

NORTHERN IRELAND PLANNING STATISTICS

User Survey 2019



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Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at ASRB@nisra.gov.uk.

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Key Points

The Northern Ireland (NI) Planning Statistics User Survey was circulated to those listed on the live readership list for the statistical product. In total, twenty-three responses were received. These responses are summarised in this report, with the key findings presented below.

- NI local government (50%) and NI central government (32%) are key users of NI Planning Statistics.
- NI Planning Statistics are primarily used in briefings (59%), as general information (55%), for policy related work (50%) and to monitor performance (27%).
- The majority of users (68%) 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 Excel statistical tables, the infographic, responses to ad-hoc requests and the statistical bulletin.
- Usage of the open data set and information placed on NINIS was low amongst respondents.

Introduction

Analysis, Statistics and Research Branch (ASRB) within the Department for Infrastructure (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 a number of 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 2019.

Background to Planning Statistics

The planning system in NI has undergone a period of considerable change in recent years. Under the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, from 1st April 2015 the majority of planning functions were devolved from the former Department of the Environment¹ to 11 newly re-organised councils².

The [NI Planning Statistics bulletin](#) is an official 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](#).

¹ Note that from 8th May 2016, Ministerial responsibility for planning transferred from the former Department of the Environment to the newly-formed Department for Infrastructure following departmental re-organisation.

² There are currently 12 planning authorities in Northern Ireland – the Department for Infrastructure and the 11 councils (local planning authorities).

User Survey – 2019

ASRB undertook a user survey³ to invite feedback on the NI Planning Statistics annual and quarterly official statistics publication; this was carried out during July and August 2019. The survey included questions on:

- Types of users;
- User needs; are needs being met?
- Accessibility of results / publication;
- Resources utilised by users.

The survey was designed to gather information on how users were made aware of the publication; to 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 think of the range of data published; and to gauge satisfaction with the content of the publication and other products.

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

The survey link was issued via an email on 5th July 2019 to all customers/users listed on the readership list and the survey remained open for a number of weeks, with a follow-up reminder issued.

Due to the design and content of the survey some responses were incomplete, therefore base numbers detailing the actual number of responses to each question are noted alongside the graphical information presented. As such, the percentages reported may be based on differing base numbers. In addition given the small base numbers involved, percentages should be treated with a degree of caution.

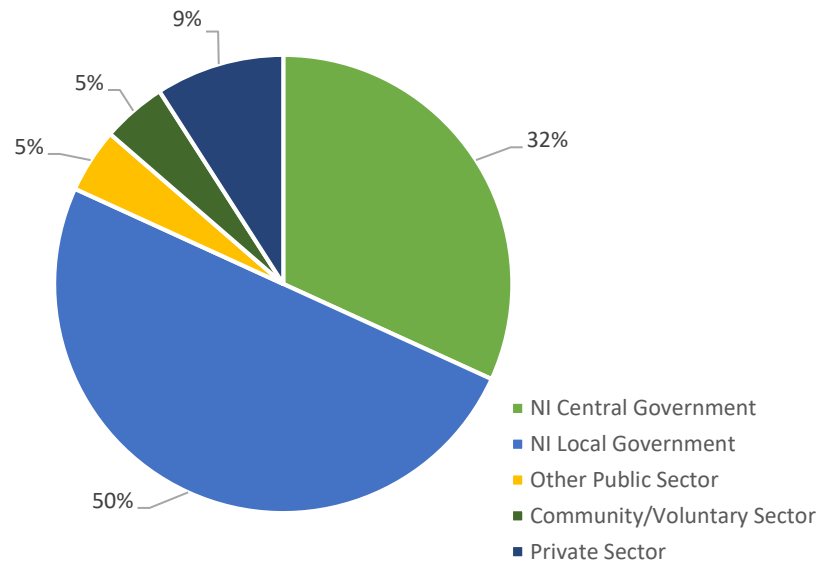
In total, twenty-three responses were received. This report provides a summary of the responses received.

³ See Appendix 1 for full user survey

Users

Twenty-two respondents recorded the capacity in which they primarily use the statistics. The majority of responses came from local (50%: 11) or central government (32%: 7). The remaining responses were from the private (2), community/voluntary (1) and other public sectors (1) (Fig.1).⁴

Figure 1: Respondents reported they primarily use the planning statistics as a member of:
(22 responses)



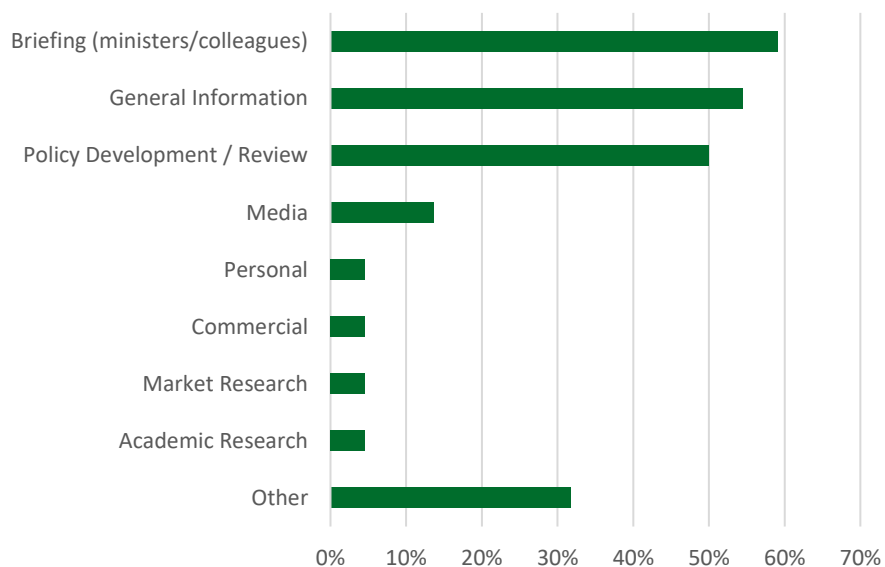
⁴ Note: no responses were received for: academia/research; the media; the general public; and 'other'.

Use of Planning Statistics

The top three uses of planning statistics were reported to be briefing ministers or colleagues (59% of respondents: 13 responses); for general information purposes (55% of respondents: 12 responses) and for policy development/review (50% of respondents: 11 responses). Nearly a third of respondents (32%:7 responses) reported 'other' use, with six (27% of all respondents) reporting this 'other' use to be monitoring performance (Fig.2).⁵

Figure 2: Respondents reported that they use planning statistics for:

(22 respondents – 50 responses)⁶



⁵ Note: no responses were received for Economic research.

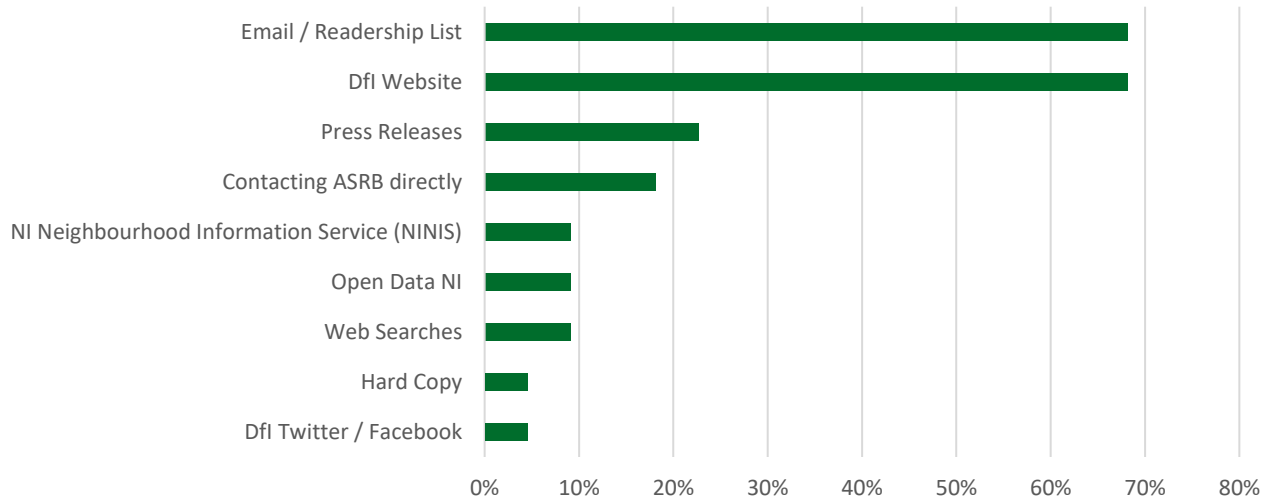
⁶ Respondents were able to select more than one option for this question.

Accessing Planning Statistics

The most common methods of accessing planning statistics were through the [DfI website](#) and the email/readership circulation email, with a majority of respondents selecting each option (68% of respondents: 15 responses). Eighteen percent of respondents (4) reported that they contact the branch directly for information (Fig.3).⁷

Figure 3: How do you access NI Planning Statistics information?

(22 respondents – 47 responses)⁸



⁷ Note: no responses were received for: NISRA Twitter / Facebook or 'other'.

⁸ Respondents were able to select more than one option for this question.

Products

Information relating to planning statistics is made available through a number of different products. The main products produced by ASRB are the [quarterly / annual statistical bulletin](#), the accompanying [press release, infographic and Excel tables](#), and an [annual open data](#) file. Information is also placed on the [Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service \(NINIS\)](#) and customers can directly make ad-hoc requests to ASRB. Customers were asked, where applicable, how each of these resources met their needs.

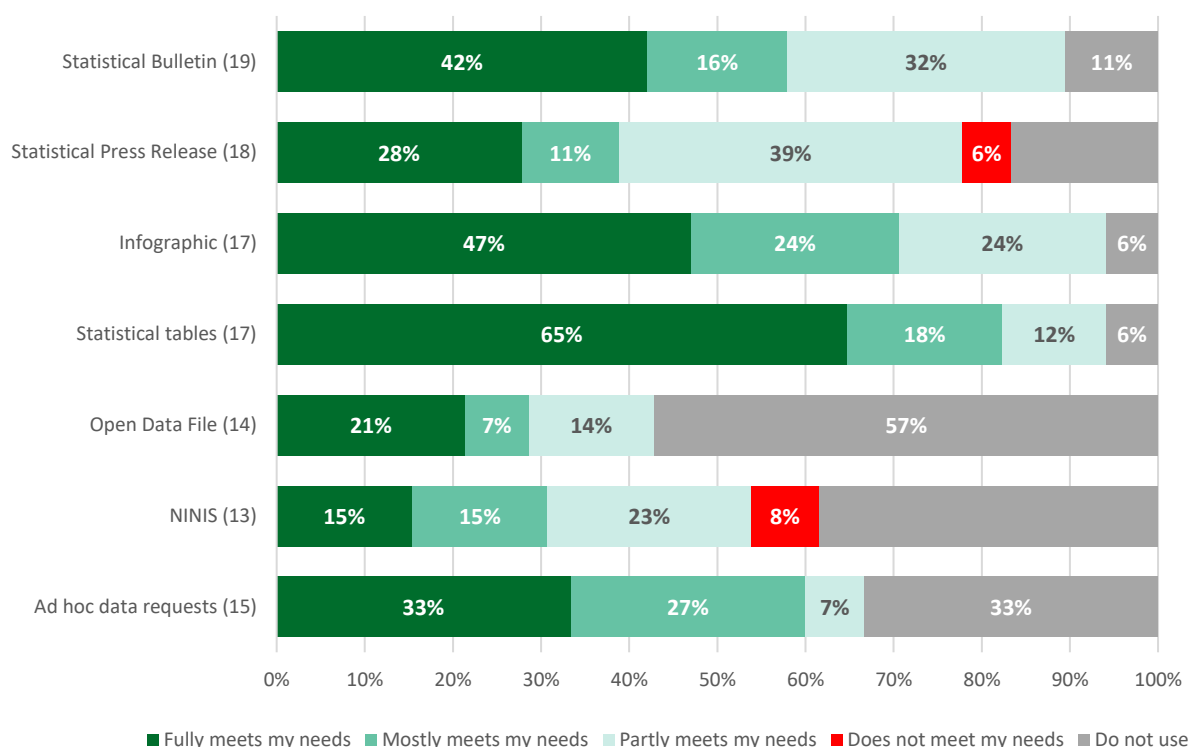
The top statistical products fully or mostly meeting user needs were reported to be the Excel statistical tables, the statistical infographic, data provided through ad-hoc requests and the statistical bulletin.

A relatively high proportion of respondents reported that they do not use the open data file and information placed on NINIS; this may indicate that the general awareness of these products is low and therefore the resource may be underutilised.

The majority of products had no respondents reporting that it did not meet their needs. The exceptions were the statistical press release and the information placed on NINIS; in both cases only a small proportion reported that the product did not meet their needs (Fig.4).

Figure 4: Statistical products – meeting user needs

(Response – base number detailed in brackets after each axis label)



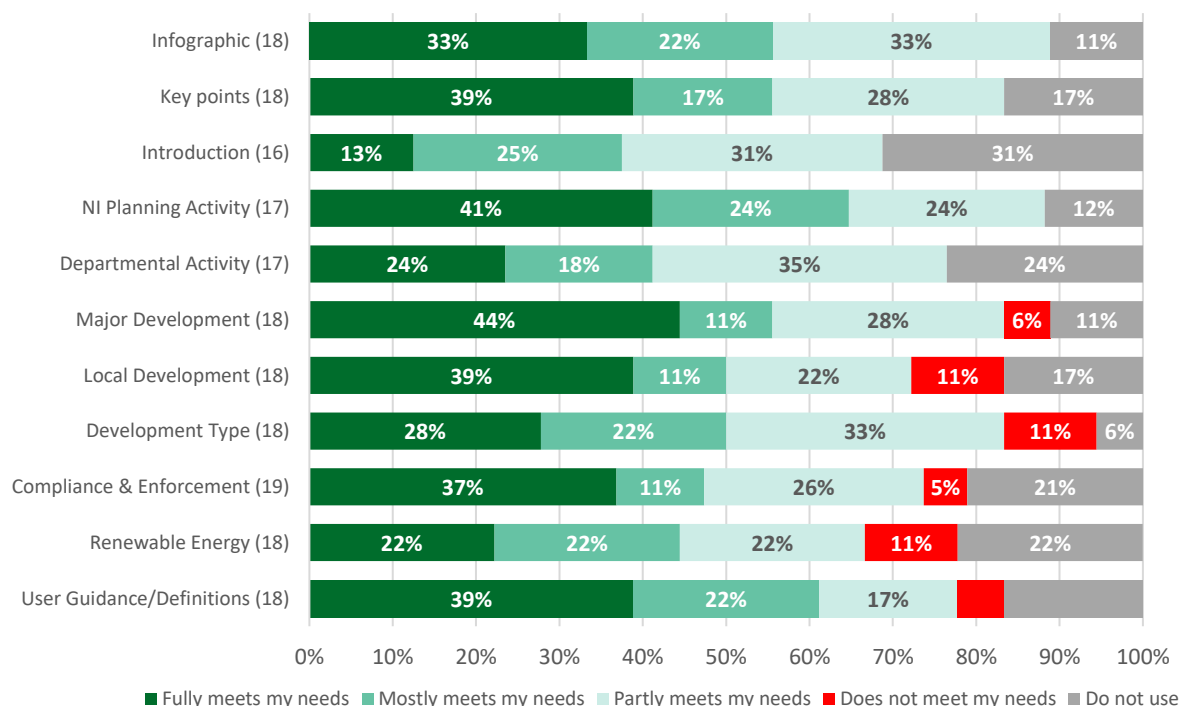
Statistical Bulletin

The [statistical bulletin](#) is published on a quarterly basis on the Department’s website. The reports are published to meet predetermined dates and users are notified of upcoming releases via the [gov.uk](#) website and a notification on the [Department’s](#) own website. Nineteen responses were recorded for the statistical bulletin (the highest across all products). Of these respondents, 42% (8) reported that the bulletin fully met their needs, with a further 47% (9) stating that it mostly or partly meets their needs (Fig.4).

When respondents were further asked how well each section of the statistical bulletin met their needs, over three-fifths stated that the sections on ‘Overall NI Planning Activity’ and ‘User Guidance/Definitions’ fully or mostly met their needs. In addition, at least half of respondents stated that the sections presenting the ‘infographic’, ‘key points’, ‘major’, ‘local’ and ‘type of planning development’ fully or mostly met their needs. The proportion reporting that the section did not meet their needs was small in each case (Fig.6).

Figure 6: Sections of bulletin – meeting user needs

(Response – base number detailed in brackets for each axis label)



Statistical Press Release

The statistical press release accompanies the statistical bulletin, presenting the key points from the publication. Thirty-nine percent (7 of 18) of respondents stated that the press release fully / mostly met their needs, with a further 39% (7) stating that their needs were partly met. Seventeen percent (3) did not use the press release and 5% (1) reported that it did not meet their needs (Fig.4).

Infographic

The summary infographic is presented as part of the publication (see Fig.6) but is also published as a standalone product on the website and circulated to users via the planning bulletin notification email. User views were sought on this standalone product (see Fig.4). Seventy-one percent (12 of 17) of respondents stated that the infographic fully / mostly met their needs, with a further 24% (4) stating that their needs were partly met. One respondent stated that they did not use the product.

Excel Statistical Tables

The Excel statistical tables provide a full suite of data that underpins the statistical bulletin and are published alongside it. Nearly two-thirds of respondents (65%; 11 of 17) stated that the tables fully met their needs with a further 29% (5) responding that they mostly or partly met their needs. Across all the products produced for planning statistics the Excel tables, based on responses to this survey, is a key product to meeting user needs (Fig.4).

Open Data File

The open data file was introduced during 2017 and a separate file is produced for each financial year, beginning with the 2016/17 annual dataset. The files provide details of all individual planning applications that were in scope for analysis during a financial year period, and enables users to reproduce published official statistics alongside providing the capability to conduct further bespoke analysis. In contrast to usage of the Excel tables above, when asked about the 'open data file' which is a relatively new product, 57% (8 of 14) of respondents stated that they did not use it. Additionally nine respondents skipped this question which may be an indication that awareness of the product is low (Fig.4).

NINIS

Each year after the publication of the annual statistical bulletin, data is sent to NISRA to be uploaded onto the [Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service \(NINIS\)](#). This information is disaggregated at council and parliamentary constituency level and contains information relating to applications, enforcements, prosecutions, convictions, renewable energy and live caseloads. The NINIS system holds data spanning a number of years, enabling users to obtain / extract data over time with ease at the geographical levels mentioned above.

Of the 13 responses received, 31% (4) stated that it fully / mostly meets their needs. Thirty-nine percent stated that they do not use the information. In addition ten respondents did not answer the question which may indicate that awareness of planning information on NINIS is low (Fig.4).

Ad-hoc Requests

Ad-hoc requests are received by ASRB from a range of users, including those from central and local government, the private sector and the general public. A third of those who responded (5 of 15) reported that they do not use the ad-hoc query facility. Of those who do, 90% (9 of 10) stated that the information provided fully / mostly met their needs (Fig.4).

Respondents' Comments

Respondents were given the opportunity to provide comments to each of the questions asked in the survey. A number of individual comments were provided but no common themes were identified. Individual comments have been considered by ASRB, however, and have fed into the future actions outlined below.

The comments provided by respondents are presented below.

There are some areas/issues not currently covered in terms of environmental impact assessments which would be of particular use going forward.

Cannot get sufficient detail on numbers of housing units in each development/applications.

The definition of enforcement in terms of closing a case does not relate to taking enforcement action. An indicator on this basis would be useful. Or some analysis of the percentage of closed cases which involve enforcement action.

We would like to see a greater attention being paid to disaggregation of rural statistics - for areas of populations less than 5,000 people.

Only partly (meet my needs) because I need to know the background to the figures also.

The report is far too detailed and not an efficient use of limited public resources.

The statistical animation recently produced by ASRB has also been of great assistance to staff.

(We have) a strong working relationship with the NISRA team that provides both the monthly unvalidated stats and validated quarterly stats. Their work is much appreciated and we look forward to a continuing positive relationship as we move ahead with the forthcoming Planning Monitoring Framework.

Extremely helpful to colleagues in planning. Their input is invaluable.

From a local authority perspective I find the 'league' tables irrelevant as it does no compare like with like. Each Council operates its own scheme of delegation which impacts on processing times, as does access to particular stat consultee office. Also, our council focuses on delivering a positive outcome and so negotiate pro-actively - others may not focus on quality but rather on quantity. It is also entirely unreflective of case numbers and levels of staff in councils

Future 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. Generally the key products such as the statistical bulletin and Excel tables are meeting the needs of users. The actions informed by this survey that ASRB plan to take forward are listed below.

- Increase awareness of the open data set. Awareness and use of this data source appears to be low, based on the survey responses. This annual dataset provides users with the scope to carry out more in-depth bespoke analysis, enabling additional information at geographical and urban/rural splits to be produced alongside much more detailed analysis. This may also have the effect of reducing the number of ad hoc requests received by ASRB.
- Increase awareness of planning information that is placed on NINIS. Often requests are made to ASRB for data over a period of time. Wider awareness of this source would be beneficial as it would alleviate pressures on ASRB staff and better serve user need. ASRB will seek to increase awareness of the NINIS product and redirect customers where relevant.
- More targeted user group engagement. Continue to engage with Key User Group (DfI). Arrange meetings with external key users (local planning authorities, local interest groups, planning consultants).
- Repeat user survey again next summer (2020) and include the Planning Performance Framework publication.
- The NI Planning Statistics are also due to go through assessment by the UK Statistics Authority, with the aim of achieving National Statistics designation and providing further reassurance that this product meets the three pillars of the Code of Practice for Statistics – Trustworthiness, Quality and Value⁹. This assessment is scheduled to take place over the second half of 2019/20.

⁹ For further information, see: <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/code-of-practice/the-code/>

The feedback received from this survey can help us to better meet our users' needs and in so doing, also help us to better meet relevant requirements of the aforementioned Code of Practice for Statistics.

If you have any comments to make on this paper, or if you would like to provide comment in relation to any of the planning products considered by this survey and how they meet or do not meet your information needs, please contact the branch using the details below:

Analysis, Statistics and Research Branch
Department for Infrastructure
Room 4-13c, Clarence Court,
10-18 Adelaide Street, Town Parks,
Belfast, BT2 8GB

Email: ASRB@nisra.gov.uk
Telephone: 028 9054 0046

Appendix 1 – User Survey

A copy of the user survey is presented below.

Northern Ireland Planning Statistics User Survey

Background

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 performance.

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.

We 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

Northern Ireland Planning Statistics User Survey

User information

1. Please complete the following statement: I primarily use these statistics as a member of..
 (please select one only)

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="radio"/> NI central government | <input type="radio"/> Academia/research |
| <input type="radio"/> NI local government | <input type="radio"/> The media |
| <input type="radio"/> Other public sector | <input type="radio"/> Private sector |
| <input type="radio"/> The community / voluntary sector | <input type="radio"/> The general public |
| <input type="radio"/> Other (please specify) | |

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

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Briefing (e.g. to ministers / colleagues) | <input type="checkbox"/> Media use |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Policy development / review | <input type="checkbox"/> Commercial purposes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Academic research | <input type="checkbox"/> Personal use |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Market research | <input type="checkbox"/> General information |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Economic research | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify) | |

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

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Web searches | <input type="checkbox"/> Press releases |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dfi website | <input type="checkbox"/> Hard copy printed documents |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Email / readership list circulation | <input type="checkbox"/> Contacting ASRB directly |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dfi Twitter / Facebook | <input type="checkbox"/> Open Data NI |
| <input type="checkbox"/> NISRA Twitter / Facebook | <input type="checkbox"/> Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service (NINIS) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify) | |

Northern Ireland Planning Statistics User Survey

Meeting user needs

4. There are a number of different sources of Northern Ireland Planning Statistics information. Where applicable, to what extent does each source meet your needs?

	Fully meets my needs	Mostly meets my needs	Partly meets my needs	Does not meet my needs	Do not use
Statistical bulletin (PDF)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Statistical press release (PDF)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Infographic (PDF)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Statistical tables (Excel / ODS)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Open data file (available on Open Data NI)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
NINIS (Planning Applications and Decisions Granted)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ad hoc data requests	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5. Please provide any further comments you have in relation to your answer/s above.

6. Where applicable, to what extent does each section within the statistical bulletin meet your needs?

	Fully meets my needs	Mostly meets my needs	Partly meets my needs	Does not meet my needs	Do not use
Summary infographic	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Key points	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Introduction	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Chapter 1: Overall NI Planning Activity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Chapter 2: Departmental Activity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Chapter 3: Major Development Planning Applications	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Chapter 4: Local Development Planning Applications	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Chapter 5: Development Type	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Chapter 6: Compliance and Enforcement Activity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Chapter 7: Renewable Energy Activity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
User Guidance / Appendix 1 – Definitions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. Please provide any further comments you have in relation to your answer/s above.

Northern Ireland Planning Statistics User Survey

Further comments

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

Northern Ireland Planning Statistics User Survey

Survey complete - thank you for your input