relevant updates on the development of this new system and any potential impacts on statistical reporting will be included within future NI Planning Statistics publications. Currently the project is at too early a stage to include any further information on potential impacts to NI Planning Statistics. ASRB have been involved in this process to date and will work closely with relevant suppliers to ensure that any new system continues to meet the existing requirements of the NI Planning Statistics. This will involve ASRB playing a role in data testing and transfer to any new system.

Alongside this one council has chosen to move forward independently and develop their own system. ASRB have held initial discussions with this council and will continue to engage to try and ensure that this system continues to meet the existing requirements of the NI Planning Statistics. Again it is too early to include any further information on potential impacts to NI Planning Statistics but any relevant updates will be included within future NI Planning Statistics publications.

The current system is vast and has many guidance documents for those imputing data and working through the planning process. Guidance is also provided for end users that make use of the public access system.

Communication with Data Supply Partners

Until 31 March 2015 the Department of Environment were the data owners however ownership changed from the 1st April 2015 when planning powers transferred to councils (under the Planning Act (NI) 2011). Since that point there have been data share agreements in place between the ASRB, DfI and the councils to continue the extraction of planning data from the NIPP for agreed purposes.

Statistical staff within ASRB have an internal link that enables them to run extracts from the NIPP independently. This is supported by DSB staff within the Department.

Where an anomaly arises ASRB scope out the details of the requirement and raise an internal service request which is directed to the relevant DSB staff to take forward. Statisticians and DSB staff then take forward together to agree and implement the changes required. The NIPP is a unitary system and is currently maintained within DfI; statisticians are kept updated via relevant user groups of changes to the system. It is identified that going forward processes will change to manage data coming from two new systems (in 2022). As these changes come into place process documentation and guidance will be updated to reflect the new communication procedures.

Quality Assurance Principles, Standards and Checks Applied by Data Supplier

Paper applications are received by planning authorities. They are then keyed onto the portal through 'e-forms' which ask a series of questions to ensure the applications are given the correct classifications and fields are completed uniformly and consistently.

The applications then go to a validation work queue – this is the step to ensure that the legislative requirements are met for an application to be deemed valid. Once the application is deemed valid it moves to a more senior member of the planning team for allocation to case officers. Each case officer within the planning authority will have an allocation work queue listing the applications they are responsible for. The case officer is responsible for taking applications through the planning process to decision.

The system has a number of management information reports to enable oversight of data and to identify any quality issues, for example 10% quality checks on applications and fees allocated.

Over time the system has been subject to changes to keep in line with legislation and policy changes. For example the reclassification of applications. These changes are handled by the portal contractor and relevant internal DSB staff and are fully tested outside of the portal prior to being implemented.

Whilst the overarching processing of a planning application / enforcement will remain with two new systems phasing into operation in 2022, it is recognised that processes and methods may change. Any changes and impacts on quality assurance will be fully considered, kept under review and this document will be updated to ensure users are aware.

Producer's quality assurance investigations and documentation

Data acquisition from the NIPP is smooth and is normally without issue. There is DSB support available if any problems are encountered.

When extracts are downloaded a number of validation checks are carried out on the data to ensure that the data looks sensible and can be relied upon. Each quarter when running through the setup stage of the process, values are recorded relating to key pieces of information i.e. received, decided, approved, live etc. During these stages it can be quickly recognised if something appears amiss. There is also a number of sense checks completed to ensure data are reliable and anything that needs queried is raised with the relevant planning authority. During the setup phase of each quarter the main checks are (i) analysis of trends for figures; (ii) checking internal consistency and reliability of the data.

In addition on a monthly basis ASRB produce headline summary files to measure performance for the three statutory targets at Northern Ireland and council levels. A number of validation checks are carried out to ensure dates are accurate and the required pieces of information are completed. There are numerous checks carried out to ensure the key dates in the system are logical. ASRB directly work through any anomalies with council and Departmental staff.

Data is validated and edited outside of the NIPP by ASRB using primarily SPSS and Microsoft Excel. Some manual checks are required which introduces minimal risks to quality and validation of the data. Additional validation checks continue to be built in where a need is identified.

New or amended processes will most likely be required once the new portal systems are introduced. Currently it is too early to ascertain what that might entail but all surrounding documentation will be updated as and when there is more clarity.

Strengths of Data Source

- Data is extracted from the live system.
- Planning data is derived from an internal administrative system which has established procedures to ensure data are of good quality. However this unitary system is due to be replaced with two systems, one covering eleven planning authorities and one for a sole planning authority. There is some potential risk to the planning data required for the production of planning statistics as change takes place between the existing and new systems. However given the early stages of development of the new systems, the level of risk noted in this QAAD is low but this will be kept under review as the new systems develop.
- There is an public facing planning portal which provides the majority of the pieces of information that are included in the extracts ASRB take; therefore alongside system validation there is an element of public validation which increases the robustness of the data.
- The information reported is a census of planning applications in Northern Ireland.
- Each application is input onto the system and goes through a number of validation questions to ensure it is allocated to the appropriate categories.
- Standard classifications used
- All of the information is coming from the one system. This will change with the adoption of two systems in 2022. An assessment of the impact in terms of the strengths and weakness of the data sources will be carried out once this is known.
- There is no hard cost to ASRB for obtaining the data.
- ASRB are confident the data is of good quality.
- Data have co-ordinates which enables geographical outputs to be produced.
- Planning authorities work closely with ASRB resulting in quick resolution of any issues that may impact on data quality.

Weaknesses of Data Source

- It is a live system so data published are at point and time.
- With so many users updating the system there is scope for error and carrying processes out differently within and across planning authorities. However in terms of date received, date valid, decision and withdrawal dates for planning applications and open, closed and concluded dates for enforcement cases there is minimal scope for error. ASRB also mitigate some of this with the depth of validation that is carried out on dates during their validation processes.
- As above, the current system is approaching the end of its lifespan and, while that has no current impact on its strengths, the level of risk will be kept closely under review.

Assessment of Level of Assurance Requirements

ASRB assess that the level of risk of quality concerns in this source is low at present and that the public interest is low. This suggests that the appropriate level of assurance required for these statistics is **A1 - Basic Assurance**.

- This means that ASRB have used the QA toolkit and have reviewed the administrative source and published a summary in this document.
- ASRB came to this decision as the counts of planning applications and enforcements are considered robust, but at published levels are of limited public interest.
- ASRB will continue to assess the level of assurance and update if necessary. For example, with system replacement due it will be important to review the data source once any new systems are implemented.

ASRB do recognise that as the development of the new planning systems progress the level of risk quality concerns will likely rise. ASRB therefore plan to review the QAAD on a bi-annual basis to ensure that the assessment of the level of assurance requirements is accurate and up-to-date. The next review is scheduled for July 2022, by which point ASRB should be working with outputs from the new planning systems and reviewing/reworking the data processes to extract and process data.

NISRA assessment of User Needs

This administrative source is a list of planning applications and enforcements across NI and is considered to be of high quality. In addition to the system processes ASRB carry out additional validation checks which increases the robustness of the data. Although there are some weaknesses in terms of using a live system and scope for unit level information to change ASRB consider that the data is fit-for-purpose as these changes would have minimal impact at the aggregate level which the data are published at.

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Next review due: July 2022