Oifig an
Rialaitheora Pleanála
Office of the
Planning Regulator

Strategy Statement 2019-2024*

Building a World-Class Planning Oversight Body

***This OPR Strategy Statement is extended to 2026, pending the commencement of the Planning and Development Act, 2024**

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Our purpose

The OPR's purpose is to oversee the continuous enhancement of Ireland's planning process and its outcomes by driving the co-ordination of planning policy implementation across national, regional and local levels, building a stronger knowledge base and ensuring regular reviews of the performance of planning authorities and An Bord Pleanála.

Foreword

Ireland's planning process has evolved since its establishment over 50 years ago in 1964 and is a key part of public policy aimed at ensuring the proper planning and sustainable development of our country for the common good. The planning process comprises four key elements, namely:

1. Preparation and adoption of statutory strategies, plans and policies by Government, regional assemblies and local authorities;

2. Decision-making on individual planning applications and appeals in light of statutory plans and policies by local authorities and An Bord Pleanála;

3. Enforcement of the terms and conditions of planning permissions by local authorities; and

4. Oversight of the planning process, including undertaking of research, education and training by the Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR) to ensure national policies and legislative requirements are complied with.

The OPR was established in April 2019 on foot of recommendations made by the Tribunal of Inquiry into Certain Planning Matters and Payments (the Mahon Tribunal) which was established by the Dáil in 1997 and which issued its fifth and final report in March 2012.

The Mahon Tribunal made 64 recommendations aimed at significantly enhancing the transparency of planning in Ireland against a backdrop of significant historical deficiencies in relation to decision-making on local authority development plans and other planning functions.

The Planning and Development Act, as amended, (the Act) gives the OPR a statutory basis to carry out three main functions:

i. Independent assessment of all local authority and regional assembly forward planning, including development plans, local area plans, regional spatial and economic strategies;

ii. Examination of the systems and procedures used by any planning authority, including An Bord Pleanála, in the performance of any of their planning functions, including assessing risks of maladministration or corruption; and

iii. Driving national research, training, education and public information programmes.

While not a policy-making body, the role of the OPR is to ensure that the implementation of planning policy and legislation by local authorities and An Bord Pleanála supports Government policy and statutory requirements, that effective programmes of research, training and public awareness in planning are in place to strengthen the planning process and that the wider public are effectively engaged in the planning process.

Furthermore, the OPR will provide a fair and independent mechanism for the public in which to raise concerns about the systems and procedures used by planning authorities in the delivery of planning services to them and on their behalf. Through these processes of evaluation, review, examination, research and dissemination the OPR will assist the planning process, as a whole, to develop and strengthen over time.

As a newly established independent public body, the focus of this first six year Strategy Statement for the OPR is on the establishment of a successfully functioning and performing organisation, delivering on our legislative mandate outlined in the Act.

The establishment of the OPR represents an important milestone in the development of Ireland's planning process, which touches the lives of every citizen of this State, both in relation to meeting housing and employment development related needs, physical and social infrastructural requirements and enhancing the quality of our environment and the essential economic functioning of the country.

Establishment of the OPR and its oversight functions also comes at a time when there is more and more recognition of the role the planning process must play, in tandem with wider stakeholders, to tackle the many and complex environmental challenges we face.

These challenges include planning future development in a way that both addresses the drivers and adapts to the effects of climate change. They also include sustainable management and protection of our environment in the context of its natural and cultural qualities, including air and water quality, noise and biodiversity. The sustainable management and protection of our environment is a critical starting point in the delivery of planning functions.

Many citizens' experience of the planning system arise from engagement with the process of making or participating in the decision-making process of planning applications. In 2018, just over 32,000 planning applications were made for a wide variety of proposed developments.

Effective decision-making needs a clear and coherent policy context and Project Ireland 2040 will therefore be the key planning policy that will inform the OPR in its statutory functions over the period of our Strategy Statement .

In recent years, there has been a welcome renaissance in plan-making, particularly at national and regional levels, building on the established patterns of plan-making at local authority level, of which there are now 31, down from the 88 planning authorities that existed prior to the Local Government Reform Act 2014.

There has also been a renewed focus on innovation in the delivery of public services generally and planning services specifically, such as digital planning services that both represent value for money and deliver quality outcomes. Furthermore, it is accepted that evidence should inform policy development, which in turn will shape practice on the ground.

The OPR exists to draw these elements together, ensuring the quality of Ireland's planning process is founded upon the implementation of agreed policies and that the delivery of planning functions is efficient, effective, outcome focused and participative.

We are one of the first countries in Europe to put in place an independent planning regulator, reflecting both a determination to learn lessons from the past but also to establish new mechanisms to ensure the effective implementation of new public policies that have developed in recent years.

These include the integrated development of national planning policies and corresponding capital investment and sectoral investment strategies such as Project Ireland 2040, which incorporates both a spatial vision and the means to realise it through a public capital investment programme.

In common with other public sector organisations, the OPR must also be agile in adapting to changes in society, customer expectations and new ways of working over the Strategy period. Our ambition is to build an organisation that is learning and development based, that communicates via modern channels and that is noted for its personal touch in engagement with citizens and stakeholders.

This Strategy Statement focuses on capitalising on the opportunities to apply best practice and progressive public sector and organisational design in building the organisation from the ground up, for example by conducting business and encouraging interaction digitally.

Our Strategy Statement has been developed with inputs from staff, the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and a wide range of stakeholders with a view to delivering our strategic goals in ensuring that planning and development contributes to balanced and sustainable development, the supply of good quality housing and the implementation of Government policy and goals.

Implementation of this Strategy Statement, which has been prepared under the provisions of and in compliance with section 31T of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended), will demand a high level of commitment from all of the staff in our developing organisation and I am confident that we are going to build a high-performing independent public body dedicated to supporting and enhancing Ireland's planning process and public confidence in it over the years ahead.

Niall Cussen
Chief Executive and Planning Regulator

Our Purpose, Vision and Values

The OPR's **purpose** is to oversee the continuous enhancement of Ireland's planning process and its outcomes by driving the co-ordination of planning policy implementation across national, regional and local levels, building a stronger knowledge base and ensuring regular reviews of the performance of planning authorities and An Bord Pleanála.

Our **vision** is that by the end of this Strategy Statement period, the OPR will be in a position to conclude that Ireland benefits from a well co-ordinated planning hierarchy and that a wide-ranging, effective and well received programme of education, training and research on planning matters has been put into effect and that a culture of continuous improvement will be created in planning authorities driven by regular reviews of their performance.

Our **values** are as follows:

Independence: The OPR is committed to building an independent, fair and informed voice on planning matters, helping local authorities to achieve the outcomes envisaged in international, national and regional policies as they put in place statutory plans and advising the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government on the effectiveness of Ireland's planning process.

Professionalism: The OPR will build its ability to offer independent, fair and informed advice to other stakeholders in the planning process through its professionalism and capacity to gather key information and data. The OPR will highlight the key trends and objectives in the planning area to ensure a strategic and co-ordinated approach to meeting the challenges of today and the future, such as housing delivery, reducing the energy intensity of development patterns to tackle the drivers of climate change and taking advantage of significant changes approaching on how our transport systems will function.

Transparency: The hallmark of the OPR's approach will be to demonstrate transparency in everything we do, from the gathering of evidence and research data through our knowledge, public awareness and training programmes to the assessment of plans and in conducting of planning reviews. The public's confidence in Ireland's planning process depends on transparency in the process so that the public can see how policy and practice happen.

Engagement: The building of a new organisation from scratch is a strong opportunity to build a positive and lasting culture. The OPR recognises that proactive engagement and a willingness to explore potential solutions is key to playing a successful role, mindful of the many complex and sometimes competing challenges to be met in the planning and development area.

Customer Focus: The OPR is committed to delivering fair, effective, courteous and timely services to all its customers in line with the twelve Government 'Guiding Principles for Quality Customer Service[1]'. The OPR is committed to dealing with customers without discrimination or prejudice. The OPR respects equality and human rights in accordance with Public Sector Duty principles and the relevant equality legislation. The OPR will accommodate diversity in providing services to our customers.

[1]https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/89dbad-guiding-principles-of-quality-customer-service/

Our Organisation

The OPR is structured into three distinct areas in line with its statutory functions. The figure below outlines the structure of the organisation.

Office of the Planning Regulator Corporate Structure and Functions Map

The OPR was established to ensure that public interest is at the heart of Ireland's planning process and that through information, data and knowledge sharing between all the stakeholders in the planning process, we will continuously improve and enhance quality and effectiveness in the delivery of planning services by our planning authorities and An Bord Pleanála and all the various stakeholders.

The Oireachtas established the OPR and the Act clearly sets out our mandate, functions and powers as highlighted earlier in this strategy.

The OPR has come about both because of lessons that have been learnt from the past and a strong willingness by Government to strengthen effectiveness in the co-ordination of national, regional and local planning policies and initiatives to achieve agreed aims and objectives.

The establishment of the OPR also comes at a time when transformational new planning policies have been developed by Government – after extensive national consultation exercises – and these policies need to be put into practice, including:

- Securing compact urban development through the application of a target to deliver at least 40% of all new homes nationally, within the built-up footprint of existing settlements, as opposed to greenfield development extending the existing built-up areas;

- Preparing development plans and local area plans based on Housing Need Demand Assessments where housing needs across the full range of those that need housing is planned for on an integrated basis and whose delivery is monitored to feed back into the spatial planning process; and

- Moving towards low carbon or carbon free development to support the achievement of binding international obligations on Ireland in relation to tackling the drivers of climate change.

Addressing these and other policies from the National Planning Framework, such as the National Strategic Outcomes, will require transformational change in approaches to, and execution of, planning policies and plan implementation at local level.

As a new organisation, the OPR will work closely with all the relevant stakeholders, including the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government and his/her Department, local authorities, regional assemblies, An Bord Pleanála, environmental, business and community development focused groups, the professions engaged in the built environment and researchers to play a key driving role in securing these changes.

By establishing the OPR, the Government has made a clear commitment to creating a visible national co-ordination point with the knowledge and expertise to advise local authorities on their plan-making functions and to support the necessary training, education and research activities to support evidence-based planning.

Furthermore, the OPR will work to make sure that the public is effectively engaged in the planning process equipped with the necessary access to planning knowledge and data so that the public drives the making of policy to a more significant degree than at present.

Through the work of the OPR over the years ahead, more regular assessments of the effectiveness of our planning policies and practice will improve the process on a continuous basis.

Our Work

Independent assessment of all local authority and regional assembly forward planning

The core function of the OPR is to independently evaluate and assess statutory development plans and regional strategies, and variations to these, with a view to ensuring that the plan or strategy provides for the proper planning and sustainable development of the area concerned.

Hallmarks of proper planning and sustainable development include demonstrable actions on climate change, managing our water infrastructure, protecting vulnerable habitats, while addressing the implications of a growing population and economy. Meeting these challenges will require even greater levels of coordination and implementation across the hierarchy of statutory plans and strategies.

In line with the Mahon Tribunal recommendations, the OPR assumes the policy assessment and enforcement role which was heretofore invested in the Minister with responsibility for planning matters.

The OPR will independently evaluate and assess these statutory plans and strategies to ensure compliance with national, and regional, planning policies and objectives. The OPR will, in the first instance, provide the relevant planning authority with observations / recommendations with regard to how a draft plan should address legislative and policy matters including consistency with:

- The National Planning Framework;
- Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies;
- Statutory planning guidance issued by the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, including any 'specific planning policy requirements';
- Planning policy directives; and,
- Other relevant legislative and policy matters, including the evolving context for marine planning.

In performing its statutory functions, the OPR will seek to work closely with other stakeholders, including the regional assemblies and other agencies that have statutorily backed consultative roles in the plan-making process.

Once the OPR has provided statutory inputs to the plan-making process, the relevant planning authority must outline how such inputs will be addressed, taking account of the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.

If an adopted plan is subsequently not consistent with any recommendations of the OPR, the Planning Regulator may issue a notice to the Minister recommending that powers of direction, specified under section 31 of the Act, be utilised to compel the planning authority to address the matter.

Recent legislative provisions paused the county and city plan-making procedure in many administrative areas until the finalisation and adoption of the three regional spatial and economic strategies, prepared by the three regional assemblies established under the Local Government Reform Act 2014.

Adoption of the strategies above will trigger the review of city and county development plans over the next two years or so. In turn, the adoption of new county and city development plans will result in updated local area plans. Accordingly, the OPR recognises that it will be dealing with a very significant volume of plans evaluation work during its initial few years of operation. The OPR will need to prioritise and structure its operations accordingly to ensure that adequate resources are maintained at all times to meet its statutory remit.

The establishment of this new Office, to oversee the development plan and regional strategy process and the planning system, significantly enhances existing governance and oversight arrangements within the planning system with a view to ensuring that the integrity of the system is upheld to the highest degree possible.

Coherence, integrity and public confidence are fundamental for the proper functioning of the planning process. Planning is critical to the ongoing development of all parts of the country – urban and rural, terrestrial and marine – ensuring that such development delivers proper planning and sustainable development. It is important that development takes place in the right locations, in the right way and at the right time to meet the needs of our people while also simultaneously protecting the many qualities of our natural and built environment.

Reviews of the systems and procedures used by any planning authority

Secondly, the OPR has also been given powers to review systemic issues and performance in the planning process. Accordingly the OPR will have a significant role to play in carrying out reviews and examinations of the operation of planning authorities, whether on its own initiative, at the request of the Minister, or on foot of complaints received.

The OPR will also be a regulatory body for planning in Ireland, reviewing the performance of all planning authorities and undertaking an important function in selecting individual local authorities for a closer examination of their performance each year and reporting on findings to the Minister and Oireachtas.

The OPR will review all planning authorities, including An Bord Pleanála, on a regular and consistent basis. The normal cyclical review function will also have scope to be complemented by reviews on specific matters that may arise in a specific authority or across a number, for example in relation to the execution of enforcement functions, etc.

The OPR will be able to make independent and evidence-based recommendations to planning authorities and to the Minister where it considers that a planning authority:

- May not be carrying out its functions in accordance with the Act;
- Is not complying with guidelines or directions issued by the Minister;
- May not be exercising its enforcement functions under Part VIII appropriately to ensure compliance in its administrative area;
- May be applying inappropriate standards of administrative practice;
- May be applying systemic discrimination in decision-making; or
- May be operating in a manner where there is a risk of corruption or there are serious diseconomies or inefficiencies in the conduct of its functions.

It is important that the highest standards are applied by, and adhered to, by all parties engaged in the planning system including planning authorities, public bodies, the construction and development sector, professional practitioners and the wider public. While this incorporates compliance with the requirements of the ethics in public office legislation, including provisions with regard to the regulation of lobbying, it also means ensuring transparency, accountability and the implementation of best practice in all areas of planning service delivery.

A well-functioning planning system both responds to the needs and anticipates the demands of society. The planning system impacts on many aspects of our daily lives and therefore we need to ensure that it operates in the manner intended so that it can deliver quality in planning outcomes.

In this regard, the OPR intends that the review process will become a resource to the planning sector, providing a regular 'health check' with regard to the effectiveness of planning performance and the outcomes delivered. The process will issue recommendations in relation to where planning policy and implementation require enhancement. The review process will also be aimed at highlighting

successes and positive planning impacts and the dissemination of best practice so that the overall planning process can be strengthened.

Driving national research, training, education and public information

Thirdly, the OPR will drive research and conduct programmes of education, building on training undertaken by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and other organisations, and public awareness to underpin the principles of proper planning and sustainable development. This will include educational programmes for elected members, officials of planning authorities and An Bord Pleanála.

Research, training and public information functions will also be discharged by the OPR in maximising knowledge transfer between the 31 local authorities, 3 regional assemblies, An Bord Pleanála and wider stakeholders such as professional bodies and interest groups thereby maximising efficiency, effectiveness and consistency.

In this regard, the OPR will put a Geographic Information System (GIS) strategy in place to enable the optimisation of GIS technology both within the OPR and as an external resource for our stakeholders. This system will avoid duplication by building on the progress and systems already established by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, planning authorities and wider stakeholders.

It is intended that the support and analysis provided via the OPR will assist all planning authorities to access the appropriate skills, resources and systems to perform effectively. Establishment of the OPR addresses the absence of a national focal point with a dedicated statutory remit in planning research since the demise of An Foras Forbartha in the 1990s.

The Mahon Tribunal recommended that the OPR would have a role in education, training, research and public awareness because of the beneficial impacts that these activities have on risks of inefficiencies or ineffectiveness in the delivery of planning services and avoiding risks in relation to corruption or the undermining of the integrity of the planning process.

Establishment of the OPR creates an opportunity to build on, co-ordinate and complement the extensive range of existing research, training and public awareness activities, including:

I. EU and international research organisations, such as ESPON, OECD, Horizon 2020;
II. Government, through its departments and agencies, including those sponsoring multi-annual research programmes like the Irish Research Council, the EPA and SFI;
III. Local Government;
IV. Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), including the five Planning Schools on the island (UCD, TU Dublin, UCC, QUB, UU);
V. Professional bodies concerned with the built environment, including the Irish Planning Institute and Royal Town Planning Institute;
VI. Public sector institutes and associations such as the Institute of Public Administration and the Association of Irish Local Government;
VII. Activities of non-governmental organisations focusing on planning and development;
VIII. Research and information gathering activities of private sector organisations; and
IX. Research and information gathering activities of private individuals.

One of the key challenges the OPR faces over the course of this Strategy Statement relates to the drawing together of the above in the context of what the various stakeholders in the planning process consider are key knowledge, training and public awareness needs, finding both what has already been researched and what remains to be delivered in relation to evidence, practice and/or awareness.

For this reason, the OPR intends to put in place a National Planning Knowledge Group to advise the Planning Regulator on the current state of our knowledge base in relation to both pressing and strategic planning matters and gaps to be addressed in conjunction with stakeholders. Initial soundings taken in the development of this Strategy Statement point to the potential of such a group to:

- **Develop an accessible on-line planning knowledge and training resource point** that would be easy to navigate for both those engaged in the practice of planning as well as those, such as the public, who seek more information so they can participate more effectively in the planning process;

- **Deliver a strategic planning research programme** that meets both immediate and longer-term knowledge requirements, such as: understanding the requirements of climate assessment of plans and projects, new mobility technologies, the impacts of an ageing population and better plan implementation, and project visualisation techniques to enable more members of the public to understand the implications of the various decision processes in planning:

- **Enable brokerage** between those seeking new data or insights into topical planning issues for policy development and practice delivery, such as Government, An Bord Pleanála and local authorities and those with capacity to meet such needs, such as the HEI sector or professional bodies with a research role; and

- **Dissemination of information about the benefits of, and achievements in, planning** – so that the general public can better understand, through local engagement, the broader function of planning and, importantly, their role in shaping the process.

The OPR is also mandated to make recommendations to the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government at the procedural and policy levels, whether national or local, arising from work processes under each of the three main functions described above.

Recommendations may arise where, in the evaluation of plans or strategies, the OPR considers that steps must be taken to ensure a plan's consistency with national policies or where a plan is not seen as adequately setting out an overall strategy for proper planning and sustainable development.

Furthermore, recommendations may arise following the review of particular planning authorities or the examination of specific complaints; in this regard, the OPR may ask the Minister to consider using powers to issue guidelines, or directives. In considering whether to issue recommendations to the Minister with regard to guidelines, or directives, the OPR will be informed by the findings of its research and education programme.

Our Stakeholders

The OPR must work with and take account of the inputs of many stakeholders in the planning process, reflecting the interests of:

- **The public**, for whom the planning process exists and to ensure the proper planning and development of both urban and rural areas and at national, regional and local levels;
- **The Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government and their Department** with whom the OPR will work on a day-to-day basis in the delivery of our statutory mandate, and in accordance with oversight and governance and financial management arrangements required of public bodies;
- **Planning authorities, An Bord Pleanála, Regional Assemblies, and the County and City Management Association (CCMA)**, who perform different plan-making and planning decision and other planning functions in accordance with national legislation and policy;
- **Related regulatory and oversight bodies with a mandate in the planning area** such as the Office of the Ombudsman (OO), Standards in Public Office (SIPO), the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) and similar bodies that the OPR must work with on a day-to-day basis in the discharge of our statutory functions;
- **The Oireachtas** through the work of the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government;
- **The elected members of local authorities** across the country who have important policy-making functions in planning and for whom training and information gathering programmes are essential to enhance planning outcomes;
- **State agencies and other consultees with a statutory remit in the planning process**, both at plan-making and decision stages, that input into our planning process and provide feedback on the effectiveness of its functions and the outcomes it delivers;
- **Commercial and State-sponsored bodies involved in the delivery of strategic infrastructure**, whether regionally or nationally, including significant commercial and industrial developments as well as transport, tourism, energy and environmental infrastructure:
- **Professional bodies and interest groups** engaged in the promotion of good standards in the management of the natural and built environment, including planning, architectural, engineering and surveying professions and various non-governmental organisations:
- **The Higher Education Institute (HEI) sector,** including the five planning schools on the island of Ireland, and other university and HEI faculties that provide a knowledge bank, research capacity and training functions;
- **Expert commentators and the media**, who are key to being informed by our work and communicating the importance of effective planning, of protecting our natural and built environments, of building wider public awareness of and engagement in the pressing planning issues of the day and in strategic terms as well.

What You Told Us

In developing this Strategy we recognise and value the importance of hearing the views of our stakeholders and incorporating them into our vision for the organisation. Our goal is to build an agile and stakeholder-focused organisation that is highly responsive and open to changes in its environment.

Furthermore, as part of its research, education and public awareness function, the OPR is strategically positioned within the planning system to become an important link between a variety of organisations and the public. We believe that through listening and taking your views on board we can achieve true organisational excellence and deliver meaningful programmes to the public.

From our establishment in early April 2019, we began our engagement with a variety of stakeholders to understand their visions and expectations in relation to the role of the OPR within the planning system.

Through this early engagement, we met with many of you to commence the creation of synergies and to establish learning networks facilitating sharing of knowledge to promote open and proactive cooperation among planning authorities, An Bord Pleanála, the HEI sector, non-governmental organisations, planning institutes, Government organisations and departments.

As a result of this early process, we had already learned that you would like to see the OPR build, develop and foster:

- Close and regular collaboration with stakeholders on topical and strategic planning matters and identification of gaps;
- New insights to our planning process and the creation of a 'go-to' organisation for planning knowledge;
- Better public participation throughout the development plan process;
- A 'lessons-learned' and 'here-to-help' approach to promote transparency and accountability in planning;
- Research programmes, including supporting those led by other bodies, such as the 'Planning research agenda for Ireland' currently being carried out by UCC and the Royal Town Planning Institute ;
- Training programmes for local authorities to promote a uniform approach and continuous improvements in the development plan process;
- Training in the use of Geographic Information Systems, with particular focus on housing and regeneration policy and environmental data;
- Creating Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programmes and material for professional planners.

To further build on this, the OPR opened the draft version of this Strategy Statement to public consultation, over a six-week period from August 2019. Thirty-one submissions were received from a variety of interested parties and stakeholder organisations.

The submissions expressed a high degree of support for the establishment of the OPR and the broad shape of the strategy statement.

Many of the submissions also highlighted opportunities for linkages between the work of the OPR and the relevant organisation. Others more specifically referenced issues such as the relationship between the work of the OPR and the evolving regulatory and policy context for marine planning, the need for a focus on the important roles of planning authorities in relation to enforcement and the role of planning in the delivery of crucial infrastructure, all of which have been reflected in the finalised Strategy Statement.

Another significant theme reflected through a number of the submissions was the issue of climate action and other pressing environmental challenges we face. The finalised Strategy Statement has been updated to give greater recognition to the role the planning process must play in meeting these challenges.

As an organisation we strive to foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement. As part of our work developing and implementing this Strategy Statement, we see the process of stakeholder consultation as a key element enabling the OPR to create a long-term vision that is meaningful and creates lasting and positive change.

All submissions received were considered and the draft Strategy Statement was revised to incorporate suggestions and recommendations to ensure it reflects stakeholder expectations in relation to the role of the OPR within the planning system. A summary of all the submissions received, and the OPR's response to the various suggestions, has been prepared and will be made publicly available.

The OPR wishes to thank the individuals and organisations who took the time to give us feedback on the Strategy Statement and we hope its final form appropriately incorporates your inputs.

Goals and Actions

The key goals and corresponding delivery actions for the OPR over the Strategy Statement period are set out in this section and are

Goal 1:	**Building a reputation as a clear, fair and independent voice on the effectiveness of Ireland's planning process**
Goal 2:	**Driving innovation and learning for all those that are stakeholders in the planning process**
Goal 3	**Focusing on the needs of customers and those with whom the OPR engages**
Goal 4:	**Creating a high-performing and efficient organisation that supports and enhances Ireland's planning process**
Goal 5:	**Building a resilient and agile organisation with a commitment to continuous learning**

Goal 1

Building a reputation as a clear, fair and independent voice on the effectiveness of Ireland's planning process

The Oireachtas legislated for the OPR to be an independent voice at the heart of the planning system. The OPR will strive to achieve this and to be recognised by the public as a trusted, knowledge-based, constantly improving organisation, delivering value and effective oversight of the planning system.

The OPR will ensure greater public clarity with regard to the role, and the benefits, of proper planning through education and awareness.

In serving the public interest, the OPR will play its part along with other stakeholders in the planning process to ensure proper planning and sustainable development. The OPR will also assist in ensuring that the enhanced institutional requirements of the ethics and standards in public office legislation, including the regulation of lobbying, are utilised in public policy implementation.

Actions	Milestones
Review, and issue recommendations, with regard to all stages of the plan-making process for draft statutory development plans, local area plans and regional spatial and economics strategies, as well as variations and amendments to same, to ensure compliance with national, and regional, planning policies and objectives.	Evaluation of approximately 200 draft plans, variations, etc. on a (6-year) cyclical basis. Develop and implement, in consultation with key stakeholders, including the regional assemblies and the CCMA, an effective and strategic assessment methodology for statutory plans to measure alignment with existing policy and regulatory requirements including climate and other factors.
Effective and timely examination of complaints about the planning process, where these relate to systemic and policy co-ordination matters where the authority's own internal review procedures have already been exhausted and where the complaints do not relate to individual cases which are within the remit of An Bord Pleanála, the Ombudsman's Office, the Courts etc.	Ongoing delivery of a high quality professional, accessible and timely complaints resolution service. We will work with experienced, knowledgeable and independent contracted partners to deliver a high quality service that is also value-for-money for the Exchequer. We will agree a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ombudsman's Office to clarify areas of responsibility and procedure.
Conduct effective and fair reviews of the systems and procedures used by planning authorities and An Bord Pleanála.	In addition to carrying out reviews on foot of specific occurrences, we will conduct systematic reviews of authorities' broad performance in their planning functions. During the lifetime of this Strategy we intend to scale-up a review cycle so that each authority will be reviewed on a 6-year cycle. We will develop, in consultation with key stakeholders (such as the Department, planning authorities and NOAC) a Planning Authority Performance Assessment Framework (PPAF) within which agreed process and outcome targets will be developed for performance and effectiveness measurement.
Be open and transparent in all our work.	All recommendations, with regard to statutory plans and all finalised reviews and examinations of planning authorities will be published on the OPR website. Annual publication of our report on the effectiveness of Ireland's planning process in relation to policy co-ordination, effectiveness in the delivery of planning services and enhancing our knowledge base to ensure public engagement and evidence based policy and decision-making.
Assist authorities, stakeholders and communities access and understand planning policy matters.	Implement a national planning communications programme to enhance the public's access to information about the functions, responsibilities and benefits of good planning. Host relevant policy and guidance documents in accessible formats on a dedicated portal on our website.
Be responsive to customer and stakeholder requirements and have effective working relationships with key stakeholders.	Through the delivery of the highest levels of customer service and ongoing monitoring of requirements and trends in customers' issues. Proactive engagement to establish and maintain effective collaborative relationships with stakeholders, including through the establishment of dedicated fora.

Goal 2

Driving innovation and learning for all those that are stakeholders in the planning process

The OPR is uniquely empowered to drive research and education to enhance the delivery of proper planning and sustainable development to the public. We recognise the pivotal role that the OPR plays in strengthening public awareness of planning, its impacts on society, the environment and its power to create sustainable communities.

We believe that knowledge sharing, training and public participation are effective and impactful methods for creating lasting change and it will be a focal point of our strategy to deliver this goal.

Actions	Milestones
Create synergies with other stakeholders, such as local authorities, regional assemblies, planning institutes and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, to identify existing knowledge shortfalls, create standards of best practice in planning and to inform OPR research programmes.	Conduct regular stakeholder meetings, draw on existing intellectual and corporate resources to arrange for the carrying out of research and educational programmes by partners that provide meaningful outcomes while ensuring value for money. Implement a Geographic Information System that supports mapping, visualisation, spatial analysis, monitoring, analytics, decision-making, and engagement with our stakeholders.
Establish a National Planning Knowledge Group, including planning authorities, the HEI sector, non-governmental organisations, planning institutes, government organisations and departments.	Identify knowledge gaps through collaborative research with key stakeholders in the planning system. Conduct stakeholder surveys and assess the implementation and functioning of planning policy in Ireland.
Provide educational programmes for specific stakeholder groups, such as the elected members, Directors of Service at local authorities, professional planners and non-governmental organisations.	Identify target audience to address specific knowledge gaps. Design and deliver educational programmes, information points and resource materials with a particular focus on informing new local elected members in relation to their statutory duties and obligations under planning legislation and policy requirements. Arrange for the delivery of CPD-focused training for decision-makers in the planning process including officials and professional planners.
Develop accredited CPD programmes for professional planners.	Engage in discussions with Planning Institutes to collaboratively develop CPD training programmes at the start of each calendar year.
Build upon, and complement, existing planning authority initiatives to improve public awareness of the planning process by disseminating information about the benefits of and achievements in planning.	Implement interactive, ICT-driven solutions to enable better participation by the public in the plan-making process. Hold public information sessions to discuss topical planning issues and provide practical information on public participation in the planning process.
Deliver regular events for all stakeholders in the planning process focusing on promoting best practice in planning.	Organise annual events, including in conjunction with planning institutes, addressing specific areas of best practice developed within the previous period through OPR-driven research.

Goal 3

Focusing on the needs of customers and those with whom the OPR engages

The OPR will ensure a customer-focused approach to all its services. We will actively engage with stakeholders and customers to gain a better understanding of their needs. We will continuously improve and develop our customer service interfaces, including through information technology.

Actions	Milestones
Maintain and review on an ongoing basis, and publicise, a relevant and ambitious Customer Charter.	Charter to be easily accessible on our website, in both Irish and English, outlining our service commitments to our customers.
Continuously seek customer and stakeholder feedback to understand customer's experiences of the planning system and changing perceptions.	Conduct customer surveys to ensure customers are receiving the optimum service. Develop website functionality to allow customers engage with us in an efficient and user-friendly manner. Analyse data received through the complaints process to gain insights into issues arising.
Take a broad and strategic approach to communicating with our customers and stakeholders, using a range of tools and techniques including website and social media feeds.	We will maintain and develop our website and social media presence to ensure quality communication with our customers and potential customers and to increase awareness of the OPR and its functions.
At all times, we will provide information that is as clear and accessible as possible.	Reply to correspondence in clear plain language, free, wherever possible, from jargon and technical terms. Ensure that website content is written in plain English, as appropriate.
Ensure that all customer complaints are handled in the most effective, efficient and impartial manner.	Implement an internal code of practice for complaint handling.

Goal 4

Creating a high-performing and efficient organisation that supports and enhances Ireland's planning process

The overall delivery of this Strategy Statement is reliant on our functioning as a high-performing organisation. We will build efficient systems and procedures to enable the organisation to discharge its statutory duties and effectively serve the public interest.

The OPR will work in partnership with other key State bodies, such as the local authorities, the regional assemblies, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Office of Public Works, Irish Water, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, and the National Transport Authority, the Nationals Parks and Wildlife Service, and the National Monuments Service and Government departments, to share knowledge and information with the objective of enhancing the planning process.

Actions	Milestones
Ensure value for money and sound financial management in all aspects of our business.	Compliance with public spending codes, including procurement and financial management rules, ensuring accountability and transparency. Timely and accurate financial reporting.
Building a suite of ICT systems to ensure we perform effectively, engage extensively and discharge our statutory functions in good time.	Develop and implement an accessible on-line platform to disseminate planning knowledge, to provide a training resource point and easy access for the public to planning data.
Implement governance structures that promote accountable and transparent decision-making and that are in line with the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies.	Provide timely and accurate corporate governance reporting to our parent department. Ensure sound internal controls and establish a continuous monitoring mechanism for these through cyclical internal audits.
Support the work of the public sector through sharing of knowledge, improving procedures and closely collaborating with other public bodies to maximise effectiveness.	Liaise with other regulatory bodies to build a common and shared best practice to effectively deliver services to the public.
Develop a communications policy with a particular focus on timely communication of changes in the planning system and topical issues with stakeholders.	Issue publications and hold information seminars for both organisational stakeholders and the public.

Goal 5

Building a resilient and agile organisation with a commitment to continuous learning

We are committed to achieving organisational excellence through empowering our people, developing strong systems and procedures and ensuring accountability and transparency in all aspects of our business. We will strive to develop the OPR as an organisation that is highly responsive to external changes and adapts to them while continuously maintaining high standards of performance.

Actions	Milestones
Attract and retain talented and motivated staff and develop our organisation through investing in our people and structures to ensure that it actively supports our strategic goals and values.	Build our staffing complement in line with our workforce plan and foster the culture of continuous learning through the provision of relevant and transferable training and development.
Continuously develop staff through a comprehensive performance-management and learning and development system.	Effective annual target setting for performance management and development of an annual learning and development plan, encompassing staff skills and experience in order to identify knowledge gaps.
Implement ICT infrastructure that is adaptable, secure and responsive to change.	Carry out regular ICT audits to identify gaps and implement improvements and ensuring that data security is at the forefront of all ICT projects.
Efficiently adapt to legislative and policy changes affecting the discharge of our functions.	Continuously monitor legislative and policy developments and provide appropriate training to staff.
Respond to changes in the regulatory environment, ensuring public interest is at the forefront of all decision-making.	Create / participate in a network of regulatory bodies to allow early identification of upcoming changes.
Identify expected future impacts of the planning system on the environment, communities, transport and other relevant areas to proactively design meaningful solutions.	Through research, in partnership with stakeholders, and analysis of the implementation of planning policy, prepare annual forecasts in relation to future impacts.

Demonstrating Our Effectiveness

As part of our Strategy Statement, we will strive to continuously deliver high quality, efficient and measurable services to all our stakeholders and we recognise the importance of reporting on our achievements in a transparent, timely and accountable manner.

On a yearly basis, we will prepare and publish an Annual Report which will provide detailed information on our performance against targets set out in this Strategy Statement. In preparing the Report, we will report on numerous aspects of our business, such as:

- progress on the implementation of Government policy, such as the National Planning Framework;
- development plans and other plans and strategies assessed and matters arising;
- statistical information on complaint handling;
- benchmarking of performance of planning authorities;
- areas of ongoing research;
- educational programmes provided to stakeholders;
- financial performance and value for money; and
- organisational capability, including premises and resources available.

Performance in achieving our milestones will also inform the production of annual business plans for each functional area of the OPR. These annual business plans will also recognise, and provide for, the challenges, risks and opportunities presenting in our operating environment.

We also recognise the importance of maintaining high standards of corporate governance in line with the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies. We will work closely with our parent department to demonstrate financial accountability, sound internal controls, fairness and transparency in the conduct of our business.

We will develop and implement an Oversight Agreement and a Performance Delivery Agreement, following the publication of this Strategy Statement, through which we will provide a further commitment in the implementation of sound corporate governance, including:

- establishment of a Risk Committee to ensure regular and thorough assessment of risks;
- establishment of a Finance and Audit Committee;
- implementation of a Procurement Register, ensuring regular monitoring of value for money.

Furthermore, we recognise the critical importance of measuring our performance through the satisfaction of our customers. We will maintain statistics to measure progress towards the service targets established in our Customer Charter. We will carry out consultations and surveys on an annual basis in order to continuously incorporate the views of our stakeholders into our targets.

In our work to build and operate an effective Office of the Planning Regulator, we anticipate that our efforts with all the wider stakeholders will create an even more effective planning process in Ireland for the benefit of the common good and the public interest.

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