



Department of Planning

Improving and Streamlining the Planning Process

Presented by:

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Ministry for the Cabinet Office and Digital Innovation

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Mr. Speaker,

I rise today to address a matter that affects the lives and livelihoods of many in our community, the time taken to navigate our planning system, particularly regarding building permits.

From homeowners seeking renovation to small businesses aiming to expand and developers envisioning the next opportunity, the message remains consistent: the process can often feel too slow, overly rigid, and at times unclear. We understand the public's frustrations with the planning system, whether perceived or real, as these frustrations are genuine.

Mr. Speaker,

I have heard these concerns firsthand, and as Minister, I take them seriously.

However, I also want to speak plainly to say this: **I believe in the professionalism and dedication of the team at the Department of Planning.** They are not the enemy in this story; they are central to the solution. Like all of us, they are navigating the pressures of high demand, limited resources, and an evolving public expectation for service delivery.

Understanding the Root of the Delays

Mr. Speaker,

As of today, **372 building permit applications remain open**, with an **average age of 165 days**. Some are much newer, some are significantly older.

We have found that the **main pinch point is not the planning approvals themselves**, but the building permit process, where technical details, inter-agency coordination, and inspections come into play.

However, let's also be honest about this: a significant number of delays stem from incomplete applications submitted by agents, as well as the time required to obtain follow-up information. Currently, **59** of these applications are effectively awaiting responses from agents with an average age of **170 days**. The youngest of these is **20** days old, while the oldest is **481** days old.

Mr. Speaker,

This is not about assigning blame; rather, it is to highlight the importance of shared responsibility. We cannot build an efficient system if applications arrive incomplete and, despite requests for the missing information, remain unchanged for weeks or even months. This situation adversely affects everyone, particularly those whose files are ready to proceed but are delayed due to these incomplete applications.

That is why I have asked the Department to explore ways to separate complete submission applications from those still awaiting information, so we can keep the queue moving for those who have met the requirements. I

will lay this marker down here: I fully support the rejection of incomplete submissions that have awaited a specified timeframe with no response, which would mean that these applications would need to be resubmitted and started over.

Since my appointment as Minister of the Department of Planning, I have devoted countless hours to reviewing data, reading policy statements, listening to public feedback, and drawing on my own experience as a former agent who submitted plans to planning before entering full-time politics. Numerous ideas have been promoted and discussed over the past few weeks. I would now like to address some of the ideas that we plan to explore and aim to implement as swiftly as possible.

Clarifying the Director's Role in Approvals

Mr. Speaker,

I need to address a public misconception. Some have questioned how certain applications are approved, especially when the name of the Director appears on the approval letter.

Let me be clear: except in exceptional cases, typically when the Director is acting as a plans examiner, the Director of Planning does not personally see or vet applications. Planning approvals are granted by the Development Applications Board or by delegated planning officers in the case of Permitted Development applications, commonly referred to as One-Day Permits.

To avoid this confusion and protect the integrity of the Department, we have instructed that approval letters indicate that decisions are made “by the Department” or “by the Development Application Board” rather than being attributed solely to the Director. This is a matter of public clarity and institutional accountability.

Key Reforms Underway

Now, **Mr. Speaker**, let me outline the key improvements the Ministry are exploring, together with the Department, to modernise and streamline the system:

1. Boosting Permit Processing Capacity and Internal Reorganisation

With only one full-time permit processor and one supervisor, the team was overwhelmed. The Director has brought in two experienced consultants, one working full-time and another part-time, with a third looking to be added if necessary. This immediately expands the building Permit review bandwidth and is already reducing the backlog.

The Department is currently implementing its internal reorganisation and actively driving recruitment. In recent months, five new staff members have been onboarded.

2. Competent Persons Scheme (CPS)

Legislative amendments are in progress to permit the introduction of regulations for the CPS. This scheme will initially enable certified solar installers to carry out installations without traditional inspections, supplemented by casual visits from Planning Inspectors to ensure compliance. Other trades will be incorporated after the concept is tested, and capacity within each industry is expanded and confirmed.

3. Exploring a Revised Building Permit Review System

We are actively exploring a **new review model** that matches scrutiny with risk:

- **Track 1: Certified Fast-Track** – Applications endorsed by registered engineers (structural, electrical, mechanical) can be fast-tracked with minimal internal review. This empowers professionals and streamlines project approvals with expert oversight. Although this is typical of a commercial application, extending to residential

applications could allow building permits for residential developments to be processed more quickly.

- **Track 2: DIY and Minor Works** – Homeowners undertaking small projects, such as fences or sheds, will use a simplified form and a checklist-based process.

4. Expanding Self-Inspection for Residential Projects

Self-inspections—already a standard practice on commercial projects—allow qualified engineers to inspect their own projects and subsequently submit signed documentation. We are seeking to extend this practice to residential projects on an opt-in basis. This decreases reliance on our limited pool of government inspectors and assists in keeping construction on schedule.

5. The “One-Day Permit” Review System

Small-scale works should not be delayed for months. We are considering reinstating dedicated review days, during which all relevant agencies—Planning, Health, and Building—collaborate to assess minor permits in real time.

We are also reviewing the **General Development Order (GDO)** to expand what types of projects qualify for this fast-track treatment.

6. Smarter Vetting Through AI Technology

According to data from the Department of Planning, a significant percentage of applications submitted are initially incomplete. This results in a prolonged, frustrating cycle of back-and-forth conversations between agents and the Department. To break this cycle, we are considering the introduction of AI tools that screen applications at the front end, identifying missing data before it enters the review pipeline.

7. “Soft Refusal” Reform – Allowing Common Sense to Prevail

Too often, worthy applications are rejected due to minor conflicts with the Bermuda Plan, only to be approved on appeal later.

A policy to address this is being advanced through the introduction of a new tool: Ministerial Waivers. In straightforward cases, where the merits of the proposal are clear but minor conflicts with the Bermuda Plan arise, upon request from the Department of Planning or the Agent, the Minister will be able to issue a targeted policy waiver that permits the application to proceed as usual to the Development Applications Board for their review and approval.

This reform will save time, reduce paperwork, and avoid unnecessary appeals.

8. Better Communication and Service Access

To address public frustrations about unanswered emails, delays in callbacks, and a lack of clarity on file status. We are looking at how to introduce:

- Dedicated office hours for in-person consultation,
- Using Smart Online Query Forms to get inquiries to the right person,
- And tracking response timelines to improve service.

This isn’t just about building permits—it’s about rebuilding trust.

Closing: Everyone Has a Role to Play

Mr. Speaker, we are not just improving a process—we are restoring confidence in a public service function that is vital to our economy.

I would like to again thank the Director of Planning and her team for their ongoing partnership, professionalism, and willingness to evolve. I also extend my gratitude to the many architects, contractors, engineers, and homeowners who continue to work with us—and challenge us—to do better.

These reforms are just the beginning. Our goal is simple: **a planning system that is clear, fair, timely, and responsive for everyone.**

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.