

OPR REPORT OUTLINES PLANS FOR IRELAND'S FUTURE

Over the next six years the State's planning oversight body will evaluate close to 200 draft plans from around the country to measure how well they align with existing planning policy and regulatory requirements, State Planning Regulator Niall Cussen noted following the launch of the OPR's inaugural Annual Report for 2019.

Proper and effective planning is needed now more than ever in helping to lay the foundations for national recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, according to Niall Cussen, Head of the Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR).

"The Government has correctly prioritised the importance of joined-up planning and investment in both meeting immediate pandemic-posed economic recovery challenges, while at the same time addressing the global climate challenge and realising the potential of a greener future."

On launching the OPR's first Annual Report for 2019, Cussen said that Ireland's planning process directly affects every citizen of the State in meeting housing, physical and social infrastructural requirements, enhancing the quality of our environment and enabling the economic functioning of our country.

The OPR is operating at a time when the planning process will play a central role in how our cities, towns and villages develop, he said, adding that over the next six years his office will evaluate close to 200 draft plans from around the country.

"This will measure how well they align with existing planning policy and regulatory requirements with view to ensuring that the plan provides for the proper planning and sustainable development of the area concerned."

FOUNDATION-BUILDING YEAR

Commenting on the OPR's activities during 2019, Cussen highlighted that it had been a foundation-building year in terms of recruitment and putting in place the various policies and procedures necessary for the new oversight body.

However, he added that his office has hit the ground running since it was established. "In total, we made 31 recommendations and 16 observations on local authority statutory plans.

Through proactive engagement with local authority staff and elected members, every recommendation in respect of the 11 adopted plans – subject to OPR assessment in 2019 – has been implemented.

As well as ensuring that the planning process runs well, Cussen said it's necessary that everybody understood the process. This is why, he noted, that training and raising public awareness of best practice in planning is one their central remits.

"So, we intend to continue collaborating closely with stakeholders, providing training and engaging with local authority members and officials."

PLANNING HIGHLIGHTS DURING 2019

The OPR's annual report identified some significant trends and indicators, which reflect Ireland's planning performance during 2019, as follows:



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- The Office assessed and reviewed 25 local authority statutory plans. All recommendations made by the OPR relating to 11 statutory plans adopted by local authorities in 2019 were implemented.
- Assessments by the OPR included 31 recommendations and 16 observations to the relevant local authorities on the statutory plans referred to above.
- Most recommendations (39%) concerned better implementation of guidelines on planning published by the

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to ensure a consistent approach in relation to matters including flood risk management (2009), preparation of local area plans (2013), preparation of development plans (2007), and policy regarding national roads (2012).

- Of the 91 unique cases raised by members of the public on planning matters in 2019, none were found to meet the statutory criteria for commencing examinations of the planning authorities concerned. Most complaints related to individual planning application or planning enforcement cases which the OPR cannot become involved in, rather than systemic issues that the OPR is mandated to examine.
- The Office initiated the first multi-annual national training programme for local elected councillors on their planning functions in 2019 with a number of training seminars on the planning process attended by 225 elected members.
- The Office established a National Planning Knowledge Group to guide the development of the OPR’s research and public awareness programmes.
- The Office also developed a free online planning library service, providing easy-to-access information on planning documents, research papers and resources.

The report also highlights key outputs from the work of Ireland’s 31 planning authorities and An Bord Pleanála (ABP) in 2019 including:

- Approvals of apartment developments, key to sustainable urban development, exceeded housing for the first time in 2019. This was influenced by the Strategic Housing Development process of An Bord Pleanála, revised national guidance on apartment development and the Government’s National Planning Framework.
- However, 55% of all houses in the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly area were permitted in the four commuter counties outside of Dublin (Kildare, Louth, Meath and Wicklow) which poses a challenge to the Government’s planning objectives in tackling the sprawl of major urban areas, including Dublin.
- Just over 32,000 planning applications were submitted to local authorities in 2019 and while there were variations in the levels of invalid planning applications, almost 90% of valid planning applications were approved.
- The response to climate change was increasingly felt with significant approvals for renewable energy in terms of wind and solar energy.
- Approvals by planning authorities of industrial and manufacturing development proposals doubled in 2019, underscoring the importance of the planning process to economic recovery and progress.
- The pandemic has highlighted the need to deliver new and improved online planning services such as an online application and submission system. This may also require a review of existing planning fees (in place since 2001) resulting in only €24m of income in 2018 to planning authorities against a €140m cost of providing all planning services.

AN INDEPENDENT BODY

The Office of the Planning Regulator, which was established in 2019 on foot of recommendations made by the Tribunal of Inquiry into Certain Planning Matters and Payments (The Mahon Tribunal), is empowered to examine complaints about



Having initiated the first multi-annual national training programme in conjunction with the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) for councillors on their planning functions in 2019 and 2020, the OPR will continue with a series of training webinars in January and February 2021.

planning authorities which relate to the organisation of planning authorities and the systems and procedures used by planning authorities in their planning functions.

Cussen indicated that it was taking time for the public to understand that the OPR is an independent office where complaints about overall local authority planning systems and procedures across a range or pattern of decisions could be examined, rather than another level of planning appeal above An Bord Pleanála.

“Although none of the 91 unique cases raised in 2019 resulted in a formal statutory examination within the meaning of the OPR’s functions under the Planning Act, matters raised by members of the public are not without merit because they illustrate a picture of the overall system and quality of service delivery.

“In many cases, complaints made to the OPR relate to individual applications which are more appropriately considered through local authority internal complaints procedures and the Ombudsman’s Office, with which the OPR entered into a memorandum of understanding in 2019.”

INNOVATIVE STORY MAP

A highlight of the annual report is an innovative story map to take members of the public through the work of the office in a highly interactive and interesting way. The story map was developed by the OPR’s ‘in-house’ geospatial team.

The OPR is the first organisation in Ireland, and within the Irish planning sector, to illustrate its Annual Report through this medium. And the Planning Regulator indicated that the inaugural annual report afforded the OPR team an opportunity to be creative and to establish and further the OPR’s position as a leader in the digital planning space. The story map is available on the OPR’s website www.opr.ie

Niall Cussen paid tribute to the extensive efforts that his staff and a wide range of stakeholders including the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage had made in enabling the establishment of the OPR in 2019.

He pointed to the fact that for much of the year pending recruitment, it had been operating with fewer than 10 staff. The OPR is now almost up to full complement, enabling another strong year for thorough and independent delivery of oversight of Ireland’s planning process in 2020.