OPR Oifig an
Rialaitheora Pleanála
Office of the
Planning Regulator

OPR Programme of Reviews of Local Authorities' Systems and Procedures in the Performance of Planning Functions

Review of Meath County Council under section 31AS of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended Review Report

May 2024

Contents

comhairle chontae na mí
meath county council

1.   Introduction

Background

Planning plays a fundamental role in our society. It aims to ensure that the right development happens in the right place at the right time, benefitting communities and the economy, while protecting our environment and heritage. Planning has a fundamental role in the transition to a low carbon future, including through adapting to and mitigating against flood risk, developing indigenous, renewable energy resources, ensuring development supports more sustainable transport options and encouraging more effective use of brownfield sites over greenfield land. As such, planning plays a key role in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Planning should set out a cohesive vision for the future of Ireland; the role of the OPR is to ensure that local authorities support and implement this vision.

Newgrange, Co. Meath[1]

Chapter IV ('Review of Planning Functions') of Part IIB of the Planning & Development Act 2000, as amended, ('the Act'), in particular 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. These provisions give a basis for overseeing the delivery of planning services to the public and to ensure the integrity of the institutional arrangements behind the national planning system.

As committed to in our Strategy Statement, the OPR is implementing a programme of reviews under section 31AS of the Act whereby each authority, in turn, will be reviewed in respect of the systems and procedures used in the performance of statutory planning functions.

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An OPR review is improvement-focused, designed to complement and add value to the local authority's own performance and improvement plans. The programme is intended as a developmental resource for the planning system, with recommendations arising from the process that are designed to enhance the delivery of services to the public. The overall intention is to embed a culture of continuous improvement in the Irish planning sector.

Scope

Reviews are conducted in accordance with section 31AS of the Act and on this basis the emphasis is on the systems and procedures being used by a local authority to deliver its planning functions. In this regard, the review process is concerned with current operations rather than focussing on historical matters.

While the findings of this review draw upon knowledge available to the OPR in the delivery of our broad statutory remit as well as published statistics, this report principally reflects the information presented by Meath County Council to the OPR during the review process.

Process

The undertaking of any individual review is a comprehensive process, involving significant processes of information gathering, analysis and engagement with planning officials to fully appraise the systems and procedures used to deliver planning functions.

The Meath County Council review, formally initiated in May 2023, involved extensive engagement with the planning department over a number of months. This included a series of workshop-style meetings in the Council's offices with senior management and staff across the planning department. Following the publication of the review, the OPR engages in a two-year monitoring process with the Council to ensure that recommendations made are implemented.

The OPR recognises that at the time of the review, a comprehensive review of the Act is underway.[2] While the recommendations made as part of this review reflect the statutory requirements at the time of the review, the OPR will, if necessary, discuss the outcome of any relevant revised legislation with the Council as part of the implementation and monitoring phase of the OPR's review process.

The OPR wish to express thanks to Meath County Council for facilitating open engagement throughout the review process and to acknowledge the input of the Council's planning department staff, including the generous access and insights provided.

Ratings and Recommendations

The reviews programme does not set out to create a league table of local authorities with regard to performance. Nevertheless, it is important that the review process assesses the performance of the planning department in the delivery of their statutory functions as well as the overall organisation and governance of the planning department and its engagement with the public. In this regard, the OPR will apply a broad rating in respect of the systems and procedures across the key operational processes in planning service delivery.

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[2] The Planning & Development Bill 2023 is currently before Dáil Éireann, Third Stage completed.

The ratings are defined as follows:

- **Satisfactory:** where it has been demonstrated that the systems and procedures are adequate to effectively deliver the statutory function on an ongoing basis and to meet key business objectives.
- **Unsatisfactory:** insufficient evidence has been provided that appropriate systems and procedures are in place, thereby creating an unacceptable weakness with regard to the ability to adequately deliver the statutory function and to meet key business objectives.

The ratings and recommendations are provided to encourage the ongoing improvement of robust procedures in relation to statutory functions and collectively evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of the delivery of the local authorities planning services.

Regardless of the rating applied, recommendations may be made as part of the review indicating how systems for delivering operational processes could be improved or how current standards may be maintained. A collated list of recommendations made in this report is provided in Appendix 1. These recommendations are also graded by the level of priority that should be assigned to them by the Council, as follows:

- **Critical:** immediate implementation of the recommendation is required to resolve a critical weakness which may be impacting the delivery of statutory functions.
- **High:** the recommendation should be addressed urgently to ensure that the identified weakness does not lead to a failure to deliver on statutory requirements.
- **Medium:** the recommendation should be considered in the short-term with a view to enhancing the effectiveness of service delivery.
- **Low:** the recommendation relates to an improvement which would address a minor weakness and should be addressed over time.
- **Advisory:** the recommendation does not have a serious impact for internal systems and procedures but could have a moderate impact upon operational performance. On this basis, the recommendation should be considered for implementation on a self-assessed basis.

Case Studies

Planning departments are continually adapting to increase efficiencies in procedures and generally provide an improved public service in an ever challenging and changing legislative environment. As such, the OPR will, where relevant, include case studies as part of the review report to demonstrate positive procedures implemented by planning departments, to generally highlight areas considered to be of a high standard, and/or, to showcase instances of best practice that assist with continuous improvement in relation to service delivery by planning departments.

2.   Overview of Key Findings

Overall the review process has found that Meath County Council's planning performance is satisfactory with the planning department delivering its key statutory functions on an effective basis, and wherein a significant programme of work is managed. In this regard, in the region of 1,400 planning applications are being processed annually, a new development plan was adopted following an arduous period of legislative changes, and the progression of projects to assist with the revitalisation and regeneration of towns through various funding streams are a key priority.

A range of complexities must be managed in the delivery of planning services in Meath. On one hand a large portion of the county is rural, with an abundance of unique heritage intertwined through all elements of its landscape. This requires a sensitive and sustainable approach to managing development, whilst also protecting and strengthening Meath's economic base to ensure it is a county that is attractive to work in as well as live in. Connected to this is the additional challenge of the county's location in the context of the Greater Dublin Area where there are constant pressures to deliver housing and where a significant commuting population exist.

The Council's approach to the structuring of the planning department is efficient in coordinating the department's statutory obligations as well as providing momentum in the delivery of wider responsibilities, including the facilitation of a strategic approach to national funding initiatives and the facilitation of housing development through the integration of building control into the planning department.

With a staffing complement of approximately 62 full-time equivalents (including three planner vacancies at the time of review), like other authorities, Meath County Council's planning department is delivering its key functions against a background of significant pressures on resources. The requirement to deliver such wide-ranging duties, and progress significant caseloads within statutory timeframes, creates ongoing pressure in relation to the deployment of resources and the assignment of priorities. In this regard, the resourcing of its planning department will need to be an ongoing priority for Meath County Council.

Plan Led Development

This review found the Council to generally have effective systems and procedures in place in the delivery of its forward planning function. However, the availability of appropriate resources to ensure the local authority continues to effectively deliver its forward planning function will be key.

In this regard, a key forward planning task will be ensuring the implementation and monitoring of the development plan objectives. Further, it will be important that the Council places an appropriate strategic emphasis on overseeing plan-led development opportunities.

The importance of plan-led development given the County's strategic location in the context of the Greater Dublin Area, and its high quality roads infrastructure, places an additional emphasis on plan-led procedures to ensure that local, regional and national objectives can be delivered successfully. In this regard, it must be recognised that a resourced planning department is critical to delivering on Meath's role in the promotion of sustainable settlement and transport strategies in

urban and rural areas, including the promotion of measures to reduce energy demand and greenhouse gas emissions and to adapt to climate change. The Council's planning department needs to be positioned to be proactive in this regard, rather than resourced to primarily respond to customer-driven demands in relation to planning applications.

It is clear that a significant forward planning workload lies ahead for the planning department with impending local area plans, or other statutory plans as might be replaced by imminent legislative revisions, for towns such as Navan, Ashbourne, Kells and Drogheda. In addition, it is acknowledged as an ongoing challenge for the entire local authority sector to continue delivering forward planning programmes to statutory targets while at the same time providing for meaningful public engagement, including with elected members, in the context of ever evolving national planning policy requirements.

As such, the development of a strategically managed approach to its work programme as well as a suite of documented procedures for the various forward planning processes, including implementation monitoring, engagement with the public and the incorporation of national guidance and legislative updates into the plan-making process will assist the department in consistently delivering such tasks.

Navan, Co. Meath

Managing for Sustainable Development

For any local authority, managing for sustainable development is primarily about ensuring that all aspects of decision-making are in accordance with the overall economic, social and environmental objectives of the relevant statutory plans, while also being in line with wider national and international obligations.

As noted above, the Council is presented with a range of planning scenarios, some of which are more complex in nature than in other local authority areas, which often require access to greater levels of expertise to inform decision-making in the context of interfacing social, economic and environmental factors. In this respect, this review found the procedures the Council have in place to facilitate consistent decision-making across the various development management functions is satisfactory.

The Council's satisfactory performance in this regard is further illustrated through its planning application output statistics which are consistently higher than national trends in terms of the numbers of planning applications processed by the planning department.

The volume of planning applications being processed by Meath is evidence of strong demand for development. In this regard the control of development through the planning consent process must also be matched by adequate levels of enforcement in relation to unauthorised activities. While the Council displays effective systems and procedures in relation to planning enforcement, it is clear that in recent years the county's enforcement caseload has been increasing to challenging levels. It is important that the Council sends a clear message in relation to the unacceptability of unauthorised development and that such matters will be pursued.

Delivering Quality Planning Services

The delivery of quality planning services is relevant to all the functions of a local authority's planning department. It involves providing a positive customer experience through clear communication, provision of accessible information, efficiency in handling planning applications, consistency across planning decisions, and being transparent throughout the process.

Meath County Council is no different to other local authorities whose planning departments are operating in a complex and demanding environment. In recent years, the Council has delivered on its functions in an admirable manner, processing a record number of planning applications, frequently large in scale and complex in assessment. This review has found that the development management function is being delivered effectively with the timelines of decision making consistent with national averages and a low rate of appeal against the Council's decisions.

The customer focus is also evident in the planning department's success in establishing new procedures to manage compliance of conditions. In this context the Council has demonstrated an ability to design and implement new systems to ensure efficiencies of service delivery for both the department and the public, whilst also reducing organisational risk. Furthermore, the emphasis placed on enabling housing developments through the planning and building code requirements, and on to taking-in-charge, demonstrates a commitment to facilitating the development sector to meet strategic objectives.

In relation to provision and accessibility of information, the Council's website generally provides good resources to the public and planning practitioners. The website provides quality information on the planning process, including template forms. The Council's ability to engage with the public is also evidenced through the very significant volume of submissions received in relation to the county development plan review process.

Conclusion

Throughout the review process it was evident that the planning department benefits from clear leadership and a strong team ethic. With a positive working culture, it is clear that the planning department can and should further build upon its existing capabilities in the coming years to deliver services and implement policy, even more effectively.

While good systems and procedures have been implemented to guide operational processes, there is a challenge for the planning department to successfully deliver on myriad responsibilities given the pressures faced. Accordingly, the various recommendations set out in this report seek to build on existing qualities to build further organisational resilience, assist in the delivery of strategic obligations and ensure high-performance in service delivery.

3. Operating Context and Organisation of the Planning Department

Local government systems operate in an environment that is regulated, political, dynamic and subject to change. This section outlines the complexities of Meath County Council's planning department and the context within which it functions.

3.1 Area Profile

County Meath covers an area of over 2,300km², making it the 14th largest county in Ireland. Meath shares a border with Dublin and Kildare to the south, Louth to the northeast as well as Offaly, Westmeath, Cavan and Monaghan. Meath's short border along the Irish Sea gives it the second shortest coastline of any county (10km).

County Meath experienced considerable population growth between April 2016 and April 2022 having grown from 195,044 in 2016 to 220,826 in 2022, at 13% this was the second largest increase in the country during this period.[3] The population density of the county was approximately 95 per km², compared to a national average population density of 73 per km² in 2022.

Housing stock has increased broadly in line with population growth. Meath delivered the largest increase in housing stock in the State between 2016-2022, with an increase of 12%, seeing 7,198 new dwellings built, more than three times that built between 2011-2015. The vacancy rate, at 6%, is lower than the national average of 8%.[4]

Meath is part of the Greater Dublin Area and is located within the Eastern & Midlands Region. The Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly's Regional, Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) 2019-2031 identifies part of Meath as being within the Dublin Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) area, whilst Navan is designated a key town and Drogheda as a regional growth centre.

Navan is the county town with a population of 33,886 whilst Ashbourne, Laytown-Bettystown-Mornington-Donacarney and Ratoath all have populations of over 10,000 people. Further, Maynooth and Drogheda are significant urban centres that lie adjacent to the County. There are five towns with a population of 5,000 or more with the remainder of the county being largely rural in character.

3.2 Organisational Context

The executive of Meath County Council is led by a Chief Executive, supported by five directorates as follows:
- Finance, Information Systems & Water Services;
- Housing, Community & Cultural Development;
- Planning, Economic & Tourism Development;
- Infrastructure, Project Management, People Management & Development; and
- Corporate Affairs & Governance, Climate Action & Emergency Services[5].

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[3] CSO, 'Census 2022', (2023).
[4] CSO, 'Census 2022. Profile 2 – housing in Ireland', (2023)
[5] Meath County Council (2023). Annual Service Delivery Plan 2023.

In 2014, the abolition of three town councils in Co Meath resulted in the county being divided into six Municipal Districts. Each Director of Service, except for Housing, Community & Cultural Development, is also responsible for a Municipal District.

Meath County Council has a total of 40 councillors, representing the six municipal districts of Ashbourne, Kells, Laytown / Bettystown, Navan, Ratoath and Trim. The reserved functions of the Council are exercised at two levels. The Corporate Plan outlines that a range of functions are reserved for the full County Council (Plenary Council) whilst other functions are performed through the six Municipal Districts as provided for in the Local Government Act 2014.

There are four Strategic Policy Committees where elected members, as well as external sectoral interests, are represented and are tasked with the formulation and development of policy for the Council. They give the relevant sectoral interests an opportunity to assist the Council in the policy making process, consisting of:
- Housing, Community & Cultural Development;
- Planning, Economic Development, Enterprise & European Affairs;
- Transportation; and
- Climate Action and the Environment.

Meath County Council's overarching vision, as set out in the Council's current Corporate Plan 2019-2024, is to "make Meath the lead county for economic prosperity, social development and environmental protection, with efficient and good value services and a Council representing the people and communities of County Meath in an effective and accountable manner". The Strategic Objectives aimed at delivering this vision are:
1. Deliver excellent public services to our citizens;
2. Lead economic development, support enterprise and employment creation;
3. Provide a blend of solutions to the complex housing challenges at local level;
4. Support the transition to a low carbon economy and lead on climate action;
5. Engage the wider community, increase participation and work to make Meath an age friendly county;
6. Build strong, influential partnerships to maximise the county's potential; and
7. Develop organisational capability through innovation and staff excellence.

Meath County Council's overall budget for 2023 in relation to day-to-day services was €186.3 million.[6] Grants and subsidies are the largest source of income for the Council (38% of total income). Commercial rates (28%) and income from goods and services (27%) are also key income sources with Local Property Tax making up the remainder of the Council's income (8%).[7] In terms of rates, Meath's collection rate of 93% in 2019 is significantly ahead of the national average of 86%.[8]

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[6] Meath County Council, 'Annual Service Delivery Plan 2023'. (2023)
[7] Meath County Council, 'Annual Service Delivery Plan 2023' (2023).
[8] National Oversight & Audit Commission, 'Meath County Council Scrutiny Report' (2021)

From a governance and ethics perspective, national legislation (Part 15 of the Local Government Act 2001 and sections 147 and 148 of the Act) requires that systems are in place for the making of annual declarations of any interests that elected members and relevant employees may have.

In this regard, the Council have designated a member of staff as an Ethics Officer to oversee the annual declaration of interests. This requires disclosure of certain specific information including interest in property and businesses relevant to their respective duties in local government. The Council's register of interests is available to view at the Council offices.

The Council report that all relevant staff have completed their declarations in line with Part 15 and forwarded to Corporate Services as required. Further, when elected members are formulating development plans a statement on conflict of interest is read out at each meeting.

However, the identification of conflicts of interest for staff members in relation to individual planning cases happens informally. The requirement for staff to take individual responsibility in the context of conflicts of interest, or indeed perceived conflicts of interest, should not be underestimated. It is important that the planning authority develops and implements a formal procedure that will assist staff in addressing any matters that represent, or could be seen to represent, conflicts of interest. Such a procedure could incorporate sufficient unambiguous guidance to allow all individuals working within the planning authority to consider all matters that could influence their impartiality, or the perception of their independence, in respect of the duties they perform on behalf of the wider public and to ensure any matters raised are recorded, demonstrating good governance in this regard.

In terms of risk, the Council have formal procedures in place to identify and handle risk. Planning related risks are documented in a risk register along with existing control measures and actions needed to mitigate risk. As well as these formal approaches, the Council reported that informal risk identification and management takes place on an ongoing basis through day-to-day work.

3.3   Overview of the Planning Department

The planning department is managed by the Director of Services with responsibility for planning, economic development and tourism with the assistance of a senior planner and a senior executive officer. The senior planner is supported by technical and administrative staff including three senior executive planners and a senior executive building surveyor. There are 67 staff, equating to 62 full time equivalents (FTE), working in the department.[9] There were three vacancies at the time of the review (all executive planner posts in the forward planning team).

The planning department is organised into four teams to deliver its functions:
- Forward Planning;
- Development Management;
- Projects / Largescale Residential Development; (LRD) and
- Planning Enforcement / Building Control.

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[9] Including two staff members allocated to economic development who report to the SEO

The Projects / LRD team was established in 2020 to build on the planning department's potential to have a greater focus on high-level strategic projects. This foresight has enabled the planning department to have a fundamental role in actively progressing project delivery, regeneration and positive community engagement.
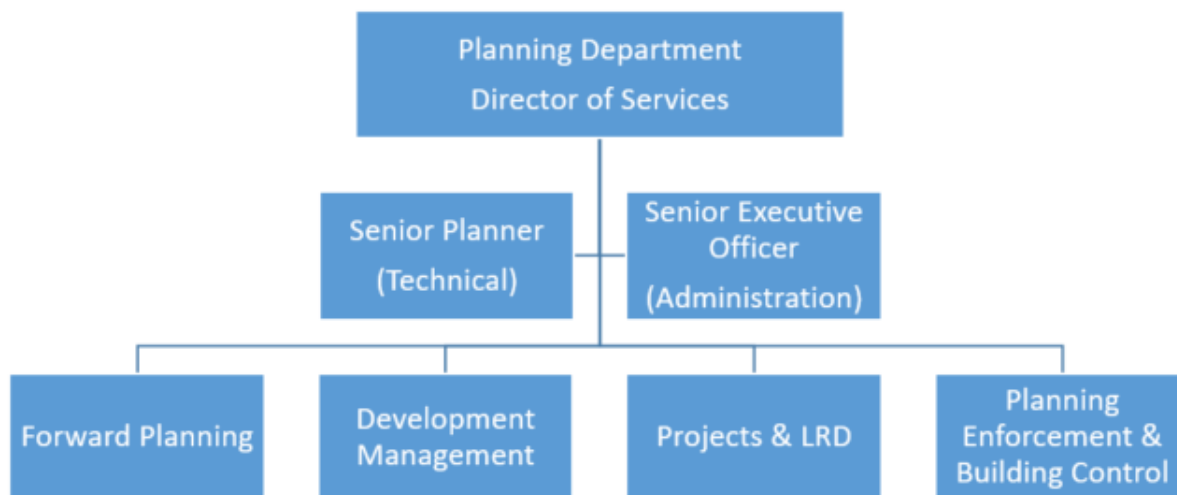

Figure 1 - Planning department teams and functions

As well as the functions set out in Figure 1, the planning department is also responsible for a range of activities, including:

- the preparation of masterplans;
- working with other agencies (such as the Land Development Agency);
- the preparation of the public realm strategies; and
- bidding for and administering grant schemes.

The Council's most recent Service Delivery Plan identifies a supporting strategy for the planning department, linked to the achievement of the strategic objectives. It includes specific targets for the planning department including the preparation of four local area plans, the preparation of a development plan monitoring system, implementation of the Residential Zoned Land Tax (RZLT), implementation of ePlanning and the roll out of a triage assessment in enforcement.

The activities of the planning department are funded under the 'development management' heading of the Council's budget, which equated to 10% of the Council's overall budget. This includes spending on planning, community, economic development and tourism. Of the €17.8 million allocated under this broad heading, expenditure on key planning functions (i.e. development management, forward planning and enforcement) amounted to 40% of the overall budget. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the 2023 budget allocation by each planning function and outlines the percentage change from 2022.

The National Oversight & Audit Commission (NOAC), through its 'cost of planning' analysis indicates that the Council's expenditure on planning in 2022 was €28.01 per capita. This figure is somewhat below the national average of €33.54.

Planning Function	2023 Budget	% of 2023 Budget[10]	% Change from 2022 Budget
Forward Planning	€1,160,805	7%	.1%
Development Management	€5,415,316	30%	7%
Enforcement	€588,518	3%	16%
Unfinished Housing Estates	€190,945	1%	2%
Heritage and Conservation Services	€1,039,963	6%	10%
Total	**€8,395,547**	**47%**	**7%**

Table 1- Estimated budget for 2022 / 2023[11]

Table 2 details staffing numbers at the various management, administrative / operational and specialist roles.[12] The department has also received sanction for a biodiversity officer and at the time of the review, was seeking sanction for a range of other roles including an additional senior planner, senior executive planners (2), executive planners (4) and an ecologist.

Staffing	Full Time Equivalents
Management / Operational	31
Planners	20 (including 3 vacancies)
Technicians	9[13]
Conservation	1
Heritage	1

Table 2 – Staff Structure

There is a GIS technician working in the IT department in the Council who has a broad remit. The expertise of the GIS officer is available to the planning team, along with other teams within the Council as necessary.

The senior planner and senior executive officer (SEO) roles operate across all the department's areas of responsibility. Their roles are to oversee the effective daily operation of the planning department and those dedicated teams to ensure that the statutory functions are delivered.

The planning department also works closely with other departments across the Council in the delivery of non-statutory functions including economic development and tourism, Climate Action Plans, active travel, natural heritage and biodiversity, public realm improvements, strategic projects, etc.

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[10] Noting that the overall budget heading also includes economic development, community and tourism funding
[11] Meath County Council, 'Annual budget 2023.' (2023)
[12] Reflects staffing (without additional sanctions) at the time the review was conducted.
[13] Includes 4xClerk of Works

Development Management

A senior executive planner leads the delivery of the development management function with the support of six executive planners, three assistant planners, a graduate planner and two technicians. The SEO and administrative officers lead an administrative team of 20 staff who coordinate the operational aspects of the development management function.

In addition to processing planning applications, the development management team's responsibilities include pre-planning consultations under section 257 of the Act; section 254 licences; 'Part 8' projects; development contributions and conditions compliance. It is noted from the development management activity statistics that Meath County Council is processing a significantly higher number of planning applications in comparison to other local authorities.

Forward Planning

A senior executive planner leads the forward planning team and is supported by four executive planners – though it must be acknowledged again that three positions were vacant at the time the review process was being conducted. While, as noted above, the department's SEO and AO has management input into the forward planning function, the planners are directly supported by a clerical officer.

The team oversee the preparation, monitoring, reporting and review of the county development plan and local area plans, including two joint statutory plans for the Maynooth and Drogheda areas in conjunction with Kildare and Louth County Councils, respectively. Notwithstanding the three vacant planner positions, the forward planning team has a significant body of work to manage for a staffing cohort of six dedicated staff. Senior management has identified this and is seeking sanction for a further two planner posts.

Projects / Largescale Residential Development (LRD)

The Projects / LRD team is led by a senior executive planner who is supported by two executive planners and an assistant planner. The team has access to administrative support (1.4 FTE) but does not have any dedicated administrative staff assigned.

This team has a wide-ranging remit, including Strategic Housing Development (SHD) and LRD applications, place-making and collaboration work on project activation. A conservation officer and heritage officer are also included within the Projects / LRD team, however their roles extend across all functions of the Council. At the time of the review, the department was in the process of recruiting a biodiversity officer and seeking sanction for an ecologist. While both posts would sit within this team, it is intended that they will work across teams as required.

Planning Enforcement and Building Control

A senior executive building surveyor and an executive engineer oversee this team with the support of a technician and four clerks of works. Operational support comes from administrative staff (seven FTEs) under the management of the SEO. There is no planner on the team at present, however this has been identified as a recruitment priority. The core responsibilities of this team are planning enforcement, building control and taking-in-charge.

The overall breakdown of FTE within the planning department staff is set out below in Figure 2.
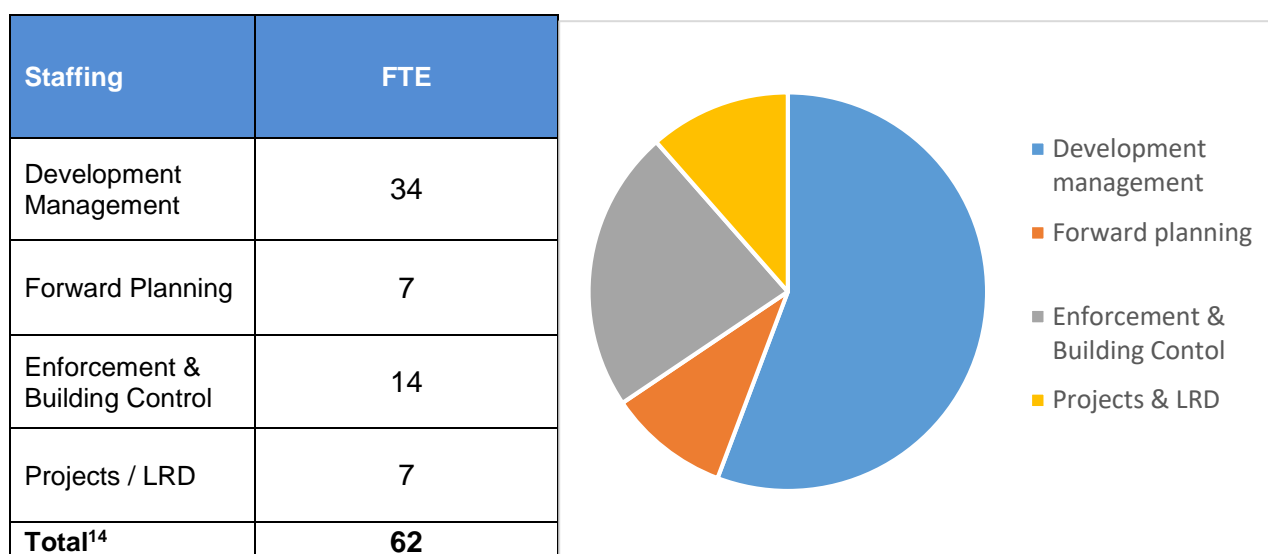
Staffing	FTE
Development Management	34
Forward Planning	7
Enforcement & Building Control	14
Projects / LRD	7
Total[14]	**62**

Figure 2: Resourcing by function

Business and Workforce Planning

The Council's Annual Service Delivery Plan 2023 sets out the single consolidated business plan for the department. It includes twenty specific performance targets for the planning department, linked to its Corporate Plan 2019-2024. These include the core statutory requirements of the department as well as other responsibilities such as:

- defending judicial reviews relating to the statutory plans;
- strategic investment / funding projects; and,
- roll-out of ePlanning, etc.

The department has engaged in a number of strategic planning exercises including preparation of a Business Continuity Checklist, Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) Planning Resources Recruitment Priorities 2023 and the CCMA Review of Planning resources 2022.

The department has identified staff resourcing and retention as a significant challenge. It highlighted the challenge of replacing experienced staff and the noted shortages within the planning profession, as well as challenges obtaining sanction for new posts. However, the department has been proactive in identifying a proposed staffing structure and has an ongoing partnership with Queens University Belfast which allows for the facilitation of student placements.

The Council has a blended work policy with technical staff offered the opportunity of working two days remotely. This is regarded as key to staff retention in a challenging recruitment environment. An 'anchor day' in the Council offices for all planning department staff facilitated in-person engagement.

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[14] Including the three planner posts vacant at time of review.

There is a regular schedule of internal meetings at various levels within the planning department to coordinate responsibilities (weekly / bi-monthly / monthly). The Director of Services meets with the Council's management team fortnightly, where relevant planning matters are discussed, as necessary. The senior management of the planning department meet monthly to discuss the overall functioning of the department (the senior planner, administrative officer, the senior executive planners and senior executive building surveyor attend).

Performance Management / Learning & Development

A record of staff training is maintained which includes accredited courses specific to planning and local authority roles as well as practical mandatory courses such as Safe-Pass and manual handling courses. The Council covers the cost of members of staff's professional membership fees. There is a clear procedure applied to ensure that planning department staff are updated on national guidance and new legislative requirements.

Individual performance is monitored through the standard public sector Performance Management Development System (PMDS), which provides a framework for the identification of a staff member's delivery objectives and training requirements. End-of-year reviews were completed for 58% and 60% of staff in 2021 and 2022 respectively. The department also highlighted that informal performance management and support takes place on a day-to-day basis with an 'open-door' policy between all team members including senior management cited as being key to this informal approach. There were no details provided of a team development plan for the department.

PMDS is key to monitoring individual performance and development as well as providing management with a focused opportunity to reflect on individual and team support. As such it is imperative that the Council make efforts to ensure there is an ongoing commitment to completing this annual process and (while acknowledging that the Corporate Plan provides some guidance for staff) that a team plan, as well as personal development plans, are prepared and reviewed at regular intervals to ensure targets can be achieved.

Conclusions

Overall, the structures in place within the planning department demonstrate a commitment to managing and supporting staff in a clear and consistent manner. There are established, effective communication and reporting arrangements in place between all levels of the staffing hierarchy. Furthermore, ongoing business planning has created a working environment that is efficient in coordinating the department's statutory obligations, along with providing a fundamental supporting role to wider local authority functions.

In particular, it is noted that the establishment of the Projects / LRD team, with dedicated resources, demonstrates the Council's commitment to proper planning and sustainable development in the delivery of special projects and has facilitated a strategic approach towards the utilisation of national funding initiatives. This is an effective assignment of resources, which also provides a supporting function across other Council services critical to the successful delivery of local and national government policies and priorities, including those which may be strictly outside the statutory remit of the planning department.

In addition, the initiative to place responsibility for the delivery of the Council's planning enforcement and building control together in a single operating unit has created synergies, not only for the delivery of these duties but for the wider planning department. In this regard, the expertise of a senior executive building surveyor and four clerks of works within the enforcement and building control team provides an excellent specialist resource to the planning department.

Furthermore, with recruitment of a biodiversity officer in train at the time of the review, as well as sanction being sought for an ecologist, it is clear that the department is proactively taking steps to manage the increasing complexities of its role and is proactively responding to climate action and biodiversity matters.

Notwithstanding the intelligent structuring of teams, and regardless of the vacancies currently being carried, it is evident that the planning department is carrying a significant workload and, in this regard, it is under constant pressure in relation to the deployment of resources and the assignment of priorities. While this is clearly illustrated in relation to the forward planning and enforcement functions, which, subsequent analysis will demonstrate, have significant workloads to deliver on ahead, it is an overall matter of consideration for a busy planning department.

With ever-increasing complexities to face, including new legislation and the urgencies of environmental protection and climate action, like other local authorities, Meath County Council must remain focussed on adequately resourcing its planning department. It is acknowledged that the department has been proactive in identifying the need for additional staffing and has made a business case for a number of additional positions to sustain the current workload and meet increasing demands.

Given the informal manner in which conflicts of interests are currently managed within the planning department, the Council must proactively establish a formal procedure in relation to ensuring that all staff are aware of their obligations on actual, or perceived, conflicts of interest. This should include the requirement for staff to consider all matters that could influence impartiality, or the perception of such independence, in respect of the duties they perform on behalf of the Council and the wider public. This should be designed to ensure that all potential conflicts of interest are clearly identified, and that safeguards are implemented to avoid decisions being made without conflicts being appropriately identified or addressed.

Recommendation 1 – Conflict of Interest Procedure

The Council should develop a procedure to effectively, comprehensively and proactively identify and manage potential conflicts of interest in relation to its staff. Such a procedure should include sufficient guidance to allow all individuals consider, and be aware of, any matters that could influence their impartiality, or the perception of their independence, in respect of the duties they perform.

No.	Recommendation	Grading	Responsibility
1	Conflict of Interest Procedure	High	Director of Service/Senior Planner

4.   Forward Planning

The National Planning Framework (NPF) is Ireland's long-term national level planning strategy. It recognises the strategic location of County Meath relative to Dublin and the significant influence that this has had on the high levels of population growth in the county in recent decades. Managing the challenge of future growth in the county is therefore critical to the achievement of a more balanced and sustainable pattern of development with a focus on employment creation, infrastructure provision and addressing legacy issues of rapid population growth.

At a regional level, Meath is located within the Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) area and the detailed regional application of national policy and development priorities in population, settlement, economic development and transport is set out in the EMRA Regional Economic & Spatial Strategy (RSES). Therein, Navan and Drogheda are designated as Key Towns whilst Dunboyne is located within the Dublin Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP). The RSES requires that a cross boundary statutory Joint Urban Area Plan for Drogheda and a Joint Local Area Plan for Maynooth be prepared by Meath County Council in partnership with Louth and Kildare County Councils respectively.

The MASP, which supports employment generation at strategic locations to strengthen the local employment base and support the future growth of the Metropolitan Area along the north-west corridor, through prioritisation, includes serviced lands at Dunboyne. Navan and Maynooth are also identified in the RSES as strategic employment locations.

The Meath County Development Plan 2021-2027 marked the beginning of the alignment of planning policy at county and local levels with regional and national policy. Further, it sets out a vision for the county to promote stable and sustainable growth and "to improve the quality of life of all citizens in Meath by creating an environment that supports a vibrant growing economy and a well-connected place to live, learn and do business".

Mary McAleese Boyne Bridge

County Development Plan

The review and adoption of a new county development plan is an important function of local authorities. Key to its delivery within the statutory timeframe of two years is a collaborative and multi-disciplinary approach from the outset. The Meath County Development Plan 2021-2027 came into effect on 3rd November 2021 in accordance with the statutory plan making process. Volume 2 of the Development Plan includes written statements and land use zoning maps for the 38 towns and villages including Navan, southern environs of Drogheda and Maynooth environs. These statements will remain until a new statutory plan is adopted for the relevant settlements.

The Office commends the planning department for their commitment to progressing the County Development Plan during challenging times when pandemic restrictions followed a period that paused the two-year process due to updates to national and regional policy frameworks.[15] The level of commitment required by all staff to progress this statutory document in accordance with the legislative requirements amongst such challenges is recognised. The use of a dedicated website and the public consultation portal for the entire process fostered a level of confidence in the process that is evident from the level of engagement during the various steps, including a record number of submissions (approximately 2,400) received following the draft Plan consultation period.

A key analysis of the core strategy was presented at the Council meeting one year after the plan was adopted whilst the formal two-year review report for the Development Plan[16] was presented to the elected members in December 2023. The monitoring process was underway at the time the OPR review process was being conducted, with extensive background data being gathered by the forward planning team. An interactive monitoring dashboard is a work in progress that will improve efficiencies for monitoring core strategy and commercial activity. The principle aim of this monitoring tool is to track the delivery of new housing against the core strategy targets but a commercial development tracker is also included to track developed and occupied commercial floor-space for offices, industrial use, retail and warehousing.

The benefits of an interactive system to the local authority should not be underestimated and such an interactive system has the potential to provide evidence on the pattern of development of particular settlements compared to the overall strategy of the development plan, whilst the visual element provides for essential clear communication of the data. The Development Plan Guidelines (2022) clearly emphasise the importance of establishing an ongoing programme of monitoring whilst also recognising it is a complex challenge. A challenge in this regard is the ongoing availability of GIS resources to the planning department given that the GIS technician is part of the wider IT department, with other responsibilities and objectives to deliver on, rather than being focussed on the work of the planning department.

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[15] section 11(1)(b)(ii) of the Act
[16] Required under section 15(2) of the Act

While a draft procedures manual is in place for the interactive monitoring dashboard, setting out how data is collected and by whom, it was noted that there are no procedural manuals in place in relation to other aspects of the forward planning work programme (i.e. plan making, variations, etc.). Having a documented procedure in place for important aspects of work, such as consultation exercises, communications and data collection, reduces the risk that knowledge might be lost with staff movement over time and can ensure greater efficiency and consistency of approach.

Local Area Plans

The County Development Plan sets out an extensive list of settlements for which local area plans will be prepared, nine of which will be statutory plans as per the Act. Meath is unique nationally in that it is required to prepare both a joint urban area plan for Drogheda with Louth County Council and a joint local area plan for Maynooth with Kildare County Council.

A detailed schedule for delivery of this workload has not yet been finalised, with the Council noting the potential impact of various considerations including resource constraints, ongoing judicial hearings in relation to the County Development Plan and approaching legislative changes. However, regardless of the format of plans arising out of new provisions in the Planning & Development Bill 2023, it is important that a comprehensive work programme for the delivery of these plans is prepared and that sufficient resources are in place in order to deliver on this work programme. The fact that Drogheda and Maynooth are significant settlements that require clear and up-to-date plan-led frameworks to provide for sustainable expansion, further underlines the need to prepare for delivering this workload.

The preparation of the Maynooth and Environs Joint Local Area Plan (JLAP) commenced in 2022 with the publication of a pre-draft public consultation issues paper. The planning department outlined that the drafting of the JLAP is progressing between both local authorities, with the working group meeting monthly and chapters being drafted for review and sign-off by both authorities. Both local authorities are to be commended for recognising the importance of providing for agreed collaboration and structures from the outset by establishing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to progress the JLAP. The MOU sets out the fundamental governance structures required to deliver the JLAP and how the preparation of the plan can be delivered having regard to various objectives and sometimes competing priorities within the two administrative areas.

Maynooth and Environs Joint Local Area Plan 2024-2030
Pre-draft Public Consultation Issues Paper

Pre-draft Public Drop-in Event
Take the opportunity to meet the Planning Team preparing the Maynooth and Environs Joint Local Area Plan 2024-2030.

Date: Wed 12th October 2022
Time: 1pm – 8pm
Venue: Glenroyal Hotel, Straffan Road, Maynooth

Closing date for submissions:
4pm Friday
11th November 2022

Have your say!

The planning department outlined that the MOU was key to establishing, and agreeing, the foundations for how both Councils would manage the process together, including setting out structures and a cross boundary committee to progress the project through the various stages. The pre-draft consultation phase is complete and the drafting of the JLAP is ongoing at the time of writing. The approach taken appears to be delivering on what is a challenging and resource intensive project with the planning department emphasising that open communication between all parties involved has been key to progression.

The preparation of a joint urban area plan for Drogheda is a further cross-boundary statutory plan-making process that Meath County Council is progressing. The planning department outlined that a judgement of the High Court in South Drogheda, in part, caused a delay on these matters. Drogheda is a designated regional growth centre in the RSES to support significant population and economic growth to drive effective regional development. The progression of a joint urban area plan will be critical in providing for the compact and coordinated growth of the town's hinterland as well as enhancing its role as a self-sustaining strategic employment centre on the Dublin-Belfast economic corridor.

Additional Duties and Activities

The forward planning team is responsible for implementing the requirements of the Residential Zoned Land Tax (RZLT) and the future requirements of the Land Value Sharing and Urban Development Zones Act. The process of how the RZLT is applied is critical to ensuring that serviced and zoned lands in appropriate locations are activated.

There is an SDZ (strategic development zone) at Clonmagadden in Navan, incorporating 38 hectares of land; this area, located to the north of the town between the Kingscourt Road and the Slane Road, has the potential to deliver circa 1,400 units. The SDZ planning scheme, approved by An Bord Pleanála in 2004, never advanced as the original landowners did not pursue the delivery of developments under the scheme. The Council considers that the scheme as it is currently designated, needs to be revoked and / or replaced with due consideration being given to national, regional and local policy changes as well as infrastructure capacities in the immediate area since the SDZ was approved. However, work capacity constraints across the department have prevented the Council from reassessing this SDZ designation and progressing its revocation or replacement.

While it is acknowledged that circumstances beyond the Council's control impacted the advancement of the original SDZ, given the urgency associated with land activation, it is unclear why these lands, which are zoned 'New Residential' in the county development plan, have not been included in the final RZLT map.

In addition, the department also needs to be mindful of the impact on capacity that more site-specific masterplans or frameworks, responding to particular objectives referenced in the county development plan, can have on the team as well as variations to the statutory plans that may be necessary over the plan period. The team also assist with the preparation of papers for judicial reviews of the statutory plans as they arise.

Environmental Assessment

The Council engaged external experts to prepare Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), Appropriate Assessment (AA) and Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA) as part of the development plan and as necessary for any of the plans being prepared. Generally, the Council's systems for preparing SEAs, AAs and SFRAs appear reasonable and appropriate, having regard to the provisions of relevant legislation and regulations.

In terms of monitoring the significant environmental effects of the implementation of the plan in accordance with the SEA Directive and Development Plan Guidelines, the Council do not have a specific process in place. In respect of the overall monitoring of the County Development Plan there are opportunities for in-house training and assistance to be delivered from the experts in the wider team to ensure that the monitoring of environmental impacts is effective.

Amenity Objectives

Part XIII of the Act relates to amenities and specifically areas of special amenity, landscape conservation areas, tree protection orders, the creation of public rights of way, compulsory purchase order for rights of way and the repair and tidying of advertisement structures. Chapter 8 of the County Development Plan details the policies and objectives to safeguard the heritage and landscape of the county. A suite of appendices is also included as part of the Plan which support and map the relevant sites. The conservation officer and heritage officer assist the planning team in respect of any relevant issues that arise that could potentially impact on the areas of special recreational value, landscape conservation and / or heritage.

The County Development Plan 2021-2027 lists the existing public rights of way in Appendix 12 which are also illustrated on map 8.5.

The Council aims to protect individual trees, groups of trees or woodland that are of environmental and / or amenity value through Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs) made through the development plan process or separately under section 205 of the Act. In 2011, the Council, in partnership with the Heritage Council, commissioned a tree, woodland and hedgerow survey that informed the designation of eight TPOs, as identified on Map 9.3 of the Plan. In this regard, the Office welcomes an objective to review this survey over the Plan period as provided for in Chapter 8 of the County Development Plan.

Performance Rating and Recommendations

Given Co. Meath's location, in the context of the Greater Dublin Area and connecting to other significant urban settlements, the Council's ability to deliver on its forward planning responsibilities is of strategic importance nationally. Acknowledging the successful alignment of local and county level planning policy with regional and national objectives through the new 2021-2027 County Development Plan, the Council's delivery of its forward planning function is **satisfactory.**

However forward planning does not cease with the production of a county development plan and, in this regard, the Council has a significant forward planning workload ahead of it for which it will be important that appropriate resources are in place. The importance of delivering on the expected local area plans, including those that must be delivered in partnership with other authorities, and crucial plan monitoring obligations, demand that capacity constraints be overcome and that appropriate levels of technical support are available.

Recommendation 2 – Forward Planning Work Programme

Given the volume of strategic forward planning work ahead, the planning department should formalise a multiannual forward planning work programme that sets targets for the delivery of the various elements of workload identified in the County Development Plan and elsewhere. The work programme, which should be submitted to the Council's Senior Management Team, will set out the various dependencies and critical success factors including details of the technical resources required and the measures to support joint working arrangements with neighbouring authorities.

Recommendation 3 - Monitoring and Implementation

The Council should commit appropriate resources to a system for monitoring progress on the delivery of development plan objectives. Building on existing innovation the Council can fulfil the potential on offer to capture real-time data on residential and economic development activity, to not only address development plan monitoring requirements, but also to contribute to the development and implementation of various projects and planning initiatives.

Recommendation 4 - Procedures Manual

The planning department should document the existing operating procedures associated with the plan making process e.g. data collection requirements, analysis, drafting, consultation phases, reporting, environmental assessment, publication and adoption of statutory plans, as well as the variation / amendment process. The focus should be on procedure rather than formal requirements which are established via statutory guidance. The various components may be compiled and updated over time into an overall procedures manual to guide staff, in particular new staff, with regard to the essential elements of the plan making process. The role of the various technical and administrative team members should be outlined in the manual, to ensure appropriate project management structures are in place.

No.	Recommendation	Grading	Responsibility
2	**Forward Planning Work Programme**	High	Director of Service
3	**Monitoring and Implementation**	High	Director of Service
4	**Procedures Manual**	Medium	Senior Planner

5.   Architectural Heritage

The provisions of Part IV of the Act set the statutory framework for the protection of architectural heritage. Meath boasts a wealth of built heritage extending across the entire county and includes the UNESCO World Heritage Sites of Brú na Bóinne, the Hill of Tara, passage tombs of Loughcrew, walled towns and a volume of historic country houses and demesne landscapes.

There are circa 1,400 structures on the County's record of protected structures, which forms an appendix to the County Development Plan. Policies are contained in chapter 8 to support the protection and enhancement of structures listed in the record of protected structures.

There are 22 architectural conservation areas designated in the County Development Plan, the boundaries of which are all mapped and available for viewing online. Character statements have been prepared for each of these to guide redevelopment proposals and are included in appendix 7 of the Plan. Relevant policies are included in the Plan, including an action to prepare guidelines for the management and development of additional architectural conservation areas.

The local authority also has responsibility for ensuring that owners carry out certain works to ensure the protection of these structures and has other powers to secure protection, including compulsory purchase order powers. Works are only exempt if they do not materially affect the character of the structure or any element which contributes to its special interest. Section 57 of the Act allows owners to request the local authority to declare the type of works which are exempt.

Hill of Tara

General Systems and Procedures

The Council's conservation office, which operates within the planning department's projects / LRD team, has a full time conservation officer who maintains the record of protected structures and is responsible for the promotion of awareness of built heritage across the county. The conservation officer operates in tandem with all areas of the planning department and, as required, across all teams of the Council. The department also has a heritage officer, and the focus of this role is to promote interest, knowledge and education of natural heritage as well as providing an advisory role for SEA and AA screening reports for the planning department.

All planning applications that relate to protected structures, development within architectural conservation areas, development relating to historic structures which are not included in the record of protected structures or sites within historic village / town areas are referred to the conservation officer for formal comment.

Section 59 and section 60 notices require works to be undertaken in relation to endangerment or restoration of protected structures. There have been no recent cases where endangerment or restoration notices have been issued pursuant to section 59 / 60 of the Act. While there is no formalised process in place for the identification and referral of endangerment / restoration concerns, where the conservation officer becomes aware of such issues, the matter would be progressed through the planning department's enforcement function.

Another key function of the conservation officer is to approve grants under the Historic Structures Fund and the Built Heritage Investment Scheme. In 2022 and 2023, the Built Heritage Investment Scheme approved a total funding of €126,400 and €193,555.80 respectively to 22 individual projects whilst the Historic Structures Fund awarded circa €125,000 to three projects in 2022. Through the review, it was noted that managing and administering of both funding streams is a resource intensive process. In this regard, it is noted that the projects / LRD team has limited administrative support (1.4 FTE) with significant commitments beyond conservation.

The monitoring of the effectiveness of these funding streams is important with respect to promoting the protection of historic structures, best conservation practice, adaptive reuse and sustainable development in line with national policy.

It was indicated at the time of this review that a suite of standard operating procedures is being prepared as well as an archive catalogue. Given the limited administrative support available on a dedicated basis, putting such procedures in place will be important to ensuring consistency and efficiency in administering the funding schemes and overseeing the management and monitoring of the architectural conservation function.

Public Engagement
The Council's website includes material on heritage, information on the record of protected structures, the conservation and heritage projects and grants, in addition to information on conservation guidance and advice.

A mailing list is maintained for interested parties to be updated on relevant communications. The team also provides advice to property owners and the wider Council on funding supports to undertake works to protected structures and on the planning process to enable works to progress.

There is evidence of positive and focused engagement with the public on all matters pertaining to conservation, which included the hosting of a seminar on protected structures targeted towards owners of protected structures to guide them through grants and funding streams available.

Heritage Week 2017, Newgrange, Co. Meath

Performance Rating and Recommendation

Meath County Council's commitment to delivering on architectural heritage responsibilities is considered to be **satisfactory**. Good work is being carried out in relation to the protection of architectural heritage and in particular with regard to proactive public engagement.

However, the absence of documented procedures for architectural heritage and lack of dedicated resources beyond the conservation officer role leaves a risk in relation to continuity in the delivery of conservation duties. While the assignment of dedicated administrative support should be considered in the overall context of the planning department's business needs, the preparation of a procedures manual, with a practical focus on the management of funding schemes, would provide for a greater level of organisational resilience and would also facilitate the delegation of non-specialist administrative tasks.

Recommendation 5 - Architectural Heritage Procedures

An architectural heritage procedures manual should be prepared to assist the ongoing delivery of the Council's architectural heritage duties. While the manual could be developed over time to encompass all areas of responsibility, initially the manual should have a practical focus on tasks that could be delivered with the support of the wider planning department, including the management, oversight and monitoring of conservation grant schemes, processes of engagement with owners / occupiers of protected structures. In due course the manual should document processes for updating the record of protected structures and identify procedures for the coordination of conservation expertise in relation to planning applications and other Council projects.

No.	Recommendation	Grading	Responsibility
5	**Architectural Heritage Procedures**	Medium	Senior Planner

6.   Land Activation and Projects

The central role that planning departments have in facilitating urban regeneration and land activation is critical to ensure that policy tools including Town Centre First, Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund (LIHAF) and the Urban and Rural Regeneration & Development Funds (URDF and RRDF) deliver in a meaningful and sustainable manner.

Local authorities play a critical role through their various functions including the preparation of local area plans, using compulsory purchase powers, establishing and operating the Vacant Sites and Derelict Sites Registers, coordinating delivery by infrastructure providers, utilising Council and state-owned lands, and liaising with private developers.

The establishment of the projects / LRD team as part of a wider organisational restructuring in 2020 is a good indication of priority placed by the Council on the delivery of strategic projects and place-making initiatives. The team, which is led by a senior executive planner, is responsible for overseeing the process for SHD and LRD applications as well as coordinating a variety of place-making initiatives and strategic projects.

The team's responsibilities include:
- preparing URDF and RRDF applications;
- overseeing the Council's Vacant Sites Register;
- identifying strategic opportunities to deliver transformation projects in towns and villages;
- developing public realm plans and streetscape enhancement and regeneration plans;
- engaging with communities on action plans and masterplans; and
- collaborating interdepartmentally in relation to infrastructure projects (e.g. active travel and public realm).

Kilcloon playground

Vacant Sites

The Urban Regeneration & Housing Act 2015 introduced the Vacant Sites Levy as an activation measure to see vacant or underutilised land in urban areas brought into beneficial use, while also ensuring a more efficient return on State investment in enabling infrastructure and helping to counter unsustainable urban sprawl.

The projects / LRD team oversees the evaluation of sites for inclusion on the Vacant Sites Register. The Council's accounts department oversees the collection of levies - levies of approximately €28,000 were collected in 2020 and 2021 while almost €200,000 was collected in 2022.

Currently there are ten properties listed on the Register which is a significant reduction from the 55 that were listed in 2018. All sites are GIS mapped and are available for public viewing on the Council's website along with general relevant information. While some sites were removed from the Register following successful appeals by the landowners, many of the sites have been activated for development, including four sites which were purchased by the Council for housing development.

In 2021, Government signalled the Residential Zoned Land Tax (RZLT) would replace the Vacant Sites Levy as a new mechanism to activate vacant land for residential purposes. The process to identify lands to which the tax will apply is underway and the tax will be payable from 2025.

The RZLT is intended to activate land that is serviced and zoned for residential use, or mixed use including residential use, in order to increase housing supply and to ensure the regeneration of vacant and idle lands in urban locations. These locations have been identified within statutory land use plans as being appropriate locations for housing and they have benefitted from investment in the key services to support the delivery of housing.

Information on the RZLT process is available on the Council's website, with details of how mapping is prepared, how submissions can be made, and frequently asked questions. The Council prepared and published a draft RZLT Map which was finalised in December 2023. The Council will continue to review the RZLT Map annually as required by the Finance Act 2021 and RZLT Guidelines.

The projects team liaise with the Council's environment department which is responsible for managing the Derelict Sites Register, which includes ten sites. The Council website includes clear information on the provisions of Derelict Sites legislation, how to report a derelict site and a link to view the derelict sites map.

Urban / Rural Regeneration

Meath County Council's commitment to promoting plan-led development is ongoing with a number of land activation initiatives being progressed across the Council. They have also been active in securing funding for a number of projects from the URDF and RRDF funds which aim to deliver more compact and sustainable development as envisaged under Project Ireland 2040.

The principal approach of the projects team to activating regeneration is through the preparation of public realm plans. A key component of the preparation of these plans has been public engagement, both online by way of an issues paper type publication, online surveys and in person through public consultation meetings. There are currently public realm plans being prepared or finalised for Kells, Ashbourne, Athboy, Navan and Laytown / Bettystown. These plans set out guiding principles and projects specific to the town to:

- create an enhanced environment for people living, working and visiting the town through public realm enhancements – encouraging economic growth;
- optimise access to and within the settlements for pedestrians, cyclists, public transport, car and other vehicles;
- maximise connectivity and ease of movement throughout the town; and
- create multi-functional streets that balance movement, place, and safety for all within a traffic calmed environment.

Artists impression of Laytown/Bettystown public realm

The Council outlined one example of targeted regeneration in the Flower Hill and Abbeylands area of Navan town. An Urban Design Plan, completed in 2021, was funded by URDF and established a roadmap for the regeneration of the Flowerhill and Abbeylands area to the north-east of Navan town centre.

The Urban Design Plan was informed by a number of policy documents, including the Navan Town Centre Public Realm Strategy, and was adopted following public consultation with the community. It outlines a shared vision, supported by objectives which are developed with the intention to deliver projects in five areas which includes streetscape enhancement; a new urban quarter with public spaces and mixed use developments; river park habitat restoration; redevelopment of targeted sites and place-making initiatives. Since the Plan was prepared, a number of sites have been redeveloped and brought into residential use.

A Public Realm Plan for Oldcastle was published in July 2021, setting out a number of projects to be delivered by various stakeholders. Under RRDF almost €855,000 in funding was secured to upgrade the town square in Oldcastle and transform the vacant fair green into a new plaza and bowling green.

In 2022, RRDF funding was secured for an upgrade of Dunshaughlin Courthouse for use as a multi-purpose community space as well as public realm works along two adjacent roads to improve pedestrian safety, traffic flow and parking.

Performance Rating and Recommendations

Overall, the Council's delivery of its land activation function is considered to be **satisfactory.**

The Council has been successful in accessing various funding streams including the URDF and RRDF, demonstrating a proactive approach towards planning and delivering capital projects. The establishment of a dedicated project team in 2020 brought with it a renewed focus for collaboration across various operational areas of the Council. The unit has also developed a strong partnership with local communities and elected representatives through various means of consultation and collaboration, both formal and informal, across a number of projects.

Further, the Council has been proactive in building up an integrated, publicly available map-based database for vacant sites and derelict sites. The potential now exists for an expansion of such databases to include opportunity sites as various statutory plans are progressed, and an infrastructural audit of zoned undeveloped lands as the RZLT process reaches its final stages.

Overall, the Council has proactively implemented the various land activation mechanisms that are available and is working with property owners and communities to identify opportunities for the redevelopment and regeneration of derelict and vacant sites, demonstrating that systems and procedures are in place to support land activation in the county.

7.   Development Management

The development management process is recognised as one of the more complex statutory functions of the local authority. It must be managed and delivered within a challenging regulatory environment driven by particular requirements of several EU Environmental Directives, as well as implications arising out of case law decisions made by the Irish and European Courts. As such, coherent systems and procedures are imperative to the efficient and effective delivery of this function.

Development Management Responsibilities

The range of tasks assigned to development management teams across local authorities are generally standard nationally. These include the obligations to ensure all steps in the process are managed, recorded and registered in accordance with specific legislative requirements set out by the Act and the Regulations. These include:

- processing of planning applications;
- Section 247 pre-planning consultations;
- Appropriate Assessment and Environmental Impact Assessment in relation to development proposals (assisted by the heritage officer);
- assessment of local authority Part 8 projects;
- issuing Section 5 Declarations;
- processing planning compliance submissions;
- issuing observations in relation to decisions appealed to An Bord Pleanála;
- issuing of Section 254 Licences in relation to appliances, cables, street furniture, etc. on public roads;
- licencing of events / control of funfairs; and
- any outstanding matters related to Strategic Housing Development applications and processing Large Scale Residential Development applications (though as already noted, in Meath County Council these are specifically dealt with by the projects / LRD team).

Development Management Team

In total, there are 10.6 (FTE) planners and 2 technicians working in the development management team, supported by an administrative team of 22.9 (FTE) persons, who collectively deliver this statutory function. A senior executive planner leads the technical staff of the team and scheduled meetings occur with the technical team every month. However, informal meetings occur regularly across the team with the staff anchor day facilitating informal support and oversight within the team as required, as well as effective use of online meetings between team members reported to occur on a daily basis.

The administrative team, managed by a senior executive officer, is responsible for validating planning applications. The validation team comprises four staff members including two technicians. The senior management administrative team meet weekly.

Standard Operating Procedures

There is no overall procedures manual in place for the processing of a planning application, however it is acknowledged that this is largely set out by the legislative code. Notwithstanding, a number of procedural documents were submitted for parts of the process which require consistent and clear methodologies to reduce organisational risk. Standard operating procedures were provided for the following:

- processing of planning applications and the ePlanning process;
- validation checklist;
- processing LRDs; and
- Part 8 development proposals.

Further, the planning department outlined a culture of training and mentoring which has proved beneficial for the delivery of a large number of planning applications in an efficient manner. This mentoring approach also provides an opportunity for the junior planners to upskill in people skills and management.

The caseload of the team is managed by the senior executive planner who keeps a record and manages the allocation of work which includes compliance, Section 5 Declaration requests, pre-planning requests as well the planning files.

Development Management Output

Planning data published by the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage provides details on all local authorities' outputs and allows comparison between authorities and national trends. Since 2015, the volume of planning applications received in Meath has increased from 1,101 to a peak of 1,997 in 2021 which then reduced to 1,389 in 2022. Figure 3 illustrates Meath County Council's intake of valid applications for the 2015 – 2022 period, illustrating the 2021 peak. As a comparison, looking at other local authorities within the eastern / midlands areas the 1,389 applications received in 2022 compares with 849 in Louth and 1,516 in Kildare, whilst Cavan received 536 and Westmeath received 521.
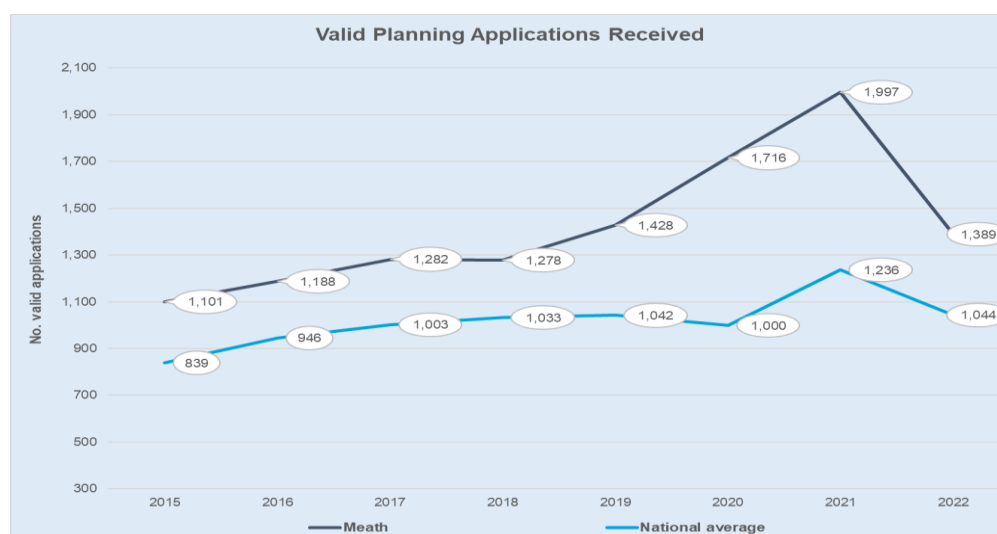

Figure 3: Valid applications received[17]

DHLGH 'Annual Planning Statistics 2017-2022', (December 2023).

It is clear from these trends that Meath's rate of processing planning applications is consistently higher that the national average. Further, given the county's location in the context of the Greater Dublin Area, it is no surprise that many of the applications are complex with an increase in multi-unit residential development applications in towns as well as commercial and employment type applications. The Council also indicated that applications for single housing in the countryside have been a significant driver of increased applications in recent years, peaking in 2021. The Council explain this surge as applications being made in anticipation that significant changes to local rural housing policies would be brought about in the County Development Plan that was adopted in November 2021.

The LRD process, introduced as a replacement for the SHD system of direct applications to An Bord Pleanála for large (>100units) housing developments, returns the processing of such complex applications as a function of the local authority. The Council has determined 16 LRD applications since January 2022, which also included SHD amendment applications. The detailed standard operating procedure (referenced above) that is in place for LRD ensures that such applications are processed in a consistent and efficient manner. There is one dedicated planner who manages all the LRD applications and any associated preplanning.

Invalidation of planning applications
Meath County Council's invalidation rate over the last eight years is higher than the national average, albeit marginally in most years. The staff that validate files also assist with queries as they arise at the public counter. This is a proactive support to interact with agents / applicants who wish to seek advice on the validation checklist. However, there is no system to validate at the public counter.

Two technicians validate planning applications and register them on the mapping system. The planners carry out the referrals and then the file is returned to the administration team for further processing. The most experienced and senior technician is usually responsible for validating the most complex applications. The Council noted that it is proactive in its approach to dealing with agents on validations and in the past where a small or minor issue arose, it would usually facilitate the applicant to correct this in an immediate timeframe.

Meath County Council commenced operating 'ePlanning' during 2023. This online platform, which is being rolled out to all local authorities, allows applications and associated documentation to be submitted electronically and removes the requirement for paper-based submissions. The Council anticipate that ePlanning will have the impact of increasing invalidation rates during its initial implementation phase. Nevertheless, it is expected that as planning agents become familiar with the portal's requirements this impact should reduce. As of December 2023, the Council indicated that almost 40% of all planning applications being made were being applied for using the ePlanning system.

In this regard, the ongoing monitoring of validation rates to ensure a consistent approach is taken to applications lodged via ePlanning or at the public counter will be important. Planning leaflets, planning application pack, forms, templates and guides, all of which are available on the Council website, are important tools that assist agents and applicants.
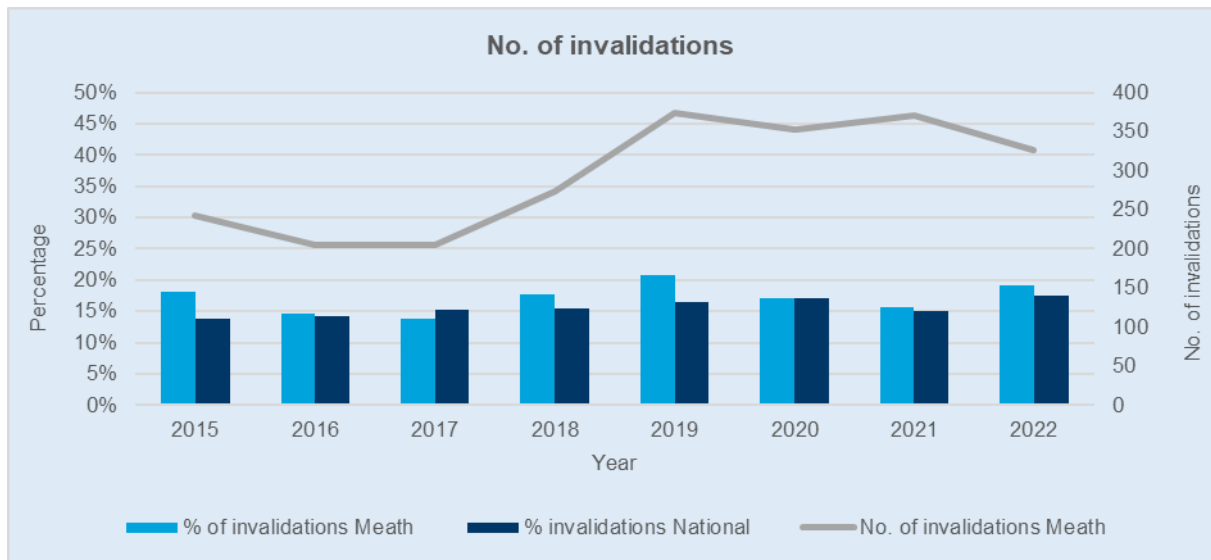
Figure 4: Invalidation rates[18]

Decisions granted and refused

The percentage of planning applications granted and refused by Meath County Council is generally consistent with national averages, as is illustrated in Figure 5 below detailing refusal rates for the years 2015 to 2022. The Council's grant / refuse rates have been at, in or around, 90% / 10% in many of the years since 2015, which is also generally in line with national trends.

However, a significant increase in the refusal rate, to 15% and 22% respectively, arises for the years 2020 and 2021. As noted above, there was a large increase in applications for single houses during 2020 and 2021 and many of these applications did not meet the policies and objectives of the development plan with the consequence that there was also a surge in the refusal rate.
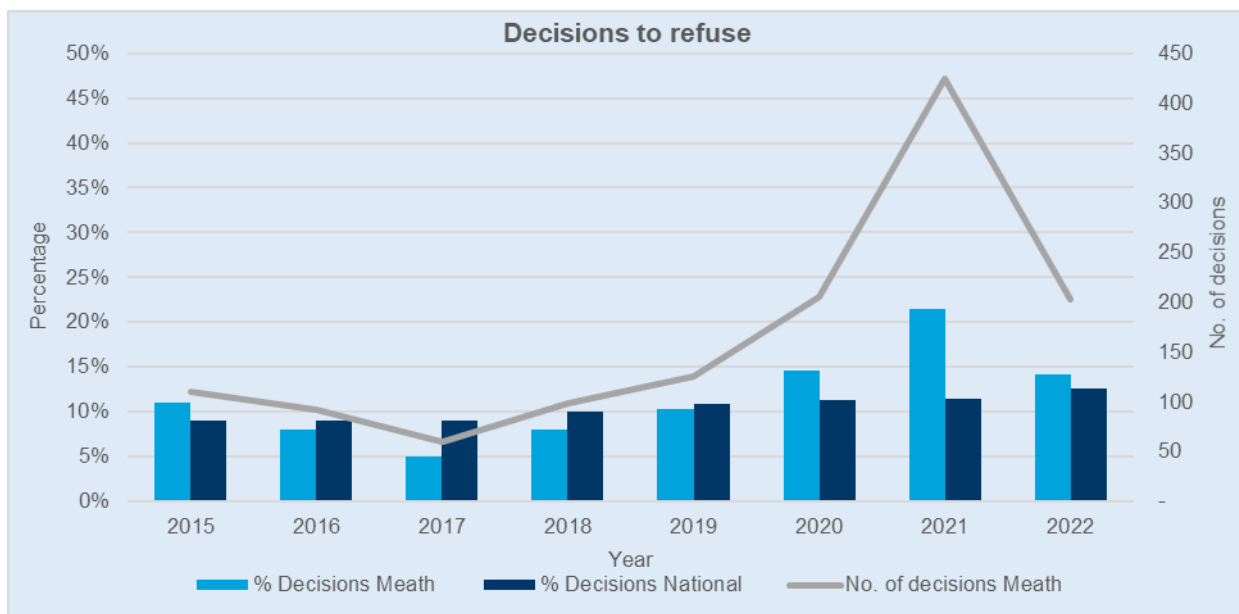

Figure 5: Decisions to refuse planning permission[19]

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[18] DHLGH 'Annual Planning Statistics 2017-2022', (December 2023).
[19] DHLGH 'Annual Planning Statistics 2017-2022', (December 2023).

Decisions made within eight weeks

During most years between 2015 and 2022 Meath County Council made in the region of 60% of its decisions within an eight-week period. In this regard, the Council's rate has been close to the national average. However, during 2020, for various operations reasons, just 47% of decisions were made in this timeframe.
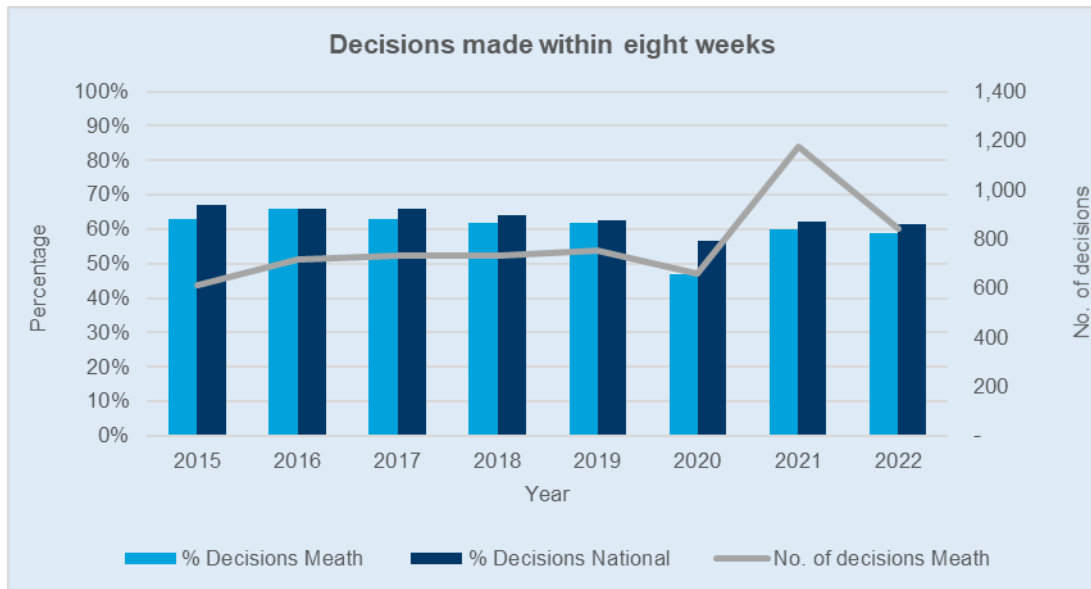

Figure 6: Decisions made within eight weeks[20]

Appeals to An Bord Pleanála

Since 2016, the average rate of planning applications appealed to An Bord Pleanála nationally has been approximately 7%. As illustrated on Figure 7 below, Meath County Council's rate has generally been below the national rate, and most recently at 4% 2022.
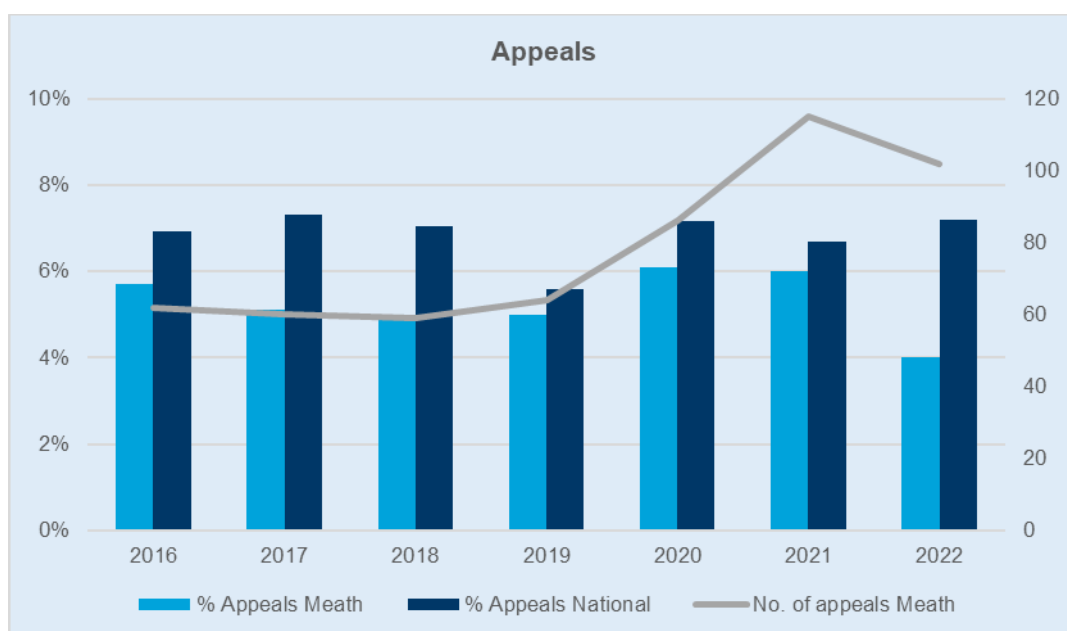

Figure 7: Appeals to An Bord Pleanála[21]

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[20] DHLGH 'Annual Planning Statistics 2017-2022', (December 2023). https://www.gov.ie/en/service/9e4ee-get-planning-statistics/
[21] An Bord Pleanála 'Annual reports 2016-2022'

Reversal rates on appeal

Generally, the percentage of the Council's appealed decisions that were reversed by An Bord Pleanála is above the national average. In 2018 this trend increased to 41% (a reversal rate of 19 decisions) which the council attributed to a divergence in the interpretation of rural housing policy. Notwithstanding the small statistical base represented in the data below, a consistently greater than average rate of overturn of local authority decisions by the Board is noteworthy, particularly when it would appear to relate to particular categories of development such as single rural homes.

A relevant factor in this regard may be the fact that the rural settlement policy of the Meath County Development plan pre-dates that of the National Planning Framework, the opportunity to update it not being taken in the recent county development plan review because of then-impending rural housing guideline updates signalled by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Further analysis, and policy response, by the local authority at the appropriate time would be warranted on this matter.
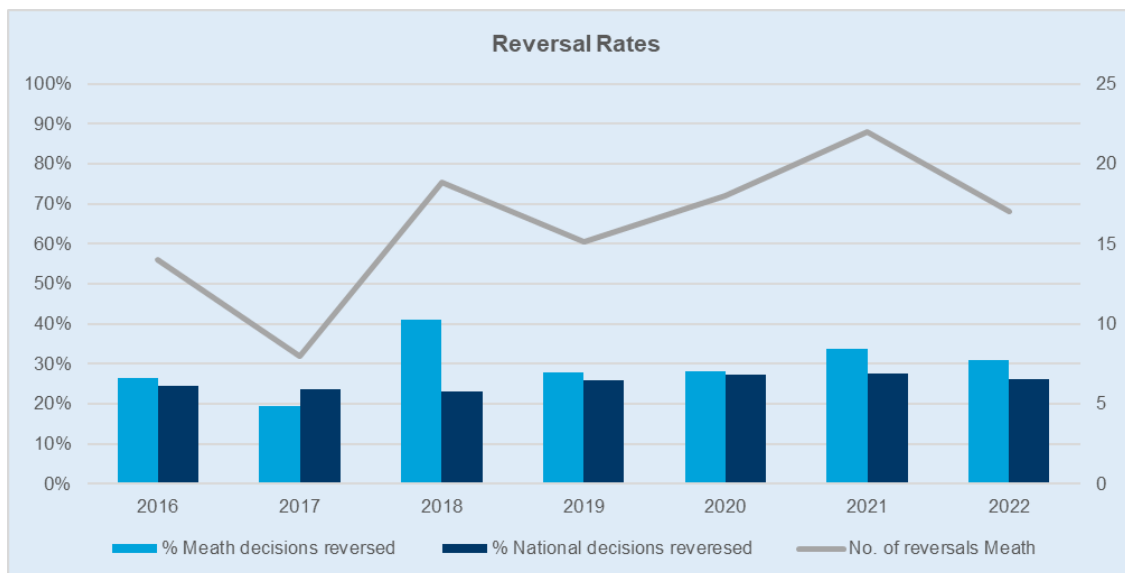

Figure 8: Reversal rates following an appeal to ABP[22]

Planning Conditions and Compliance

There are advice notes and guidance conditions used by all planners preparing planning recommendations but no standard book of conditions was provided in relation to grants of permission. The OPR Practice Note on Conditions was also referenced as a beneficial tool used by Council staff. The conditions guidance document is updated as necessary in accordance with this practice note and any relevant conditions that might be included by An Bord Pleanála.

Meath County Council has developed a bespoke software solution to manage the recently introduced requirement that submissions be processed within eight weeks where applicants seek confirmation that compliance with planning conditions has been achieved. Using the potential of the Council's existing Customer Relations Management (CRM) system, planning compliance submissions are handled through a dedicated interactive dashboard.

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[22] An Bord Pleanála 'Annual reports 2016-2022'

While there are unprocessed compliance submissions that predate the introduction of the new eight-week requirement, this new system is allowing the Council meet the new statutory expectation. Details of the system are set out below as a case study.

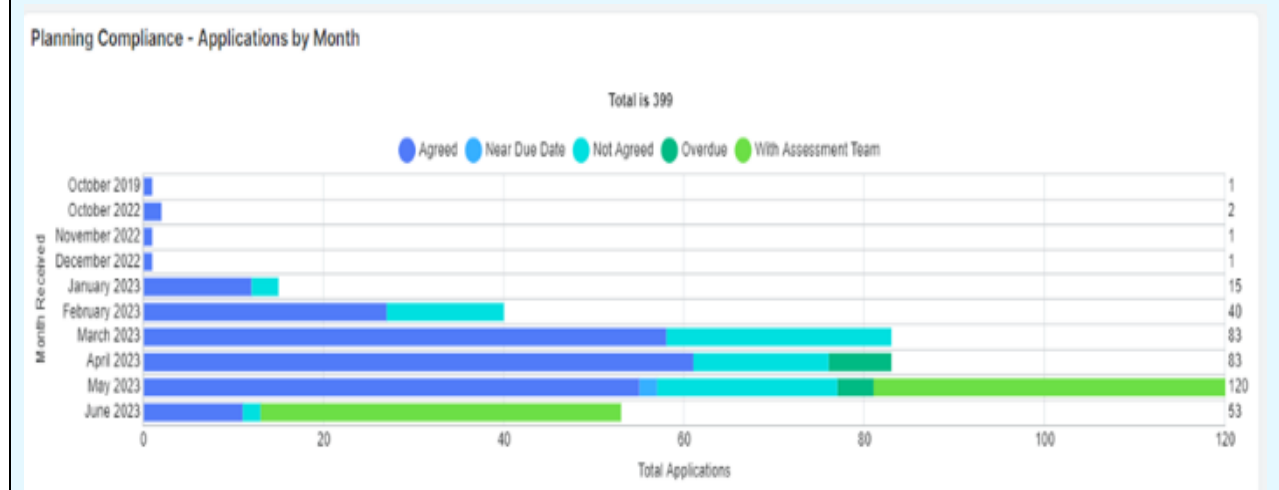## Case Study – Planning Compliance Dashboard

Meath County Council has developed a customised software solution to assist in the management of the recently introduced eight-week timeframe for processing planning compliance submissions under section 23(4) of the Act (see Circular PL 13/2021).

The planning department implemented its planning compliance dashboard in early 2022 as an integrated module of its existing proprietary Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system.

In summary, this customised module created a new online dashboard to manage the assessment and response process to compliance submissions in accordance with the new statutory timeline. In support of this new system, the Council ensured that a dedicated email channel was created specifically for compliance submissions, providing all applicants /agents with a definitive response within the designated eight-week period.

On receipt, compliance submissions in relation to each planning condition are automatically acknowledged with a case reference generated for each request. This case reference record includes the details of both the original compliance condition and the submission demonstrating compliance.

Upon assignment, the relevant Council office is given a four-week period to assess and respond to the request and will either "agree", with the compliance approved, or "not agree". The Senior Executive Planner is automatically alerted when requests are not agreed.
A key component is that this customised system automatically generates system alerts advising the relevant Council official of any impending timelines and when matters remain unresolved within three days of deadline, it automatically escalates to the senior executive planner for urgent action.

Planning Compliance - Applications by Month

Total is 399

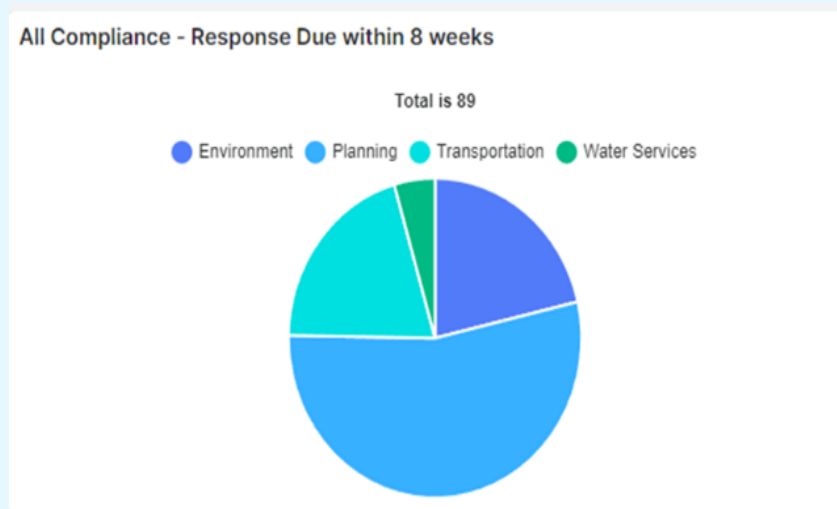Agreed Near Due Date Not Agreed Overdue With Assessment Team

Case Study – Planning Compliance Dashboard

The compliance dashboard shows full tracking of all requests and their progress status with a full workload management reporting suite. Overall the system provides the following:

- automatic calculation of the response due date;
- all relevant files can be accessed by team members;
- notes may be added to assist team members;
- automated reminders issue;
- status updates are automatically flagged overdue;
- on approval, an automated email is generated and sent to the requestor; and
- re-submissions are linked back to the original submission so any differentiation can be tracked.

From a management and resource efficiency perspective, the automation, communication and escalation processes in the application of the compliance module provide for a very effective response to statutory obligations.

All Compliance - Response Due within 8 weeks

Total is 89

Environment ● Planning ● Transportation ● Water Services

With regard to the customer, feedback is positive since the implementation of the module, due to an increase in responsiveness, with compliance matters now being addressed within an average period of five weeks. In the case of conditions not agreed, few have been appealed. In light of the improved effectiveness, the system is building greater trust with agents / applicants in relation to the Council's management of compliance matters.

In terms of wider applicability of this innovation, it is recognised that this system is dependent on proprietary software as the underpinning architecture for the module. That said, the processes, reports and underlying principles of this solution could be adapted or developed by other local authorities, depending on budgetary constraints, in-house ICT expertise, etc.

Section 247 Pre-Application Services

Meath County Council's website has clear and readily accessible information available about the pre-application service on offer. The completion of a pre-planning questionnaire, also available on the website, is required before a pre-planning consultation can be arranged. Requests are processed by the administrative team and are submitted to the senior executive planner who allocates the requests to the various planners in the development management team.

In the first instance, informal communication methods (email and phone calls) are utilised with appropriate file notes taken to represent the consultation. In-person meetings are arranged in relation to larger scale or more complex development proposals where often it is necessary for staff from inter-departmental teams attend. It is the department's intended procedure that, in all instances, the file-notes recording the consultation are shared with the prospective applicant as well as being uploaded to the relevant planning file.

Data was not available regarding waiting times for pre-planning consultations to be facilitated, nevertheless the information provided indicates that in the region of 500-600 preplanning consultations are facilitated annually. While this is a relatively unseen output in terms of the planning department's workload, the volume of consultations, in the context of the number of applications received each year (as detailed in Figure 3 above), signifies that a significant resource input is required. Further, the data provided by the Council did not clearly distinguish between the number of statutory section 247 consultations and those informal non-statutory advices that the planning authority often provides to potential applications.

It is clear that a structured approach is intended in relation to the facilitation and monitoring of preplanning consultations, however an inspection of a number of random planning applications online found no record of the pre-application consultation that would have taken place included within the scanned documentation. In the cases in question, it was clear from Question 19 of the application form that a pre-planning consultation had been requested and furthermore, reference was made to the consultations in the various planner reports.

Therefore, while it would appear that a significant volume of preplanning consultations are being facilitated, to the benefit of applicants, the transparency of the process is somewhat undermined when the relevant documentation is not appearing on the online file.

The Development Management Guidelines make it clear that such records should be retained and placed on the file in the event of a planning application being made; guidance in this regard is also provided in the OPR's 'Pre-Application (s247) Consultation Services' case study paper.[23]

Section 5 Declarations

Section 5 declaration requests are processed in the same manner as planning applications – they are registered, allocated to planners and recorded on the planning register and online mapping. The Council's planning report template provides for EIA preliminary examination or EIA screening to be undertaken as part of the determination process.

In accordance with section 5(7B) of the Act, section 5 declarations issued by the Council are available on the planning pages of the Council's website, with the accompanying documentation required under the legislation.

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[23] OPR, 'OPR Case Study Paper CSP04. 'Pre-Application (S247) Consultation services' (2021)

Section 254 Licences

The planning department has a procedures document in relation to conducting the section 254 licencing process. Application forms are available on the Council's website that include a list of documentation to be submitted with the licence application. It is managed by a planner on the projects team who assesses the application and prepares a report for clearance at senior level.

The transportation department manages (telecommunications masts) section 254 applications. Such applications are referred to the planning department for final assessment prior to a licence being issued.

Section 48 Development Contribution Scheme

The process to prepare the Meath County Development Contribution Scheme 2024-2029 is underway. The public consultation stage concluded in October 2023.

The Council's finance section prepares the contribution scheme. The planners in development management will calculate the applicable contributions as part of the decision making process, but all other matters pertaining to the scheme are managed by the finance section.

Event Licensing

Corporate Services manage funfair notifications with a referral for comment to the planning department and the relevant municipal district engineer. Otherwise, the number of applications received annually for event licensing is on average two per year. A sample report and managers order for an event licence was provided in order to outline the assessment procedures undertaken.

Event licence applications are required to hold a pre-application meeting prior to the advertisement of the event, a pre-event meeting two weeks before the event and a post-event meeting after the event. There are standard conditions prepared and the road safety officer will be involved in the consideration of such applications.

Environmental Assessment

EIA screening must be undertaken by local authorities in carrying out their statutory functions under the Act. The 'OPR Practice Note PN02 – Environmental Impact Assessment Screening' provides a step-by-step guide to the screening process.

The standard planner's report includes a section in relation to EIA requirements. This includes an assessment with regard to the thresholds as set out in the 2001 Regulations in respect of the EIA Directive.

The Council is undertaking AA screening and AA of all decisions on planning applications in accordance with DHLGH 'Appropriate Assessment of Plans and Projects, Guidelines for Planning Authorities'. The screening for AA and conclusions in respect of the screening process are detailed in the standard planner's report.

Flood risk policies and objectives within statutory development plans are the basis for considering planning applications in principle and in detail, in accordance with the 'Planning System and Flood Risk Management Guidelines'. The planning department seeks internal input from the environment section of the Council, to determine the flood risk and acceptability of any proposed surface water drainage. An analysis of a sample search of planning applications from the Council's website demonstrates that flood risk is assessed by the environment section, as appropriate, which is reported in the planning report documenting the relevant considerations for each development proposal.

The Council confirmed that staff have attended training on environmental assessment matters. Given the complex and evolving nature of this area of planning practice it is important that staff are supported to undertake training on an ongoing basis, and the planning department has access to technical expertise for complex planning applications.

Online Planning Services

The Council's website is the principal means by which members of the public, agents, applicants and other stakeholders can engage with the development management process. Like all other authorities, Meath County Council's planning files can be accessed online. This service is provided through the LGMA's planning inquiry platform (iPlan).

Since March 2023, planning applications can be submitted to Meath County Council online following implementation of the ePlanning portal. The LGMA has been working with local authorities over the past few years to roll this portal out on a phased basis nationally. The ePlanning system allows customers lodge applications with all associated documentation without the need to provide paper copies. Third party submissions can also be lodged through the ePlanning system.

Intensive training for staff took place in the months before implementation. The department took this opportunity to re-examine processes and adjust to a dual system of managing the files lodged in both formats. The Council noted that this has resulted in efficiencies being realised, with referrals and allocations of files now processed in a quicker timeframe.

To assist in the transition to the online system, the planning department promoted the new portal in local media in advance of its implementation and issued targeted communications to planning agents.

Performance rating and recommendation

It is the Office's opinion that Meath County Council's systems and procedures for the overall delivery of the development management function are **satisfactory**. The evidence provided by the planning department, as well as the OPR's analysis of more widely available information, indicates that there is a robust framework in place for the overall delivery of this core function.

It is noted that the Council's development management workload has been steadily increasing, with very significant surges in certain years. It is also acknowledged that this increased workload is managed in the context of increasingly complex and largescale applications, the ongoing evolution of the statutory code and alongside the process of business reorientation represented by the implementation of ePlanning. Further, recognising the demand placed on the wider planning department through the development plan review process, it is clear that the development management team has delivered under significant pressure in recent years.

Regardless of day-to-day workload pressures, through the development and implementation of its Compliance Submission Dashboard, the development management team has also demonstrated an ability to be innovative in the face of new challenges and to manage the delivery of new commitments. The team's positive adoption of ePlanning also signals a readiness to achieve greater efficiency in service delivery.

While the team's overall achievements are recognised, there is scope for strengthening procedures in relation to section 247 pre-application consultations to ensure that various steps in the process are appropriately managed at all times, given the significant volume of requests dealt with. Accordingly, a recommendation is made in this regard.

Recommendation 6 – Pre-Planning Consultation

The Council should update monitoring procedures in relation to pre-planning consultations, under section 247 of the Act, to ensure that all steps in the process are tracked and completed to schedule. Monitoring should include tracking details from the receipt of each request, assignment to a planner, facilitation of the consultation, issuing of the note recording the consultation and confirmation that the record has been placed on the file appropriately.

No.	Recommendation	Grading	Responsibility
6	Pre-Planning Consultation	Medium	Senior Planner

8.   Planning Enforcement

Part VIII of the Act mandates local authorities to take action against unauthorised development. These mechanisms include issuing warning letters, serving enforcement notices and pursing Court injunctions through legal proceedings.

As noted earlier, the Council's enforcement function is delivered by a team consisting of a senior executive building surveyor, an executive engineer, a technician and four clerks of works, with operational support from seven full time equivalent administrative staff. This team not only oversees the enforcement function but also manages the Council's building control responsibilities as well as the taking-in-charge of housing developments.

The inclusion of the Council's building control responsibilities alongside the planning function is beneficial to the overall work of the department. This approach encourages synergy in the implementation of the two codes, providing for the efficient cross-referencing of management information from the Building Control Management System with planning data as well as ongoing ease of consultation between building control and development management. The pairing also assists the Council's focus on the delivery of multi-unit housing developments, whereby projects are progressed through the planning process to commencement, enforcement if necessary, to taking-in-charge, all under the coordination of a single department.

Once a new multi-unit residential development is initiated, one of the team's clerk of works has that development allocated to their caseload and essentially serves as the point of contact between the Council and the developer for the duration of the project. This assists project delivery but also facilitates the management of compliance with planning conditions, reducing the need for planning enforcement and enables a smoother progression towards taking-in-charge.

While integrating building control into enforcement within the planning department certainly brings advantages, it also brings an additional volume of important work that has to be prioritised within the available resources. There was no planner on the team at the time the review process was being conducted, however sanction was being obtained to recruit an executive planner. In the interim, planning input was being provided through the wider planning department.

Standard Operating Procedures

The enforcement team operate a triage system when a complaint is received regarding unauthorised development. In the first instance, the enforcement officer will assess the complaint to determine if a case is to be opened and the priority and manner in which it should be progressed.

All enforcement cases are recorded on a dedicated Microsoft Access database which generates files, warning letters and enforcement notices as required. Use of the system is restricted to key individuals and these staff can log onto the system remotely, via council tablets, making it convenient working across various sites. The system can also interface with Council operated cameras and drone.

A procedures manual is in place to provide guidance to staff on the various elements of the enforcement process from opening a new file, issuing warning letters, enforcement notices and legal proceedings, to the various mechanisms for closing files. The location of the unauthorised development files are mapped on GIS, however there is no publicly available map viewer of enforcement cases

Enforcement Activity

Enforcement activity for the period 2015 and 2022 is illustrated in the graph below. The graph highlights a substantial surge (59% increase) between 2020 and 2021. As has been observed in other local authority areas, the Council believes that the restrictions associated with the pandemic were the primary influence in an unprecedented number of complaints being received during this period. Notwithstanding this particular spike, there has been a persistently increasing volume of cases on-hand since 2015, with a significant caseload of 1435 open cases at the end of 2022.
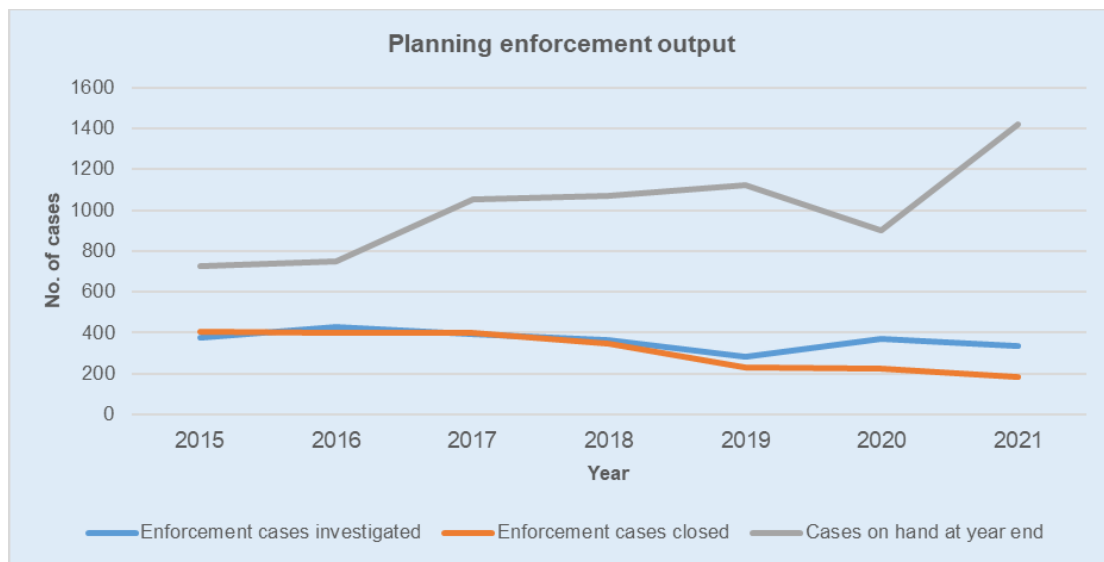

Figure 9: Planning enforcement output[24]

In essence, the on-hand caseload has doubled from 725 over an eight-year period. Having regard to the overall statistics for enforcement, it can be established that the number of cases closed year on year is significantly less than the number of cases investigated. In order to address these trends and manage ongoing workloads, a targeted strategy is necessary to address the existing backlog of cases as well as managing ongoing workloads.

The number of cases closed by the Council, that were either closed by dismissing the case, by enforcement proceedings or by negotiation are illustrated in Figure 10 below. In most years, the majority of cases were closed due to negotiation. In more recent years (2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022) there was a significant increase in the number of cases closed due to enforcement proceedings. It is also noted that no cases were dismissed during this four-year period.

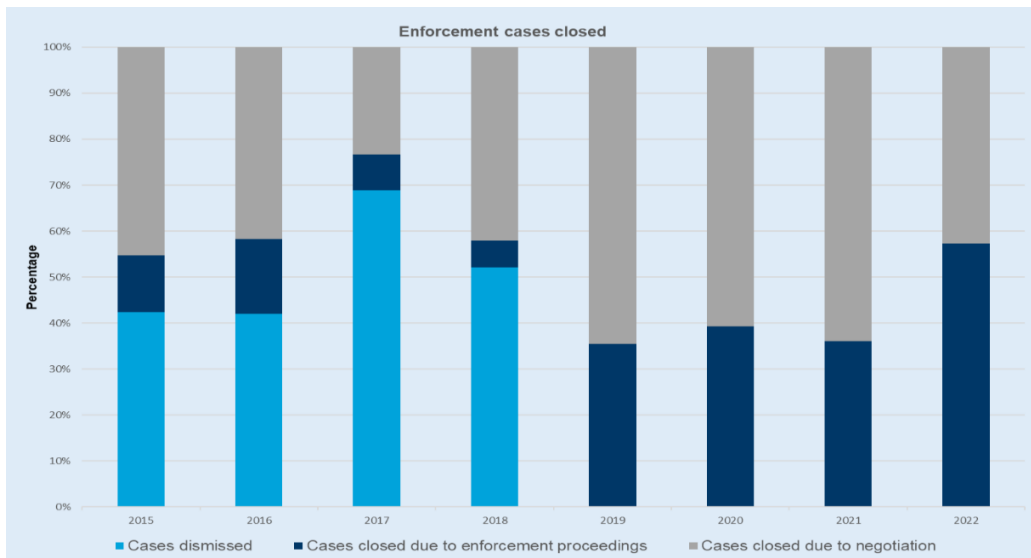[24] NOAC, 'Local Authority Performance Indicator Reports 2015-2022.

Figure10: Enforcement cases closed[25]

Activity in relation to enforcement over 2020 – 2022 as illustrated in Figure 11 indicates that the cases investigated decreased year on year from 316 in 2020 to 164 in 2022 whilst the number of enforcement notices and legal proceedings initiated over this period significantly increased.
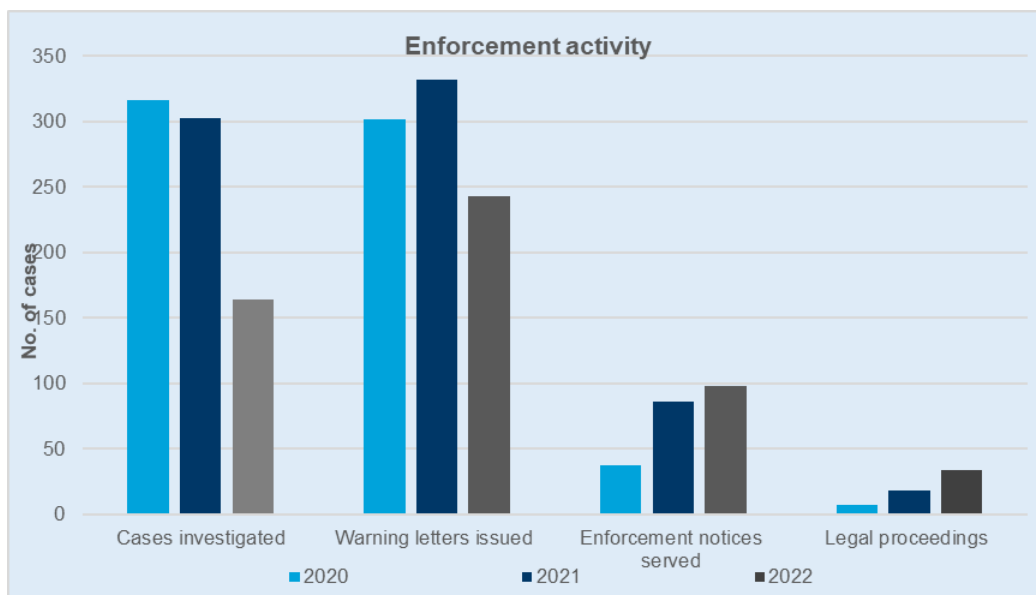

Figure 11: Enforcement activity 2020-2022[26]

A further monitoring limitation, which should be noted, is with regard to the number of site inspections being conducted. While this detail is recorded in the narrative of the individual files, and documented on the system in that regard, there is no quantifiable data available recording the number of site visits in recent years.

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[25] NOAC, 'Local Authority Performance Indicator Report 2016-2022'.
[26] NOAC, 'Local Authority Performance Indicator Report 2016-2022'.

Meath County Council's website provides useful and simply presented information in relation to the definition of unauthorised development, the complaints procedures including a submission form and dedicated email address. The Council accepts enforcement complaints in writing and by email.

A standard operating procedure for the collection of data on short-term lets has been prepared. However, the Council stated that there are very few complaints or queries with respect to short-term lets and as a consequence it is not a priority for the section.

Quarries

In accordance with section 261 of the Act, which required all quarries to be registered with the exception of those for which planning permission had been granted in the previous five years, the Council registered 61 quarries within the county. The Council register lists 160 quarry sites following the process required under section 261A. The location of all registered quarries and a copy of the register are available for public viewing on the Council's website

Reports and relevant action were completed, including enforcement proceedings initiated with respect to unauthorised quarry sites. When the Council receives a complaint related to unauthorised quarrying activity, the enforcement team undertake site inspections and investigations to progress enforcement action, as necessary. The Council is currently defending a number of High Court cases with respect to the unauthorised development of quarries.

Performance Rating and Recommendations

Having regard to the practical structuring of the enforcement / building control team, the assignment of dedicated staff to deliver these functions, and the operation of documented procedures, an enforcement database as well as GIS capability it is considered that the Council has **satisfactory** systems and procedures in place in relation to planning enforcement.

Nevertheless, while quality structures are in place, the ongoing increases in the Council's enforcement caseload and the seeming decline in the volume of cases being investigated over recent years, presents a challenge to be addressed.

Recommendation 7 Enforcement Case Management

Given the current and increasing volume of enforcement cases on hand, the Council should prepare and implement a medium-term strategy to drive the progression of existing enforcement cases. The implementation of this strategy should include analysis of existing caseload categories, the assignment of priorities and the identification of targets for investigations and case closures. Finally, the strategy should include a commitment to regular formal reporting to the elected members of the Council.

No.	Recommendation	Grading	Responsibility
7	Enforcement Case Management	High	Director of Service

9.   Other Planning Related Functions

9.1   Part 8 / Local Authority Own Development

The Council has a procedures manual for processing local authority own-development. The promoting section are responsible for publication of the notice and the documents on the consultation portal of the Council's website. Once received by the planning department the application is registered in accordance with the normal procedure associated with a section 34 application. Since 2022, the Council estimated that 25 Part 8 schemes have progressed, all of which were passed at final stage by the elected members.

The standard operating procedure sets out in detail the steps to be taken, and by whom, at the concept stage, the live application stage and the post-application stage of the overall Part 8 process. It also includes appendices which provide a list of approved newspapers; schedule of drawings and documents required from the promoting section; referrals at pre-planning stage which is the responsibility of the promoting section; templates for site notices and newspaper notices; preliminary examination for EIA screening procedure; template for AA screening determination. An appendix is provided which outlines procedures when an application is being made to An Bord Pleanála for a local authority development.

Article 120 of the Regulations requires the Council to undertake an EIA screening of sub-threshold development as part of the consideration of Part 8 proposals. Article 250 requires the undertaking of an AA screening for any local authority own-development. From analysis of Part 8 projects on the Council's website, it appears that screenings are undertaken in accordance with the legislation.

Navan to Kingscourt greenway

9.2   Taking in Charge

The Council's taking-in-charge function sits within the planning department's enforcement / building control team. The senior executive building control officer manages taking-in-charge as part of the wider building control function. A taking-in-charge policy document is in place since 2008, which sets out the required actions, timeframes and responsibilities at each stage of the process including details of:

- the documentation to be submitted with applications;
- the standards required for a development to be considered for taking in charge;
- the time frames for each stage of the process;
- the services, areas and infrastructure that will be taken-in-charge; and
- the maintenance services that will be provided following completion of the process.

The Council's website sets out the details of section 180 of the Act as well as information for home owners and developers on how to apply to have a development taken in charge. There are 974 housing estates in Co. Meath that have been given consideration under the taking-in-charge provisions, which break down as follows:

Taken-In-Charge	Not In Charge	Part in Charge	Local Authority Owned
431	371	12	160

The Council is currently giving consideration to 65 valid taking-in charge requests. The records since 2015 of the numbers of developments taken in charge by the Council are consistent and it is clear that the operational procedures implemented in this regard are delivering.

In relation to older estates, where the developer is no longer present or functional (out of business / bankrupt, etc.), or has not made an application to have the estate taken-in-charge and the period for enforcement action has expired, and the residents themselves wish to apply to have the estate taken-in-charge, the Council will arrange to carry out a plebiscite of the qualified electors resident in the estate.

An example was provided by the Council which detailed a request from residents in 2017 for a large residential development in Trim to be taken in charge. Following site inspections, a cost of remedial works was established by Council staff and the estate was formally taken in charge in 2020. It was outlined that applications to take in charge via plebiscite are managed on a case-by-case basis depending on the circumstances, for example, if bonds are in place or if compliance is outstanding. There are currently 58 valid taking in charge requests lodged with the Council, 28 of which are resident plebiscite requests.

This team also deal with compliance issues through engagement with developers during construction of housing developments and escalates to the statutory enforcement processes, where appropriate. Generally, the Council operates by focusing on the newer developments and finalising the process for them, whilst progressing the legacy developments as procedures and resources permit.

Further, the new compliance database has improved the process, as it is very clear to all users what matters of compliance are outstanding which then impacts on how progressive or otherwise a development is in terms of completing the development in order to progress to taking-in-charge.

Performance Rating and Recommendations

The Council's approach to Part 8 is procedurally robust. It is clear that the Council takes a proactive approach to the taking-in-charge process. The Council's systems and procedures in the delivery of these functions are **satisfactory**.

However, given the advanced processes that are in place since the Council's taking-in-charge policy was put in place over 15 years ago, it would be of benefit to update the policy document to adequately reflect current practice. The existing policy document does not detail how procedures have evolved and how the team manages such requests through the various stages of progression. Further, a clear system of monitoring and analysis of data relating to housing developments and the taking-in-charge process would provide the potential to offer an integrated database on the status of developments.

Recommendation 8 Taking-in-Charge Procedures

The Council should prepare an updated procedures manual for the taking-in-charge process to guide all relevant personnel. The focus should be on setting out the established procedures derived from the practical application of the requirements of the legislation, statutory guidance and good professional and operational practice. The role of the various technical and administrative team members should also be outlined in the manual, to ensure appropriate monitoring structures and necessary administrative supports are in place.

No.	Recommendation	Grading	Responsibility
8	Taking-in-Charge Procedures	Low	Senior Planner

Appendix 1: List of Recommendations

Recommendations are graded as follows, based on the level of priority that the Council should assign them.

- **Critical:** immediate implementation of the recommendation is required to resolve a critical weakness which may be impacting the delivery of statutory functions.
- **High:** the recommendation should be addressed urgently to ensure that the identified weakness does not lead to a failure to deliver on statutory requirements.
- **Medium:** the recommendation should be considered in the short-term with a view to enhancing the effectiveness of service delivery.
- **Low:** the recommendation relates to an improvement which would address a minor weakness and should be addressed over time.
- **Advisory:** the recommendation does not have a serious impact for internal systems and procedures but could have a moderate impact on operational performance. On this basis, the recommendation should be considered for implementation on a self-assessed basis.

No.	Recommendation	Description	Grading	Responsibility
	Organisation of Planning Department			
1	Conflict of Interest Procedure	The Council should develop a procedure to effectively, comprehensively and proactively identify and manage potential conflicts of interest in relation to its staff. Such a procedure should include sufficient guidance to allow all individuals consider, and be aware of, any matters that could influence their impartiality, or the perception of their independence, in respect of the duties they perform.	High	Director of Service / Senior Planner
	Forward Planning			
2	Forward Planning Work Programme	Given the volume of strategic forward planning work ahead, the planning department should formalise a multiannual forward planning work programme that sets targets for the delivery of the various elements of workload identified in the County Development Plan and elsewhere. The work programme, which should be submitted to the Council's Senior	High	Director of Service

No.	Recommendation	Description	Grading	Responsibility
		Management Team, will set out the various dependencies and critical success factors including details of the technical resources required and the measures to support joint working arrangements with neighbouring authorities.		
3	Monitoring and Implementation	The Council should commit appropriate resources to a system for monitoring progress on the delivery of development plan objectives. Building on existing innovation the Council can fulfil the potential on offer to capture real-time data on residential and economic development activity, to not only address development plan monitoring requirements, but also to contribute to the development and implementation of various projects and planning initiatives.	High	Director of Service
4	Procedures Manual	The planning department should document the existing operating procedures associated with the plan making process e.g. data collection requirements, analysis, drafting, consultation phases, reporting, environmental assessment, publication and adoption of statutory plans, as well as the variation / amendment process. The focus should be on procedure rather than formal requirements which are established via statutory guidance. These various components may be compiled and updated over time into an overall procedures manual to guide staff, in particular new staff, with regard to the essential elements of the plan making process. The role of the various technical and administrative team members should be outlined in the manual, to ensure appropriate project management structures are in place.	Medium	Senior Planner

No.	Recommendation	Description	Grading	Responsibility
	Architectural Heritage			
5	Architectural Heritage Procedures	An architectural heritage procedures manual should be prepared to assist the ongoing delivery of the Council's architectural heritage duties. While the manual could be developed over time to encompass all areas of responsibility, initially the manual should have a practical focus on tasks that could be delivered with the support of the wider planning department, including the management, oversight and monitoring of conservation grant schemes, processes of engagement with owners / occupiers of protected structures. In due course the manual should document processes for updating the record of protected structures and identify procedure for the coordination of conservation expertise in relation to planning applications and other Council projects.	Medium	Senior Planner
	Development Management			
6	Pre-Planning Consultation	The Council should update monitoring procedures in relation to pre-planning consultations, under section 247 of the Act, to ensure that all steps in the process are tracked and completed to schedule. Monitoring should include tracking details from the receipt of each request, assignment to a planner, facilitation of the consultation, issuing of the note recording the consultation and confirmation that the record has been placed on the file appropriately.	Medium	Senior Planner
	Enforcement			
7	Enforcement Case Management	Given the current and increasing volume of enforcement cases on hand, the Council should prepare and implement a medium-term strategy to drive the progression of existing enforcement cases. The implementation of this strategy should include analysis of existing caseload categories, the assignment of priorities and the identification of targets for investigations	High	Director of Service

		and case closures. Finally, the strategy should include a commitment to regular formal reporting to the elected members of the Council.		
	Taking-in-Charge			
8	Taking-in-Charge Procedures	The Council should prepare an updated procedures manual for the taking-in-charge process to guide all relevant personnel. The focus should be on setting out the established procedures derived from the practical application of the requirements of the legislation, statutory guidance and good professional and operational practice. The role of the various technical and administrative team members should also be outlined in the manual, to ensure appropriate monitoring structures and necessary administrative supports are in place.	Low	Senior Planner