TIPPERARY TOPS LOCAL AUTHORITY PLANNING PERFORMANCE REVIEW

As part of the its first review into local authority systems and procedures for performing planning functions, the Office of the Planning Regulator has singled out Tipperary County Council as performing well, whilst also making recommendations on how systems for operational process could be improved or how current standards may be maintained.

Reviewing the performance of planning functions of local authorities is one of the three key roles of the Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR). The aim of such reviews by the State's independent oversight body for planning is to highlight good practice and areas for improvement, in addition to promote learning across the local authority sector with a view to enhancing the overall planning process.

Commenting on the completion of the OPR's first review, Planning Regulator Niall Cussen said: "Every day, people throughout the country interact with their local authorities in relation to planning issues ranging from planning applications, planning enforcement to environmental protection. That's why it's so important to ensure that the systems and procedures local authorities use to deliver these services are robust and effective."

URBAN AND RURAL CONTEXTS

Tipperary County Council was chosen by the OPR as one of several local authorities to pilot the process during 2021. This has been mainly due to the council's mixture of urban and rural contexts, the recent re-organisation arising from the merger of the former North and South Tipperary County Councils and its innovation in service delivery (such as the council's current piloting of the national e-Planning initiative – see side panel).

The report considers the local authority's performance within the context of 11 key operational processes in planning service delivery. It makes a series of recommendations on improving systems for operational process, or how current standards may be maintained. All recommendations have been graded as critical, high, medium, low or advisory.

Tipperary County Council will be in a good position for the general local authority sector-wide e-Planning roll-out from 2022 onwards.

Some of the review's key findings:

- Tipperary County Council operates generally effective systems and procedures to deliver its planning functions.
- In some areas of performance, the council demonstrates a highly effective practice.
- It has robust procedures in place to ensure a focus is placed on consistency with evolving national planning policy.
- Extensive efforts have gone into preparing a single, county-wide Record of Protected Structures with 3,000 structures included in the overall project; and 16 recommendations, four of which are graded as high

These findings relate to forward planning resource capacity, invalidation rates (Tipperary has the highest national invalidation rate), architectural heritage practice, and the capacity of

The Planning Regulator Niall Cussen said that Tipperary County Council's planning department benefits from clear leadership, a structured corporate approach and the commitment and talent of individual staff.

Tipperary County Council's enforcement team.

According to the OPR, it has had positive engagement with the council throughout the review process, and noted that the council had committed to developing a robust implementation plan arising from the recommendations and findings of the review.

STRUCTURED CORPORATE APPROACH

The Planning Regulator pointed out that Tipperary County Council's planning department operates in a complex and demanding environment. "Despite the challenges and pressures under which it operates, the planning department is generally delivering all of its statutory planning functions effectively. The department benefits from clear leadership, a structured corporate approach and the commitment and talent of individual staff," he noted.

"These factors have allowed the department to develop and implement good systems and procedures to guide its operational processes and to monitor and evaluate outputs. It has considerable strengths and can reinforce and enhance that strong competency base by implementing the 16 recommendations proposed in this report," Cussen stated.

Chapter IV (Review of Planning Functions) of Part IIB of the Planning & Development Act 2000 (particularly Section 31AS of the Act), gives the OPR the discretion to review the systems and procedures used by local authorities and An Bord Pleanála in performing their planning functions.

Under Section 31AS of the Act, the Planning Regulator's Office will now implement a programme to review every local authority over a six-year cycle. The OPR's 'Pilot Methodology for Conducting Reviews of Local Authorities' has been published to guide and give structure to the review programme.

PILOT PHASE OF E-PLANNING PROJECT

Tipperary County Council has been chosen as one of several local authorities to take part in the pilot phase of a national e-Planning project, as initiated by the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage.

The pilot, which first started in the fourth quarter of 2020, will be rolled out across the 31 local authorities over an 18-month period. Tipperary County Council's participation in the pilot phase ensures that the council will be in a good position for the general local authority sector-wide e-Planning roll-out from 2022 onwards.

Under the Planning Development Act 2000, a legal framework has been provided to facilitate the submission of planning application documentation through local authority websites.

The legislative provisions deliver on the commitment to roll out online a greater level of planning services, as contained in 'Rebuilding Ireland' – the Government's 2016 Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness – which was reiterated five years later in the new 'Housing for All' plan, as released in September 2021.

The e-Planning project involves developing and implementing an online system through which planning applications are made, where applicants will be kept updated on the progress of their application.

Tipperary County Council is currently testing the e-Planning project on a phased basis, with development testing and roll-out of system features and functionality to be implemented in a step-by-step manner.

The delivery of this service will represent a significant enhancement in the range of online planning services currently available (such as development plan viewers).

When complete, the e-Planning project aims to provide a consistent national public-facing planning portal for planning applications; better data to track planning application trends nationally; and, more efficient and consistent application processing.