



Oifig an
Rialaitheora Pleanála
Office of the
Planning Regulator

Office of the Planning Regulator Activity Report

Quarter 4 of 2024



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Introduction

This is the nineteenth of a series of quarterly activity reports that the Office of the Planning Regulator (the OPR) will publish on its website as an overview of the nature and extent of its functions across its statutory mandate.

These are:

- I. evaluation of the statutory plans of the local government system;
- II. reviews and examinations of local authority systems and procedures used in the delivery of planning services to the public; and
- III. undertaking programmes relating to training, education, research and public awareness in relation to the benefits of planning.

Evaluation of Statutory Plans

The OPR is responsible for independently assessing city/county development plans and local area plans at three key stages: issues paper, draft plan and material alterations. The OPR also considers any proposed variations to existing city/county development plans or amendments to local area plans. OPR submissions may include recommendations, observations or advice.

In Q4 of 2024, twelve consultations on statutory plans opened for public consultation. These consultations related to:

- five variations to county development plans;
- one issues paper for local area plans;
- four draft local area plans; and
- two material alterations to local area plans.

OPR Submissions on Statutory Plans

In Q4 2024, the OPR made eighteen submissions to local authorities. Table 1 sets out a breakdown by plan-type. In Q4 the majority of submissions related to variations to county development plans and draft local area plans.

Submissions on Statutory Plans	
Draft County Development Plans: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Draft Monaghan County Development Plan 2025-2031 	1
Variations to City/County Development Plans: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Variation No. 2 to Kilkenny County Development Plan 2021-2027 Variation No. 6 to Monaghan County Development Plan 2019-2025 Variation No. 2 to Wicklow County Development Plan 2022-2028 Variation No. 3 to Meath County Development Plan 2021-2027 Variation No.1 to Kilcullen Settlement Plan of the Kildare County Development Plan 2023-2030 Variation No. 3 to Wicklow County Development Plan 2022-2028 Variation No. 3 to Kilkenny County Development Plan 2021-2027 	7
Issues Papers for Local Area Plans: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Issues Paper for the Bray Municipal District Local Area Plan 	1
Draft Local Area Plans: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carrick-on-Shannon Joint Local Area Plan 2025-2031 Longford Town Local Area Plan 2025-2031 Flemington-Balbriggan Local Area Plan Wicklow Town Rathnew Local Area Plan 2025 Carrick-on-Suir Local Area Plan 2025-2031 Draft Blessington Local Area Plan 2025 Portarlinton Joint Local Area Plan 2025-2031 	7
Material Alterations to Local Area Plans: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Portlaoise Local Area Plan 2024 – 2030 Maynooth and Environs Joint Local Area Plan 2025-2031 	2
Total	18

Table 1 | Submissions on Statutory Plans

OPR Submissions by Regional Area

Local authorities are divided into three regional areas, represented by three regional assemblies:

- the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA);
- the Northern and Western Regional Assembly (NWRA);
- and the Southern Regional Assembly (SRA).

OPR submissions during Q4 2024 related to all Regional Assembly areas. Figure 1 shows the number of submissions made on consultations within each regional assembly area.

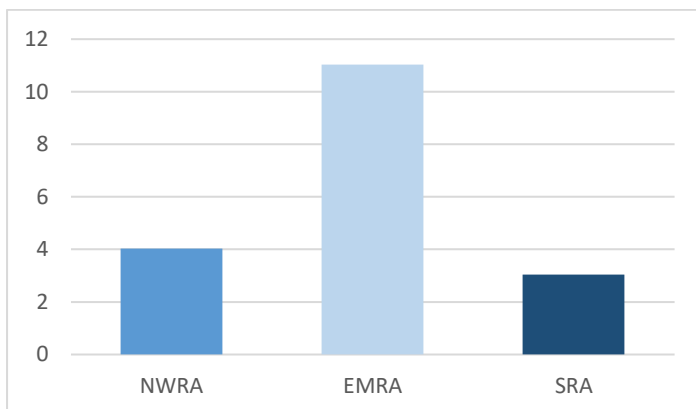


Figure 1 | OPR Submissions by Regional Assembly Area

OPR Recommendations and Observations

The OPR may make recommendations or observations in its submissions at the draft and/or material alterations stage. Due to the high-level nature of issues papers, the OPR does not make observations or recommendations at this stage.

Recommendations issued by the OPR relate to clear breaches of relevant legislative provisions; the national or regional policy framework; and Government policy, as set out in the Ministerial guidelines under section 28 of the Act. The local authority is required to implement or address recommendation(s) made by the OPR.

Observations take the form of a request for further information, justification on a particular matter, or clarification regarding particular provisions of a plan on issues that are required to ensure alignment with policy and legislative provisions. The OPR requests that local authorities action an observation.

Table 2 sets out the number of observations and recommendations made by the OPR in Q4 2024¹.

Recommendations and observations made by the OPR			
	Submissions (number)	Recommendations (number)	Observations (number)
Draft County Development Plans	1	15	10
Variations to City/County Development Plans	7	16	-
Draft Local Area Plans	7	38	15
Material Alterations to Draft Local Area Plans	2	3	5
Total	17	72	30

Table 2 | Recommendations and observations made by the OPR

OPR Recommendations and Observations: Legislative Categories

The evaluation and assessment of plans considers the following legislative and policy matters:

- Consistency with the National Planning Framework (NPF);
- Consistency with the relevant Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES);
- Consistency with the relevant Development Plan (DP);
- Relevant guidelines for planning authorities made under section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended (the Act), including consistency with specific planning policy requirements (SPPR) specified in those guidelines;
- Consistency with the NTA Transport Strategy (if in the Greater Dublin Area);
- Consistency with the legislative provisions for statutory plans as provided for under the Act; and
- Consistency with legislative provisions in relation to Climate Action.

¹ As the OPR does not issue recommendations or observations at Issues Paper stage these figures do not relate to submissions made at issues paper stage.

A breakdown of the recommendations and observations made in Q4 by legislative category is contained in Table 3 and 4. As recommendations can cover more than one legislative provision, the numbers presented in these tables (Table 3 and 4) differ from the total number of recommendations listed above in Table 2.

The most common themes across the recommendations and observations issued in Q4 2024 were Core Strategy and Settlement Strategy; and Sustainable Transport and Accessibility.

OPR Recommendations	Number
Consistency with NPF	30
Consistency with RSES	65
Consistency with DP	37
Consistency with NTA TS for GDA	-
Policy Matters re section 28 Guidelines	45
Consistency with Legislative Provisions	11
Consistency with Legislative Provisions re Climate Change	12
Other	4
Total	204

Table 3 | OPR Recommendations

OPR Observations	Number
Consistency with NPF	6
Consistency with RSES	5
Consistency with DP	5
Consistency with NTA TS for GDA	-
Policy Matters re section 28 Guidelines	6
Consistency with Legislative Provisions	6
Consistency with Legislative Provisions re Climate Change	3
Other	4
Total	35

Table 4 | OPR Observations

Adopted Plans - Outcome of OPR Submissions

Once a plan has been adopted, the OPR has four weeks to assess the plan as adopted and determine whether the plan aligns with national and regional policy and has satisfactorily addressed the recommendations made by the OPR.

Two local area plans and two variations to existing county development plans were adopted by planning authorities in Q4 2024. The assessment of the two local area plans and one variation were ongoing at the end of 2024. Assessment of Variation No. 2 to the Kilkenny County Development Plan 2021-2027 was completed in Q4 2024. The OPR made one recommendation to one of the proposed variation, which was satisfactorily addressed.

The assessment of two plans which were adopted in Q3 2024 were completed in Q4: Sligo County Development Plan 2024-2030 and Ballina Local Area Plan 2024-2030. The recommendations of the OPR were not all satisfactorily addressed for these two plans. This is explored further in the below section.

Draft Directions

Further to section 31AM of the Act, where the OPR is of the opinion that a plan has been made in a way that is not consistent with any recommendations made by the OPR and that the plan has been made in a manner which fails to set out an overall strategy for the proper planning and sustainable development of the area concerned, the OPR may deem that it is merited for the Minister to issue a direction.

In Q4 2024, the OPR made a recommendation to the Minister of a draft Direction on the Sligo County Development Plan 2024-2030 and Ballina Local Area Plan 2024-2030. Following consideration of these recommendations, the Minister issued notice of a draft Direction to both local authorities, however, the matter was ongoing for both plans at the end of 2024.

Final Directions

The OPR also issued a recommendation of a final direction on two plans in Q4 2024: Loughrea Local Area Plan 2024-2030 and Roscommon Local Area Plan 2024-2030. The Minister issued their final recommendations on both plans in addition to the Westport Local Area Plan 2023-2029 during Q4 2024.

Note: The OPR's submissions and recommendations to the Minister can be found on the [OPR website](#). Please note that Final Directions are only published once the direction process has been complete.

Stakeholder Engagement

Engagement with Local Authorities

During Q4, the OPR continued to engage with local authorities, meeting with Kilkenny County Council, Monaghan County Council and Westmeath County Council. This engagement allows the OPR to answer queries or discuss key matters regarding proposed plans, and to provide additional information, such as policy updates, which may support the work of the local authority during the plan-making process.

Plans Evaluation Forum

The OPR hosted three meetings of the Plans Evaluation Forum, in October and November 2024, which enabled discussions between all organisations on statutory plans subject to public consultation over that period.

Reviews and Examinations

Case Handling

Case activity

The OPR provides a service to the public in relation to a variety of planning-related case types including queries or general information requests, submissions on aspects of the operation of the planning process, and complaints about the delivery of planning services.

During Q4, a total of 86 cases were received and 80 cases were closed by the OPR, detailed by month in Figure 2.

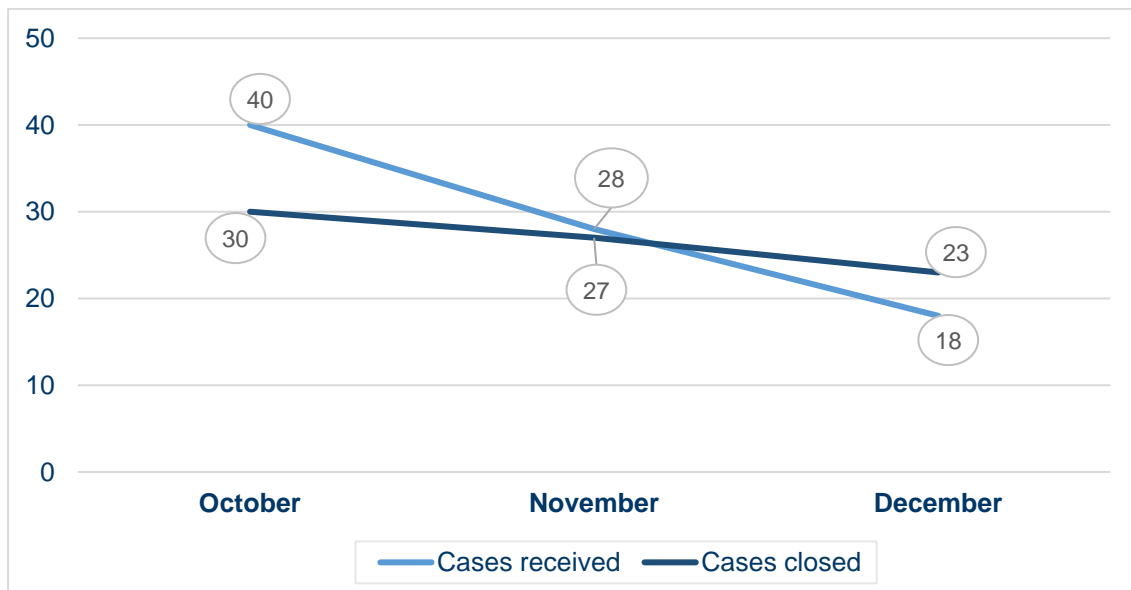


Figure 2 | Cases received vs. cases closed Q4, 2024

The 80 cases closed in Q4 are as follows:

- 19 complaints
- 38 queries
- 23 submissions

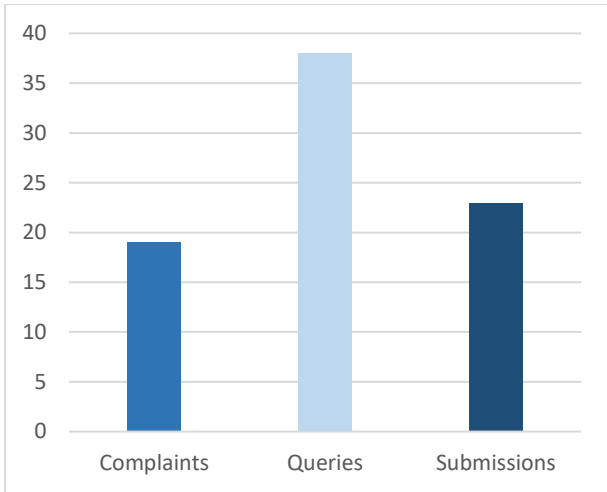


Figure 3 | Case types

The 80 cases closed during Q4 are estimated to have taken 360 working hours to process, an average of 4.5 hours per case.

However, while some of the cases received can be handled in a relatively straightforward manner, many of the cases involve the consideration of voluminous and complex technical detail. Often, especially with regard to complaints, the processing of cases can be time consuming, involving a series of correspondence with the customer and / or the relevant local authority.

While a broad range of themes arose in the OPR’s case handling during Q4, a number of dominant themes prevailed. As can be seen in Figure 4, the most common single theme was statutory plan making (occurring in 22% of cases) followed closely by issues associated individual planning cases (at 15%).

The theme entitled ‘other’ includes a variety of issues such as: planning statistics, discharge licences, reviews, and planning resources data (at 5%).

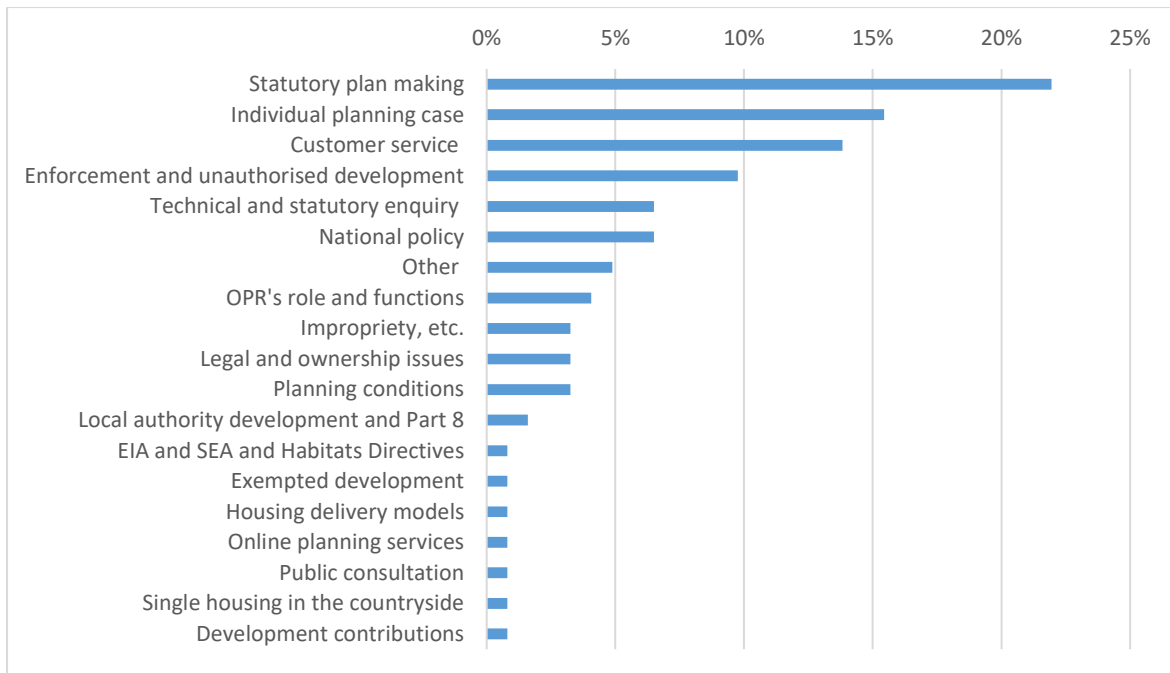


Figure 4 | Main themes of cases closed

Complaints

The statutory provisions are precise with regard to the types of complaints that fall within the OPR’s remit to examine. For a complaint to be considered examinable under the legislation, it must relate to the organisation of the local authority and of the systems and procedures used by it in the performance of its planning functions.

With regard to the 19 complaints that closed during Q4, four of these complaints met the threshold for preliminary examination.

One of these complaints was partially upheld. This complaint was focussed on issues associated with planning conditions and the local authority’s processing of associated compliance submissions.

With regard to the other three complaints, the Office ceased consideration. The Office determined that the matters raised did not represent a systemic concern or that the local authorities had followed proper procedure. All of these cases related to enforcement and unauthorised development issues.

Planning Authority Reviews Programme

Through its reviews programme, the OPR fulfils an important oversight and monitoring role in relation to the systems and procedures used by local authorities in the performance of their statutory planning functions.

Review of Roscommon County Council

Work continued on analysing extensive material and data, as well as preparing the draft review of Roscommon County Council. This was done in preparation for circulating the draft report to the local authority and Minister of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Local Authority Monitoring

During Q4, the OPR engaged with local authorities at various stages of implementation:

- Meath County Council - the six-month progress update was progressed;
- Offaly County Council - the 12-month progress update was progressed;
- Waterford City & County Council - the 12-month progress update was progressed.

In addition, the OPR formally closed out on the monitoring of the Tipperary County Council and Kildare County Council reviews, following the completion of the monitoring periods.

The OPR welcomes that the recommendations arising from the reviews have been largely implemented, and recognises that the full implementation of some recommendations will be an ongoing process.

Research, Education, Training and Public Awareness

Councillor Training

In Q4 the OPR continued to fulfil its statutory mandate to conduct education and training programmes for members of planning authorities in respect of matters relating to proper planning and sustainable development.

In October the OPR delivered a planning training webinar for local authority elected members in conjunction with the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG).

The webinar titled '*Overview of New Planning Legislation*' dealt with:

- The New Planning and Development Act 2024; and
- The Members' Role in the Evolving Planning System.

Presentations were delivered by Mary Jones, Principal Officer in the Planning Legislation Review Unit of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and John Keating, Senior Planner with the Research, Training and Public Awareness team of the OPR.

The presentations were followed by a question and answer session. A recording of the webinar was uploaded to the OPR's website together with the presentations.

Local Authority and Regional Assembly Staff Training

In Q4 in line with the OPR's statutory mandate to conduct education and training programmes for staff of local authorities in respect of matters relating to proper planning and sustainable development, the OPR delivered a webinar linked to the publication of Practice Note PN04 on '*The Development Plan and Employment Lands*'.

The presentations dealt with:

- Practice Note PN04 – Planning for Employment Growth – The Development Plan and Employment Lands;
- Land Use Planning – National Roads and Employment;
- The Role of Integrated Land Use and Transport Planning in Informing the Assessment of Enterprise and Employment Lands; and
- Water Services Considerations and Employment Lands.

The presentations were delivered by:

- Sinéad Mullen, Senior Planner with the Research, Training and Public Awareness team of the OPR;
- Tara Spain, Head of Land Use Planning with Transport Infrastructure Ireland;
- Owen Shinkwin, Senior Land Use and Transport Planner with the National Transport Authority; and
- Catherine Kelly, Forward Planning Manager with Uisce Éireann.

The presentations were followed by a question and answer session. A recording of the webinar was uploaded to the OPR's website together with the presentations.

Publication of Educational Material for Local Authority and Regional Assembly Staff and Other Key Stakeholders

During Q4, the OPR hosted a meeting of the Planning Law Bulletin Steering Group and agreed the case selection for the sixth edition of the '*Learning from Litigation*' bulletin.

Thereafter the OPR engaged with legal practitioners to draft the case summaries. The cases included:

- Carrownagowan Concern Group and Others v An Bord Pleanála and Others [2024] IECA 234;
- Harte Peat Limited v the Environmental Protection Agency, Ireland and the Attorney General [2024] IECA 202;
- John Conway v An Bord Pleanála and Others [2024] IESC 34; and
- Hayes_Foley v the Environmental Protection Agency and Others [2024] IECA 162.

The sixth edition of the *'Learning from Litigation'* bulletin was published in Q4. This edition was shared with stakeholders and promoted extensively via OPR social media accounts. It is intended that the legal bulletin will be published on a quarterly basis.

Implementation of the Learning and Development Strategy for Local Authority Planning Staff

In Q4 work continued on the implementation of the Local Authority Planning Sector Learning and Development Strategy. The OPR met regularly with the Local Authority Services National Training Group's (LASNTG's) Courseware Specialist and participated in meetings of the Planning Services Training Group (PSTG).

The PSTG is a pillar under the LASNTG and is responsible for the development and delivery of training courses to meet the training needs of the local government planning services sector. In Q4 the following progress was achieved:

- The first formal training courses for planning sector staff were delivered across LASNTG's five regional training centres (including Ballycoolin, Roscrea, Castlebar, Stranorlar and Ballincollig). Four bespoke one-day training courses were delivered in each of the training centres throughout October, November and December. The courses dealt with Planning Administration Fundamentals, Development Management Fundamentals, Enforcement Planning Fundamentals and Forward Planning Fundamentals.
- In addition to offering support and feedback on the training courses, the OPR participated in the delivery of the Forward Planning Fundamentals course in the five Regional Training Centres; and
- Offered on-going support and feedback to LASNTG and specifically to their Courseware Specialist.

Ministerial Action Plan on Planning Resources

The Steering Group, established by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, to coordinate and oversee the development of a Ministerial Action Plan on Planning Resources, met in December.

The OPR is a member of the Steering Group. The aim of the Ministerial Action Plan is to increase the pool of planning and related expertise and to bring forward new talent to meet present and future needs. The OPR will be responsible for chairing working group one on education and co-chairing working group four on innovation and efficiency.

Stakeholder Engagement

National Planning Knowledge Group

The National Planning Knowledge Group (NPKG) held its third and final meeting of 2024 in October. During the course of the meeting the OPR provided an update on the work that is being advanced under the Strategic Planning Research Programme (2023-2025) and as part of the education, training and public awareness brief.

Representatives from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage provided an update on the status of the Planning and Development Bill 2023 and the First Revision of the National Planning Framework.

The International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) provided an overview of the InPLACE Research Project – Investigating, Planning, Place-making and Commuting in advance of the formal launch of the research report on 9 October.

Updates were also provided by the National, Economic and Social Council (NESC) on their research projects and by Ulster University on their contribution to the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor (DBEC) research.

During Q4 the OPR also engaged with individual members of the NPKG regarding the OPR's intention to review the Terms of Reference for the NPKG and to reconfirm membership of the Group. A survey was issued to the members and the responses were collated in Q4 and will be used to help to inform the review of the Terms of Reference of the Group.

As the Chief Executive and Directors of the OPR will be subject to the provisions of the Lobbying Act 2015, with effect from 01 January 2025, the Terms of Reference will also be updated to reflect the new requirement for the NPKG to have regard to the Transparency Code prepared by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

Informal Working Group on Marine Spatial Planning

In Q4 the OPR facilitated a workshop of the informal Marine Spatial Planning working group. This group consists of parties with a particular interest or role in Marine Spatial Planning and comprises representatives from the Maritime Area Regulatory Authority (MARA), An Bord Pleanála, the County and City Management Association and the OPR. MARA agreed to prepare a number of flowcharts for circulation to the group for comment thereafter. It is intended that they will be shared with key stakeholders and with Coastal Planning Authorities.

OPR Research Output

During Q4 the OPR advanced work on a number of research projects identified within the Strategic Planning Research Programme (2023-2025), some of which were long-term projects carried over from the original Strategic Planning Research Programme (2020-2022).

Strand One (Planning Issues) Projects

In Q4 the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) formally launched the 'InPLACE – Investigating Planning, Placemaking and Commuting' research project. This three-year research project examined the effects of out-commuting on small rural settlements using a case-study approach focused on selected communities across the

island of Ireland (Northern Ireland and Ireland) and the State of Maryland in the USA. It provides insights into spatial planning and community development with a focus on creating sustainable, liveable spaces. The study was supported by the OPR, the Department of Housing Local Government and Heritage, the Local Government Management Agency, Clare County Council, Cork County Council, the Department for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland, the Department of Transportation in Maryland, US and the Tomar Trust (a private philanthropic trust).

In Q4, the OPR progressed work in partnership with the EU and International Planning Regulation (EUIPR) unit in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on the research project relating to the examination of the Annex II EIA Thresholds and Criteria in Ireland in the context of the planning legislation.

Fieldfisher was appointed to undertake the research which entailed a review of relevant European case law, legal precedents, a comparative analysis of relevant statutory provisions and associated practices and procedures on the implementation of Article 4(2) and Article 4(3) of the EIA Directive in a number of jurisdictions. Environmental expert input was provided by Fothergill TC Ltd. The report was finalised in Q4 with proofreading and graphics to be completed in Q1 2025.

Strand Two (Planning Performance) Projects

In Q4 work was progressed on Case Study Paper CSP07 dealing with '*Quarries and the Local Authority Development Plan*'. The text is close to being finalised and it is anticipated that it will be ready for graphic design and publication in Q1 2025.

During Q4, the OPR continued to participate in the Steering Committee for the EPA - Pro-Health SEA Project. This project seeks to develop a Toolkit for Proportionate and Consistent Consideration of Population and Human Health in Strategic Environmental Assessment. During Q4, the project team required input and guidance from the steering committee on deliverables six and seven, which relate to a review of international guidance and an international expertise questionnaire on health in SEA.

Two workshops are scheduled for January 2025 to examine the emerging 'Health in SEA' toolkit. The workshop target audience includes Irish SEA Practitioners, health experts, plan-makers. The OPR is working to encourage local authority attendance. It is anticipated that the project will be finalised later in Q1 2025.

Strand Three (Planning Practice) Projects

In Q4 an OPR Paper was published on Development Plan Monitoring – Measuring What Matters. This paper incorporates feedback from a stakeholder workshop which was held in June 2024. The workshop showcased new innovative methods of communicating the essence of plans in measurable key objectives. The OPR paper shares the key findings of the workshops, features cases studies and identifies the next steps and key action areas. Work has commenced on the development of a practice note based on the findings of the workshop and work undertaken to date.

Communications and Digital Analytics

In Q4 the Communications team continued to support the OPR across media, social media and events. Some highlights included:

- The National Infrastructure Symposium, held in TUD Grangegorman on 14 October 2024 was supported by Communications, Digital Analytics and wider OPR team. Ministers Donohoe and O'Brien addressed the event, alongside Senior Managers from across the public and infrastructure sector. Over 110 attended, results of a post-event survey reported that most found the event 'very useful'
- OPR attended and sponsored a stand at the IPI conference in October
- OPR continued promoting planning as a career of choice, with an article featuring on the CareersPortal November newsletter
- In December, the OPR published 'Planning in Numbers', a five-year strategic review of planning trends and outputs in Ireland, from 2019-2023 which provides an overview of key trends and figures
- OPR staff received training in Plain English
- OPR published its winter newsletter for subscribers
- across social media OPR experienced an increase in followers on LinkedIn and decrease on X. This aligns with the OPR's prioritisation of LinkedIn as a platform during this period:
 - LinkedIn: 3816 Followers. Increase of 143 on last quarter
 - X: 2582 Followers. Decrease of 67 on last quarter



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Office of the
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Office of the Planning Regulator

Park House,
191-193A North Circular Road,
Dublin 7,
D07 EWV4

opr.ie | info@opr.ie | 01 854 6700

