

Review Report

February 2026

OPR planning review of Galway County Council



Oifig an
Rialaitheora Pleanála
Office of the
Planning Regulator

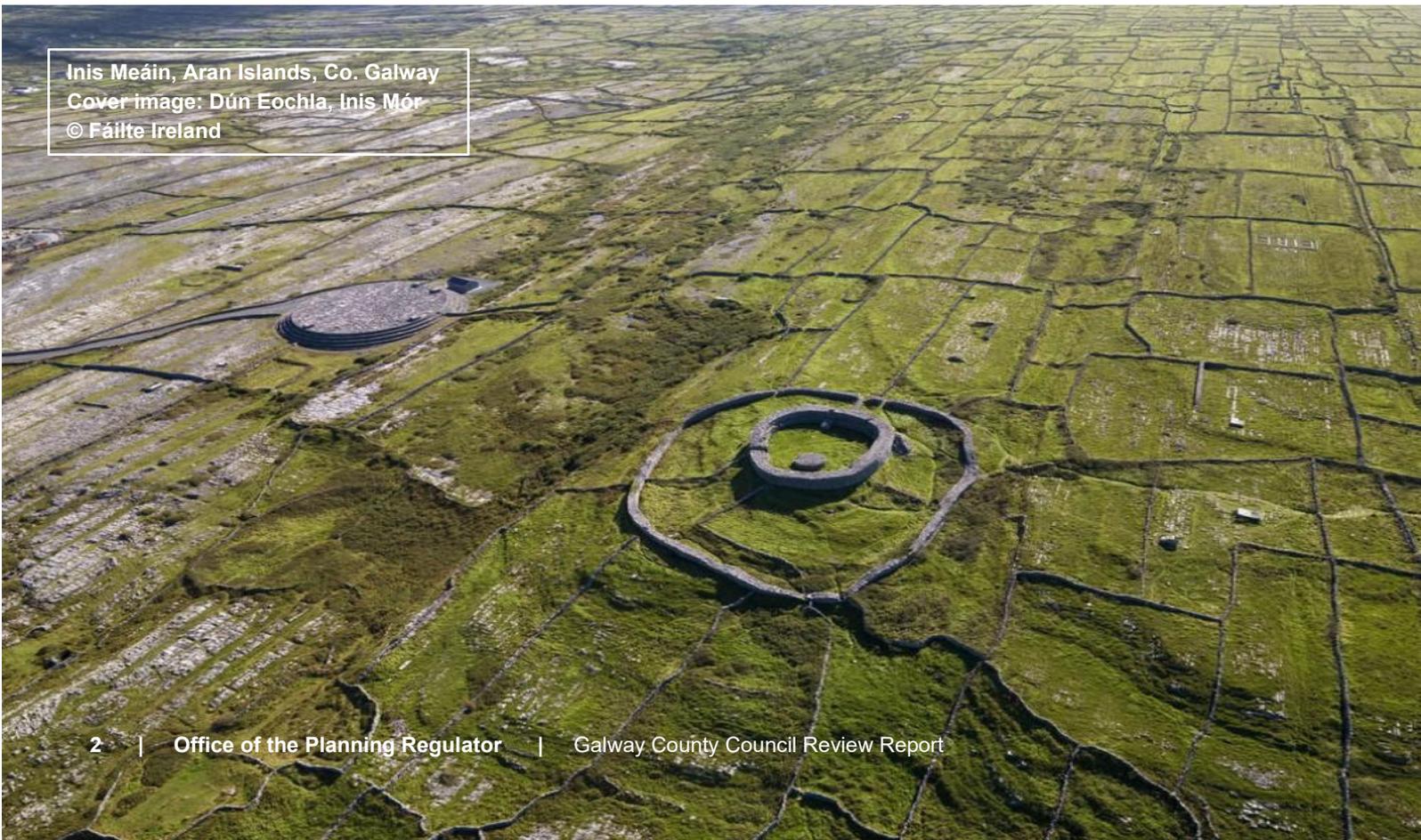
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Comhairle Chontae na Gaillimhe
Galway County Council

Inis Meáin, Aran Islands, Co. Galway
Cover image: Dún Eochla, Inis Mór
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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 enabling housing provision, 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 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.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, enables the OPR to review the systems and procedures used by local authorities and An Coimisiún Pleanála in performing their statutory planning functions.

As committed to in our Strategy Statement, the OPR has been implementing a programme of reviews under section 31AS of the Act whereby a number of local authorities have been reviewed in respect of the systems and procedures used in the performance of statutory planning functions.

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 Galway County Council to the OPR during the review process.

¹ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

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 Galway County Council review, formally initiated in March 2025, 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, the commencement of the Planning & Development Act 2024² continues to evolve and the provisions in the Act of 2000 remain in place until the relevant provisions in the Act of 2024 are commenced. 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 Galway 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.



Galway County Council offices at County Hall

² The Planning & Development Act 2024 was signed into law on 17 October 2024

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



Galway is the second largest county in Ireland and includes almost 2,000 kilometres of coastline. Given its distinctive natural geography and environment, which is recognised worldwide, the county is also home to a substantial number of nature reserves and designated sites, the result of which is a complex operating environment.

Of cultural note, Galway hosts the country's most significant Gaeltacht as well as a number of inhabited islands. The Council's administrative area (i.e. excluding Galway City) is home to a population of almost 200,000, who are predominantly rural based, living in settlement density patterns that are significantly lower than the national average.

In terms of strategic administration, the Galway County Council administrative area shares boundaries with six other local authorities. The Council places a strong focus on municipal districts structures for the management of policy and services across the county area. Given the obvious interlinkages between the county and city areas, the County Council's positive working relationship with the City Council is crucial for the wider citizenry of Galway.

Noting all of the above, Galway County Council's planning department functions in an operating environment with distinctive challenges and opportunities. Nonetheless, while the interplay of geographical, social, economic and political factors may be unique, the planning department shares the same pressures faced by local authorities across the country.

The department is under strong demand to provide customer-driven services while also being required to prioritise the implementation of a broad range of national, regional and local policies and programmes. The department's work is increasingly technical and complex, with decisions and policies being open to political, legal, media and public scrutiny.

As is the situation nationally, planning must contribute towards meeting housing demand. Additionally given the status of the Galway Metropolitan Area, and the requirements under the revised National Planning Framework for a greater proportion of the county's population growth to take place within the metropolitan boundary, in a more environmentally sustainable manner, there is a greater need for the right decisions to align with the principles of sustainable development, climate action and the integration of land use with sustainable modes of transportation. It is vital that the Council continues to contribute to a planning system that is responsive and aligned with national objectives.

Fundamentally, Galway Council Council's planning department is a key enabler in driving national policy and regional objectives in relation to urban and rural regeneration, the metropolitan area, housing delivery, enterprise and employment, tourism objectives, climate action, transportation strategy, sustainable agricultural development, etc.

At the time the OPR was conducting the review process, the Council's planning department, with an intended structure of 61 staffing positions, was operating with 11 vacancies. Further, the majority of these vacancies are technical posts. As in many other authorities, the retention of staff in permanent positions is an ongoing challenge. In this regard, it is noted that the Council's planning department has been heavily reliant on the ongoing dedication of a number of key experienced staff for the maintenance of high standards of service delivery over recent years.

The OPR review recognised that the Council's senior management has approved a council-wide strategic workforce plan which, when implemented in respect of the planning department, will contribute towards strengthening resilience across key areas of planning service delivery. It will be crucial that effect is given to the actions identified in the workforce plan to address the capacity issues and mitigate the risks currently posed to the planning department's ongoing effectiveness.

Plan-Led Development

The OPR review acknowledges the extensive work carried out by the planning department in delivering the Galway County Development Plan and its programme of local area plans. The Council's collaboration with Galway City Council in the preparation of the Joint Retail Strategy for the Galway Metropolitan Area is also recognised.

While the Council has been effective in delivering its forward planning programme it is also clear that this success has been based on strong leadership. In this regard there is a clear opportunity, and need, to build on this experience through the development of more formalised procedures so that these effective practices are built into documented systems that remain in place, mitigating against the obvious risks associated with losing key staff from the department over time.

The report also identifies the requirement for a more structured approach for the monitoring of the implementation of development plan objectives, including evaluation, monitoring and reporting. The planning department does not have a formalised approach towards delivering the various progress evaluation reports currently expected. With additional requirements imminent under the 2024 Planning Act, it is important that a greater emphasis is placed on developing a comprehensive monitoring regime and reporting to the elected members and the public.

Notwithstanding the statutory expectations in relation to monitoring, given the urgent delivery issues – none greater than housing supply – facing the county, it is crucial that tools are in place to analyse needs and requirements and the crucial factors that are in play in relation to achieving successful outcomes. With regard to housing supply, under the County Development Plan, the Council has a current target that almost 1,800 units would be delivered annually. Over recent years the overall delivery rate has been less than half of this target level. Furthermore, the target is set to increase to over 2,000 units per annum between 2025 and 2034 (and to almost 2,300 for each year between 2035 and 2040).

The incorporation of project delivery responsibilities, i.e. aspects of the Council's Urban Renewal Development Fund programme, into the work of the forward planning team, demonstrates a positive approach within the Council towards the linking of policy development to practical implementation. While the review recognises the Council's initiative in establishing a dedicated regeneration unit, and the formation of a project management office, it is considered that even stronger coordination structures could be developed, with the planning department playing a key role. In this regard, it is recommended that additional structures be put in place to enhance the pathway from policy development to project implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Given the land activation and housing supply challenges that are faced, the Council's ambition should be to go beyond accessing national funding to facilitate the design and delivery of special projects. This report advocates that the Council designates a senior manager with a role to drive collaboration across the various operational areas of the Council to generate increased synergy to deliver development plan objectives with the assistance of the various available tools and initiatives. This includes placing a key emphasis on strategic data collection and analysis to proactively inform development strategies and support compact growth.

Managing for Sustainable Development

Successfully managing for sustainable development implies securing development that reflects the overall economic, social and environmental objectives of the relevant statutory plans as well as being aligned with wider national and international obligations. Crucially it means addressing unauthorised development in a proactive manner as well as addressing dereliction and vacancy as well as protecting environmental and architectural heritage assets.

It is a key finding of the review that Galway County Council has a robust framework in place for the overall delivery of its development management responsibilities, with a significantly higher than the national average caseload being processed by the planning department on an annual basis across a broad and diverse geographic area. Despite the volumes and variety involved, it is noted that the efficiency and effectiveness of decision making is generally in line with national trends, i.e. decisions are generally made within eight weeks with a lower-than-average percentage of decisions being appealed, indicating a general public acceptance with regard to the Council's decision-making.

The review also recognises Galway County Council's overall positive and proactive commitment to the protection of heritage and engaging the public in this regard. Further, analysis demonstrates that the Council carries out screening of all applications, as required, in relation to the various European environmental directives. This is especially important given the extent of European designations in the county. The robust processes that are in place in relation to the processing of Part 8 proposals are also noted.

However, there are areas of concern that the Council must address. Tools that have been made available to assist in the management of sustainable development have not been leveraged to significant effect. The vacant sites levy has not been utilised meaningfully, and the Council has not been using derelict sites procedures to any significant degree, leaving its implementation as an environment department responsibility isolated from other land activation, regeneration and housing initiatives. There is significant scope for the Council to bring about greater coordination and build synergy between the implementation of various initiatives and to operationally bind intended outcomes to strategic development plan policy objectives. Noting the current focus from Government in relation to vacancy and dereliction, in addition to housing delivery imperatives, it is critical that the Council would deliver in this regard.

The issue of planning enforcement in County Galway is also of critical concern. The high volume of caseload consistently on-hand, referenced against annual progress made in closing cases, is considered unsatisfactory in terms of the delivery of this statutory responsibility. Furthermore, when the analysis shows that for the most part the cases that have been closed have been concluded on an administrative basis, rather than as a result of proactive enforcement activity, it is clear that the Council must make a greater investment across the board to protect the integrity of planning policies and development plan objectives through a more effective planning enforcement service. Recommendations are made in this regard, including in relation to unauthorised quarrying activity, which is a significant issue in Galway, and short-term letting, which has gone largely unacted upon to this point.

Delivering Quality Planning Services

The emphasis that the Council places on providing quality services to its customers is evident in its delivery of planning services. The planning department's recognition of the role it plays in the day-to-day lives of its customers is implicit, including a strong focus on the delivery of services across the Gaeltacht and the islands. The expertise and commitment of planning department staff is recognised, as well as the willingness of the department to be innovative and find new and effective solutions for service delivery.

In this regard it is noted that Galway County Council was one of the pilot authorities for the implementation of ePlanning, which is now operational nationally and proving to be a significant success in terms of effective service delivery and administrative efficiency in the Council, and elsewhere. Furthermore, the report recognises the planning department's initiative to implement an online pre-planning enquiries system as a best practice example that other authorities should pay attention to. This innovative system provides an excellent tool for parties considering preparing a planning application, while at the same time creating efficiencies for the planning department. The department's innovative and effective approach which saw the development of a protocol for the issuance of Section 254 outdoor dining licences provides further demonstration of the department's willingness to development innovative solutions.

The wide-ranging public engagement conducted across the various plan making processes must also be acknowledged as underlining the Council's commitment to customers and stakeholders. The implications of delivering such broad ranging and innovative programmes of public consultation to include the Gaeltacht and island areas cannot be understated. The success of the public consultation process for the county development plan is reflected in the fact that almost 3,000 submissions were received.

There are areas for improvement in relation to the delivery of services. As noted above, this includes the delivery of enforcement services, greater proactivity in this regard is required to ensure that the planning control system works properly and for the benefit of the whole community and to address any public perception that could arise in relation to a tolerance of planning breaches. Inactivity in relation to addressing derelict sites has also been noted above.

A further area that is highlighted in the report is the Council's delivery of its taking-in-charge function. The analysis notes that just 16% of housing estates in the county have been taken in charge over the last ten years, with significant periods of time elapsing from the time that requests are received until the process is concluded. Significant improvements can be made in relation to addressing the backlog of housing estates that are waiting to get through the process.



Kylemore Abbey, Connemara, Co. Galway. © Fáilte Ireland

Conclusion

Throughout this report, the professionalism of Galway County Council's planning department staff is acknowledged and for the large part this OPR review finds that planning functions are being delivered satisfactorily, with some examples of good practice on show. Galway County Council's planning department operates in a fast-moving, complex and pressurised environment. The department successfully delivers on a range of planning functions against the backdrop of limited resources, high staff turnover and vacancies.

It is important that the planning department staff are supported to continue delivering effectively in their roles. While it is clear that the department would benefit from the assignment of additional resources, it must also be recognised that the department operates with a high vacancy rate on an ongoing basis, with vacancies reaching almost 20% at the time the review process was being conducted. Actions, already identified in the Strategic Workforce Plan, must be implemented to build greater resilience into the department's structures.

It is also recognised that the department benefits from the expertise and commitment that has built up in a number of long-term staff members. While having access to such experience underpins successful operational delivery and provides a strong basis of support for more junior colleagues, it should also be recognised that an undue weight of expectation can be placed on more experienced staff members when they are expected to manage in under resourced teams. This reduces the scope such key individuals might have to contribute towards addressing the strategic challenges facing the Council and to drive innovation within their teams.

Furthermore, allowing a situation to pertain whereby under resourcing means that capacity to deliver is dependent on key individuals also poses a risk to the planning department's ongoing ability to continue to deliver its functions as successfully as it does at the moment. In this regard, in addition to addressing resourcing concerns, it is a widespread finding of this report that a greater emphasis must be put into the documentation of existing good practice into formalised and documented procedures.



3 Operating Context and Organisation of the Planning Department



Area profile

County Galway is the second largest county in Ireland having an area of almost 6,149 square kilometres, with a coastline stretching to almost 2,000 kilometres.³ The county borders Mayo to the north, Clare to the south, Roscommon and Offaly to the east and Tipperary to the south-east with natural boundaries including Galway Bay to the west along with the River Shannon and Lough Derg to the east and southeast.⁴

The county contains the largest and most populous Gaeltacht in the country, with approximately 29% daily Irish speakers. Within the rural area, and indeed within the new Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan area, the Galway Gaeltacht covers extensive parts of the county. The Gaeltacht stretches from Baile Chláir to the east of the city, to Cloch na Rón in west Conamara, a distance of approx. 100km and from Oileáin Árann⁵ northwards to Dúiche Sheoigheach which borders County Mayo.

The county incorporates four main inhabited islands, Inis Mór, Inis Óirr, Inis Meáin and Inishbofin, of which the three Oileáin Árann are within the Galway Gaeltacht. Through their Climate Action Plan⁶, the Council has designated the three Oileáin Árann as a Decarbonisation Zone, with the goal of reducing emissions by 51% by 2030.

According to the 2022 census, County Galway⁷ had a population of 192,995, with a consequent density of approximately 32 persons per km², which is substantially lower than the national average population density of 73 per km². The county's population is predominantly rural based, with approximately 76% of the population residing outside the main settlements.⁸

The Northern & Western Regional Assembly's Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy 2020-2032 (RSES) identifies a new metropolitan area which includes the entirety of Galway City and the settlements of Baile Chláir, Bearna and Oranmore. Ballinasloe and Tuam are designated as Key Towns and Athenry is identified as an Area with Strategic Potential. The historic status of Ballinasloe as the County Town is further acknowledged.

Galway is now served with a motorway network to the east of the county (M6 and M17/M18) and rail services from Galway to Dublin / Limerick provide alternative means of travel.

The former Galway Airport site has been identified in the National Planning Framework (NPF) as a Key Growth Enabler. The brownfield site (of over 45 hectares) has been identified at both the national and regional level as having the capacity to be sustainably developed for employment uses. The Council has completed a detailed analysis of the site to examine the site's potential, and the development plan contains an objective to prepare a masterplan for the site.

³ Galway County Council 'Corporate Plan 2025 – 2029'

⁴ Galway County Council, '[Local authority Climate Action Plan 2024-2029](#)', 2024.

⁵ Incorporating Inis Mór, Inis Óirr, Inis Meáin

⁶ Galway County Council Climate Action Plan 2024-2029

⁷ Excluding the city population

⁸ Galway County Council Corporate Plan 2025 - 2029

The Council outlined a number of key growth enablers for County Galway such as:

- The approval and construction of the N6 Galway Ring Road
- The delivery of the Galway East Main Drainage Scheme which is identified as a key project in the RSES and is expected to facilitate the development of residential and business areas in the eastern corridor of Galway, including Ardaun, Garraun, Oranmore, and Athenry.
- The dualling of the trainline from Galway to Athlone
- The delivery and implementation of the Dublin to Clifden Greenway
- The growth of towns and villages in a sustainable and co-ordinated manner
- Investment by Uisce Éireann in villages and settlements in the county.

Natural Heritage in the County

The county has eight Nature Reserves as well as a significant number of EU Natura 2000 designated sites (accounting for approximately 30% of the county, and 50% of the Connemara region), reflecting the high-quality natural and unique environments found throughout the county. Galway County Council recognises the natural heritage and biodiversity of County Galway in their Development Plan and described it as “a unique resource”.⁹ Such natural heritage features include woodland, grassland, wetland, marine, coastal, upland, river and lake habitats all of which support a range of biodiversity, habitats and wildlife.

Interaction with Galway City Council

Given that the urban area of Galway City straddles both administrative areas, the effectiveness of the working relationship and the interdependencies between Galway County Council and Galway City Council frequently arose as a topic in the review. Examples include on-going cooperation between the City and County Councils in the advancement of the Galway Transport Strategy and the Galway Retail Strategy. Both authorities have established joint City and County SPCs and there are regular meetings between the two chief executives and other staff on a range of coordination and operational matters.



Galway County Council foyer

⁹ Galway County Development Plan 2022 – 2028; Section 10.6.1

Organisational Context

The executive of the Council is led by a chief executive who is supported by six directors of services, taking responsibility for the following functions:

- Rural and Community Development, Integration & Environment
- Physical Infrastructure, Fire and Emergency Services & Climate Change
- Corporate Services, Human Resources, City & County libraries
- Planning & Economic Development
- Housing
- Finance, Motor Tax, ICT & Digital Transformation.

The Council has a staff compliment of just over 1,000.

The elected Council is comprised of 39 members, representing the Connemara, Tuam, Ballinasloe, Athenry and Loughrea municipal districts. The elected members also represent their constituents on a number of strategic policy committees (SPCs), which cover the following areas of activity:

- Housing
- Physical development, transportation and emergency services
- Community, Irish language, Gaeltacht, tourism and integration
- Economic development, enterprise and planning
- Environmental protection and agriculture
- Climate action, biodiversity and heritage
- Joint County and City planning committee

The five municipal districts play a pivotal role in shaping and implementing policy as adopted by the Council. The Council emphasises the importance of the municipal district structure and a process of strengthening the municipal districts with the allocation of additional resources and enhanced service delivery responsibilities is currently ongoing. Presently various activity is coordinated and reported through the municipal district structure – i.e. records of pre-planning meetings, planning permission statistics, housing data, various grant / funding streams, with the elected members of municipal districts playing a key strategic role at the local level, such as adopting local area plans, town centre first plans and Part 8 applications. The Council anticipates that the further strengthening of the role of municipal districts will allow for local elected members to focus on local strategic and operational priorities whilst allowing the plenary council to focus on county-wide issues and policies.

Local Authority Strategic Objectives

Galway County Council's overarching mission for the county, as set out in the Corporate Plan 2025-2029, is to "to promote the creation of an attractive, resilient and inclusive county in which to live, work, visit". The Corporate Plan states that the Council will "enable our diverse communities and businesses to flourish in an environment that offers a range of housing options, a robust range of employment opportunities, access to quality infrastructure and community facilities with a high-quality sustainable environment to meet the needs of all".

The Corporate Plan contains a statement from the senior management team which notes that a team-based approach will be embedded across the organisation, with the role of each staff member and line manager recognised and acknowledged through the Councils Performance Management and Delivery System as well as the Annual Service Delivery Plan. The Corporate Plan contains several actions to be achieved in 2025 – 2026, which include:

- Strengthening of the Municipal Districts by the allocation of additional resources and functions
- Delivery of a new Project Management Office integrated with the Town and Urban Regeneration Team for master planning, design and delivery of strategically important projects
- Future Skills and Training Needs of staff identified, with an underpinning staff development plan in place
- Manage ePMDS for Performance Management for all staff
- Digital Transformation and Excellence through a new Innovation Team aligned with ICT to be put in place
- Additional staff resources to meet growing demands on the Council.

Council Budget

The Council had a budget of €173m in 2024, which increased to €193.6m in 2025, and further increased in 2026 to €203.3m. The sources of income are derived from various areas such as government grants and subsidies, local property tax and commercial rates. Over the coming years, the Corporate Plan anticipates that the Council will also have an annual spend of approximately €193m on capital investment across the County, to provide homes, economic development, infrastructure and operations, libraries, fire stations, amenities and community centres. This spending is overseen by the elected members and is audited independently, which in turn, is overseen by a local, independent, audit committee, the Local Government Audit Service and the National Oversight & Audit Commission (NOAC).

Reporting on both financial affairs of the Council and the delivery of an extensive range of tasks undertaken by the Council is included in the chief executive's monthly management reports which are published on the Council's website.

Ethical Framework

From a governance and ethics perspective, the Local Government Act 2001 and the related Local Government Regulations set out the ethical framework for the local government sector. The Ethics Registrar is required to keep a public register with two parts: (i) containing members' interests and (ii) containing employees' interests (for designated employees).¹⁰ The Council's registers of interests are available to view at the Council offices and on their website (in respect of elected members).

Similar to other local authorities, and in line with the Council's Code of Conduct for Employees, it is expected that individuals in the planning department, and consultants procured by the planning department, declare any potential and / or perceived conflict of interest to their line-manager. While this is formally noted in the Code of Conduct for all council employees, a formal system of reporting conflicts of interest or indeed perceived conflicts of interest for all staff in the planning department is not in place. This is an important process that would ensure public trust is maintained, ethical decision-making is taking place and can circumvent potential legal issues. Such a procedure should incorporate sufficient and unambiguous guidance to allow all officials to consider all matters that could influence their impartiality, or perceptions thereof, 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.

¹⁰ The Local Government Act 2001 (Part 15) Regulations 2002 establishes annual declaration requirements for local authority members and designated employees.

Council Website

The provision of good planning services involves meaningful engagement in an open and comprehensive manner with local people, citizens and other stakeholders. This is evident by the implementation of processes and procedures to deliver clear communication, effective stewardship, and accountability. As is the case for other public service organisations in today's evolving technological environment, the Council's website provides the primary interface for the public and relevant stakeholders to seek information on, and interact with, Council services.

At the time the review was being undertaken, the Council had advised that their website is under review and in the future, will be updated. Further, the Council are working with a third party to support the end user experience. The Annual Service Delivery Plan 2025 targets the completion of the website redevelopment by the end of Q3, 2025.¹¹

Notwithstanding, a review of the website which was conducted for the purposes of this report, shows that it includes a large array of information, which is beneficial to the general public in navigating and understanding the planning process and the work carried out by the planning department. A highlight of the website is the ability to produce online policy context reports for potential applicants for certain sites / developments, collating common planning information relating to land use zonings, flood risk, protected structures and other topics (this shall be discussed further in this report).

The website contains application forms and guidance (in both English and Irish) for applications such as Section 254 licences, Section 5 declarations, taking-in-charge and bond release, pre-planning meetings and Largescale Residential Developments (LRD).

The website also includes detailed guidance on the planning application process, an interactive planning fee calculator, information on planning enforcement and architectural conservation, details of Section 5 declarations as well as an interactive planning list tab, whereby planning lists from the last ten years can be examined. The planning list includes applications received, granted, refused, further information requests, invalid applications and decisions made by An Coimisiún Pleanála, as is required by planning legislation.

Overall, it was found that the Council's website provides good facilities for interaction with members of the public, providing relevant information, and template forms, etc. However, there are opportunities for the enhancement of the website's existing Geographical Information Systems (GIS) functionality through the integration of a variety of spatially mapped planning data, including estates that have been taken-in-charge, unfinished housing estates, derelict and vacant sites, etc. It is recognised that the review of the website that is presently ongoing is envisaged to further enhance the quality service provided, as well as complying with the legislative requirements in terms of the online availability of documents. There may be opportunity at that juncture to include such spatially mapped planning data.

Planning Counter and Planning Register

The planning counter is located at Galway County Council's headquarters in Galway City. Public counters provide ready access to the development plan, local area plans, the planning register and advisory leaflets, together with suitably designed desks for examining planning files and development plan maps, some of which can be cumbersome to review online. Additionally, counter staff are generally able to respond to routine planning queries as they arise. Alongside this, there is a statutory requirement to maintain the

¹¹ Following the period during which the review was conducted, the Council advised that their website had been updated.

planning register and ensure it is available for inspection¹² and to make copies of the development plan available for inspection or purchase.¹³

At the time of the review, it was noted that there are no computers available to the public through which planning applications, development plan and local area plan maps, the planning register, etc. could be viewed, independent of staff assistance. Moreover, presently, there are certain complex and large planning applications and their associated documentation which are not available to view on the Council's website – permitted Strategic Housing Development applications and the more recent marine spatial planning applications. While many of these applications have their own websites, post decision correspondence, compliance submissions and reports, for example, are not available to view on such websites. In addition, it is apparent that many of the Strategic Housing Development application websites are no longer active.

While the levels of members of the public visiting the public counter over recent years has waned, as online service and information provision has increased, it is very much in the interests of both the planning department and members of the public, that all relevant information, particularly such information that is statutorily required to be available for inspection or purchase, is easily accessible in the vicinity of the public counter. The availability of such facilities can have a major impact on how customers view their experience of dealing with the planning service. The Council should give consideration towards enhancing the public counter as a customer experience.

As noted, there is a legislative requirement for the maintenance of a planning register for public viewing. The Council advised that their planning register is available online, through the iPlan system and the other elements of the register are available on request. While the iPlan system captures all planning applications received, including decisions, further information requests, etc. on such planning applications, it does not currently capture the totality of the requirements of section 7 of the Act. Likewise, the public facing GIS system which makes the associated maps available for public viewing does not currently capture all the requirements as listed under section 7.



Planning Office

¹² Section 7 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended

¹³ Section 16 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended

Overview of the Planning Department

The planning department sits in the Planning & Economic Development directorate. The Local Enterprise Office (LEO) and regeneration office also sit in this directorate. The Council is progressing with plans to establish a project management office which it is anticipated will also sit in this directorate. The project management office will integrate with the town and urban regeneration team to deliver buildings, public realm, streetscape enhancements, town centre, URDF and RRDF projects. Strategic projects that the project management office will be responsible for masterplanning and delivering include the former Galway Airport site and the BIA Innovator campus. A sub-team of the forward planning team will be responsible for delivering the Garraun Masterplan.

The planning department is led by a senior planner, who oversees four distinct functions - forward planning, development management, enforcement¹⁴ and architectural heritage and biodiversity.

The planning department is allocated funding under the development management division of the Council's budget. This division has an allocation of €20.74m or 10.7% of the overall 2025 budget, and includes forward planning, development management, enforcement, heritage and conservation services, and agent's recoupable services. It also includes services which the planning department do not oversee, such as industrial and commercial facilities, tourism development and promotion, the community and enterprise function and property management.¹⁵ Under the 2025 Council budget, the core planning functions of forward planning, development management, enforcement and heritage and conservation services have a combined budget of €8,784,189, which equates to approximately 42.3% of the development management division budget, and 4.5% of the overall Council budget.

Table 1 provides budget details for key planning services.¹⁶

Planning functions	2025 budget	2024 budget	% change
Forward planning	1,495,022	1,182,970	26.39 (+)
Development management	4,341,283	3,670,283	16.75 (+)
Enforcement	1,641,707	1,436,030	11.51 (+)
Heritage/Conservation	1,306,177	821,763	45.53 (+)
Total	8,784,189	7,111,046	

Table 1 | Planning department budget allocation

¹⁴ The enforcement function does not include unfinished housing estates, which is a function of the roads department.

¹⁵ The Development Management heading includes forward planning, development management, enforcement, industrial and commercial facilities, tourism development and promotion, community and enterprise, unfinished housing estates, building control, economic development and promotion, property management, heritage and conservation and agents recoupable services.

¹⁶ Following the period during which the review was conducted, the Council advised of the following figures in relation to their 2026 Budget: Forward Planning € 2,261,262; Development Management € 4,671,576; Enforcement €1,396,111 and Heritage € 1,816,811; Total €10,145,760. This represents a 15.5% increase on the 2025 figures.

The overall increase in the planning department’s budget for 2025 is reflective of the projected population increase of 18,655 persons¹⁷ (over the lifetime of the development plan) and the crucial role the planning department play as a key enabler in the achievement of the required housing delivery targets, along with the associated infrastructure. The commencement of sections of the Planning and Development Act 2024 may impact the work allocation and management within the department, as might the implementation of the Revised National Planning Framework.

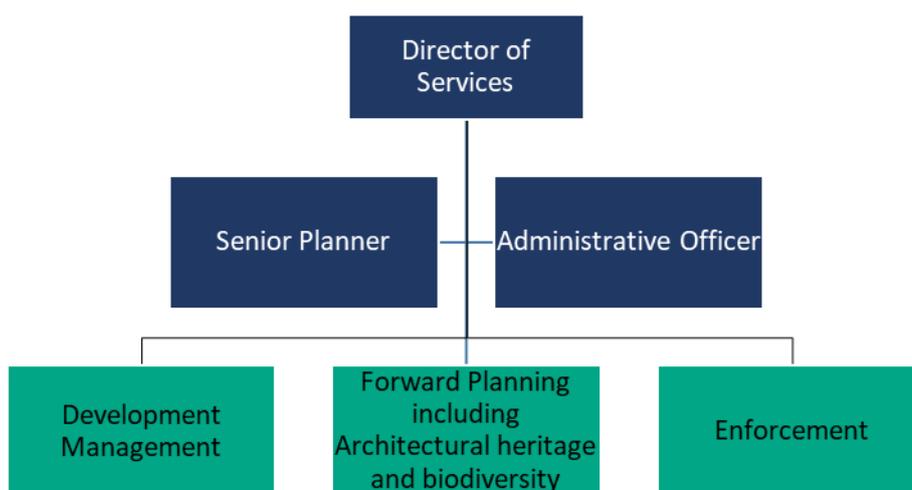
NOAC, through its Performance Indicator Report, states that Galway County Council expenditure on planning in 2024 was €30.00 per capita.¹⁸ This figure is below the national average of €38.47 per capita, and while it represents an increase on the 2023 figure of €25.60 per capita, it remains amongst the lowest per capita spends in the country (alongside Cavan County Council, Laois County Council, Tipperary County Council, Waterford City & County Council and Wexford County Council).

Staffing structures

The planning department is overseen by a Director of Services who also has responsibility for the Council’s planning and economic development functions. A senior planner leads the department on a day-to-day basis, having responsibility for business management and human resource issues, as well as procedural operations and the technical supervision of planning outputs.

The planning department is organised into three teams to deliver its core planning functions, overseen and led by the senior planner: development management; enforcement; and forward planning, which includes heritage and conservation. The planning administration team is managed by an administrative officer. In the past, the management of the planning department was overseen by a senior executive officer, however this post was vacated in 2010, and has not been refilled since. The re-establishment of the SEO position in the department would benefit the operation of the planning department by providing key administrative oversight. The role would bring a greater balance to the department, where administrative efficiency could be prioritised alongside technical outputs, as well as providing capacity to drive procedural enhancement, operational oversight and administrative leadership.

Both the senior planner and the administrative officer report to the director of services.



¹⁷ A proposed variation to the Galway County Development Plan in response to ‘The National Planning Framework’s First Revision 2025’ and the ‘Section 28 Guidelines on NPF Implementation – Housing Growth Requirements’ is currently being undertaken by the Council.

¹⁸ NOAC, [‘Annual Performance Indicator Report 2024’](#), (2025).

The planning department is also responsible for a series of important non-statutory functions, including:

- Preparation of master plans
- Working with other agencies and stakeholders, such as Irish Rail, National Transport Authority and Galway City Council to co-ordinate land for redevelopment and regeneration opportunities
- The Garraun Urban Framework Plan URDF project
- Administrating grant schemes, such as the Built Heritage Investment Scheme.

In addition, 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, active travel, public realm improvements, strategic projects including housing and transport etc.

There is a total of 61 positions within the planning department (including vacancies), which equates to 57.5 full time equivalent (FTE) positions. At the time of conducting this review, the HR department within the Council identified 11 vacancies as follows¹⁹:

- 1 acting senior planner (fixed term contract)
- 4 executive planners
- 2 assistant planners
- 2 temporary graduate planners
- 2 technicians.

No administrative staff vacancies were noted. Table 2 and Figure 1 illustrate the staffing within the planning department at the various technical and management / operation roles.

Staffing	Full Time Equivalent
Planners	26 (including 9 vacancies)
Technicians	7 (including 2 vacancies)
Admin	24
Heritage / biodiversity / conservation / building control officer	4
Total	61

Table 2 | Staffing structure

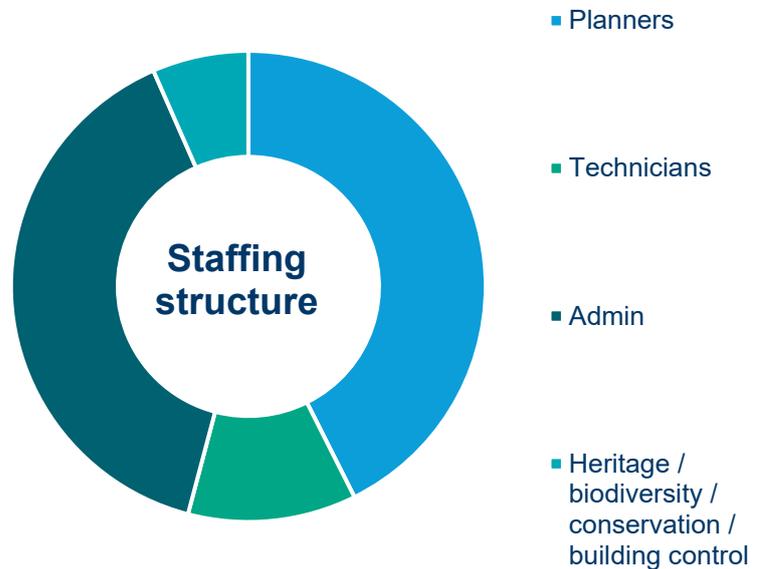


Figure 1 | Staffing structure

¹⁹ The planning department stated that these 11 positions equate to 9 FTE positions.

Delivery of Functions

The planning department is essentially organised into three teams, namely:

- Development management
- Forward planning
- Enforcement.

Development Management

The team is being led by an acting senior executive planner, who oversees the work of six executive planners, and three assistant / graduate planners. At the time the review was being conducted, the six executive planners each oversee a municipal district, apart from the Connemara municipal district, which has two executive planners. Support to each of the area planners comes from the assistant and graduate planners. Due to the nature of the work in the context of the Galway Gaeltacht, there is a permanent fluent Irish speaker on the team.

The administrative side of the team is overseen by an administrative officer, with support from two senior staff officers (1.8 FTE), five assistant staff officers (4.8 FTE) and eight clerical officers²⁰ (6.5 FTE). The administrative team coordinate the operational aspects of the development management function. A building control officer and assistant engineer, who assists in the validation of planning applications, also sit on this team.

The core responsibilities of the development management team are validating planning applications, assessing and making planning recommendations on valid planning applications, assessing Part 8 proposals, Section 5 determinations, Section 247 consultations and compliance submissions. The senior planner is currently providing assistance in development management duties including the assessment and determination of Section 254 licenses as well as countersigning of all Section 5 declarations, planning permission assessment reports in respect of further information requests and a significant number of compliance submissions. The senior planner also manages An Coimisiún Pleanála oral hearings and arbitrations, as well as legal proceedings arising.

At the time the review was conducted, the Council identified 3 vacancies within the team – one executive planner, one assistant planner and one technician. Further, one assistant planner and one graduate planner are a shared resource with the forward planning team.

Forward Planning

The core forward planning function is managed by a senior executive planner who is supported by two assistant planners, and as noted above one further assistant planner and one graduate planner who are shared resources with the development management team. At the time of the review, the executive planner from the team was acting into the position of senior executive planner to oversee a specific URFD Call 2 project (Oranmore Railway Station upgrade and Design Project), however this acting position was due to expire in July 2025. The heritage officer, biodiversity officer and conservation officer also sit on this team.

Administrative support for the forward planning team is derived from one senior staff officer, one assistant staff officer (0.8 FTE) and two clerical officers (1.8 FTE). The assistant staff officer, and one clerical officer exclusively support the work of the heritage officer, biodiversity officer and conservation officer, while the senior staff officer also manages administrative support for the development management team, supporting the work of the conservation, heritage and biodiversity team.

²⁰ One of the clerical officers is currently acting staff officer

Activities of the team include county development plan preparation and monitoring, local area plan preparation, employment land review and Residential Zoned Land Tax progress, record of protected structures review, overseeing the payment of conservation grants and preparing Section 57 declarations.

Enforcement

The enforcement team is led by a senior executive planner, who oversees this team with the support of a graduate planner²¹, a senior executive technician and two further technicians (grade I). At the time of the review process being conducted, there was a graduate planner and technician vacancy in the team. Operational support comes from administrative staff of five, comprising a senior staff officer and four clerical officers. Planning enforcement is the core responsibility of this team. Presently there are two vacancies on this team – for one graduate planner, and one technician (grade I).

Staffing	Positions
Senior Planner	1
Development Management	33 (including 3)
Forward Planning, including conservation, biodiversity and heritage and URDF project	14 (including 3 vacancies)
Enforcement	12 (including 2 vacancies)
Other Vacancies: 1 acting senior planner and 2 executive planners	3
Total	63

Table 3 | Staffing

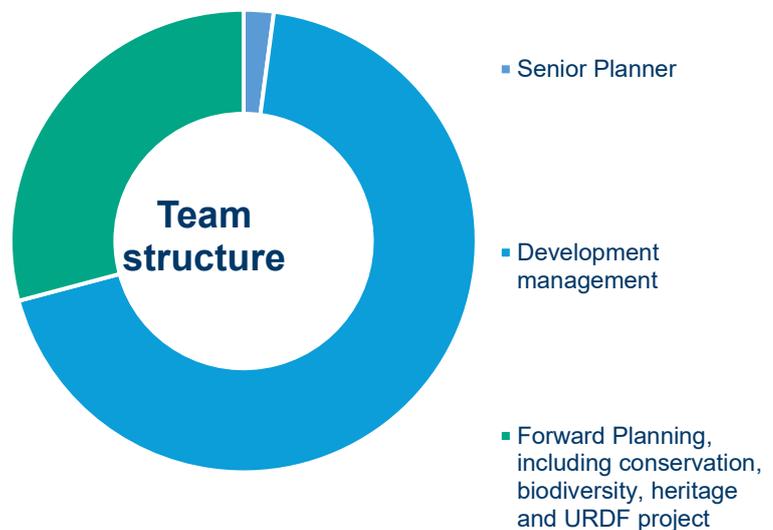


Figure 2 | Team structure breakdown

Corporate framework

The planning department 2025 risk register identifies cyber security, health and safety compliance, legislation and budgetary control as the risks with the highest risk rating. The risk of the service delivery functions not achieving or meeting its objectives in the forward planning section and enforcement section in accordance with legislation are identified in the risk register as moderate risks. Control measures such as the development of a work programme and timeframes and monitoring of work and assignment of staff are identified for the forward planning section, while the monitoring of files and case load and prioritisation as resources allow, and the use of technology to support site visits and streamline reporting are identified for the enforcement section.

²¹ The Council indicated that the graduate planner had handed in their resignation, and was due to leave in April 2025

The planning department prepares an annual operational plan that is informed by the Council's corporate plan, annual service delivery plan, and the directorate business plan. The planning department's operational plan for 2025 includes targets for supporting the objectives of Galway County Council Corporate Plan 2025-2029. These targets include the core statutory requirements of the department as well as other responsibilities such as:

- Facilitation of pre-planning consultation meeting requests within specified timeframes
- Management and implementation of the risk register
- Preparation of a masterplan for the former Galway Airport site
- Provision of planning services clinics at municipal district level.

Workplans for each team are derived from the operational plan. The Council advised that senior management within the planning department meet on a schedule and progress on individual team workplans are reported through the monthly management reports. Cross-cutting functions, such as housing, climate action, regeneration, Town Centre First, active travel and marine are discussed once a quarter, with the heads of various departments. However, it appears that meetings within the planning department do not take place on a regular or scheduled basis, primarily being ad-hoc and as needs arise. The responses to the OPR survey signal staff support for a more structured approach.

It is considered important in any organisation that team members would be afforded regular, formal opportunities to provide feedback to management on operational issues, through structures where clarification on priorities is provided, and progress can be monitored. In any busy operational area, it is important that time is made available to reflect on team performance and progress towards organisational objectives, to recognise the efforts being made by staff and to consider the supports required for staff who may be under pressure.

At the time the review process was being conducted, the planning department was experiencing a high staff turnover rate, particularly in relation to planner posts, and the Council outlined their difficulties in attracting planners to the organisation, predominantly at the graduate planner and assistant planner grades, with rolling calls for both in place. The department is currently operating with a vacancy rate of 36% in relation to planners. Furthermore, the Council outlined their concerns in relation to the position of senior executive planner, with 50% of these positions within the department filled on an acting basis. The senior planner acknowledged the critical role of this position and noted that the department has not had the benefit of a stable structure at this grade for some time. It is the intention of the Council to embed the senior executive planner structure across the three teams. A senior executive planner structure across the three key functions offers the benefits of experience, leadership and strengthened oversight to ensure high professional standards, which is important during periods of staff turnover.

The Council is cognisant of the negative impact challenges in the recruitment and retention space is having on staff and operations. The proximity of two local authority offices is also a factor that encourages staff movement between both organisations.

In 2023, the Council engaged external consultants to develop a Strategic Workforce Plan. This Plan provided several recommendations aimed at ensuring the various departments of the Council have the necessary staff resources, skillsets and organisational structure to efficiently and effectively meet the increasing volume, diversity and complexity of demands for services that are placed on the Council. An implementation plan was developed to deliver recommendations of the Strategic Workforce Plan on a phased basis over three years. Extracts of the Strategic Workforce Plan relevant to planning functions were submitted by HR to the Office as part of the information request for this review.

The plan above indicated that staff in the planning department were consistently working under significant pressure to meet deadlines, and that there is a legacy issue of under-resourcing within the planning department. It was further noted that recruitment drives had limited success, and despite working additional hours, the department was behind schedule on various projects due to challenges in resourcing, recruitment and retention.

It is not clear from the information submitted for this review, what, if any, of the recommendations in the Strategic Workforce Plan have been delivered. Specifically, for the planning department it recommended a range of additional posts to be provided to Enforcement, Forward Planning and Development Management which included various grades of planners, technicians and administrative staff. It also reported a total staff compliment of 47.1 FTE in the planning department, which is slightly less than the present staffing levels. It would therefore be reasonable to assume that the issues as identified in the Strategic Workforce Plan prevail, with the existing staff compliment having to deliver under significant pressure.

As part of this review, the Council's HR department identified 11 vacancies in relation to existing sanctioned posts within the planning department (nine professional planner roles from senior planner grade through to graduate planner grade, and two technicians) before any consideration was given towards the creation of additional posts.

The council highlighted their ongoing engagement with the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage (DHLGH), through the Council's HR department in respect of sanctioning additional posts. While the planning department has received sanction for a temporary acting senior planner post (5-year duration), a permanent senior executive planner, 3 executive planners and 2 staff officers, the Council reports that the DHLGH have expressed concerns regarding the Council's capacity to fund additional posts from the discretionary measures available to the authority. An economic strategy has therefore been requested by DHLGH in respect of additional funding being released.

Whilst the challenge to filling vacant posts in planning is acknowledged, from a strategic organisational perspective it is unclear what the intended future resourcing of the planning department should be despite the strategic workforce plan being completed. Clarity in relation to strategic workforce planning is a building block for business planning, succession management and, where not addressed satisfactorily, is an organisational risk in terms of the department's ability to deliver its statutory functions. The challenges identified by HR in recruitment and sanctioning of posts needs to be managed in co-operation with the planning department to ensure that the collective efforts by the Council in preparing the strategic workforce plan is effective.

Aside from staffing, the Strategic Workforce Plan also identified the need for the planning department to develop Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for a range of functions. While the Council outlined that some SOPs are in place, it was noted that these are largely legislatively based and/or more informal in nature, rather than process based. The planning department, while recognising the opportunities that can be derived by having a full suite of SOPs in place, reported that capacity constraints and staff turnover have impacted on their ability to develop such procedures. The responses to the OPR's staff survey underline further the desire of staff to have a full set of procedures in place. It is envisaged that a new staff officer role, if implemented, could include a focus on developing these and on formalising them into a comprehensive guide for staff.

The Council operates a blended working policy for all staff. Within the planning department, the blended work policy applies for both technical and administrative staff with 2 days remote and 3 office days. Presently, there is no anchor day for staff, which was noted due to insufficient desk space within the department. While the senior planner noted the benefits of the blended work policy, challenges in relation to team development were also acknowledged.

Performance management

Under the Local Authority Code of Governance (2024), the local government performance management and development system (PMDS) is identified as a key performance feature. The Code highlights the importance of all staff understanding their role and how it contributes to achieving the goals of the organisation. This includes creating personal development plans that align with team plans, which in turn reflect the organisation's Corporate Plan. The Code also emphasises the value of investing in staff training and development to play a key role in improving performance and helping employees achieve their personal and organisational goals within their role

Regarding training, while there is no formal learning and development plan or departmental budget for training provision, individual staff members may identify their training requirements through personal learning and development plans which are completed and forwarded to the HR department as part of the PMDS process. At the time of the review, three learning and development plans had been received by the HR department from staff within the planning department. This would represent approximately 5% of the staff in the department.

Within the planning department, 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. In addition, the senior planner arranges training for planners as required, for example flood risk training in conjunction with the OPW, and environmental training in conjunction with the EPA. Presently, the Council does not cover the cost of staff member's professional membership fees, which has been noted as a barrier to staff recruitment, in particular for planners.

The Council advised that they are currently in the process of implementing a new online PMDS system. The department 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 key to this informal approach. Notwithstanding, a record of completed personal development plans was not made available for review.

The implementation of PMDS offers benefits for enhanced organisational performance, improved service delivery to the public, increased accountability, and professional development for employees. It promotes a strategic alignment of individual efforts with corporate goals, fosters better communication and understanding between managers and staff, and provides reliable data for informed decision-making and resource allocation.

Operationally, 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 planning department make a renewed and meaningful commitment towards the annual process, with realistic personal development plans prepared, and reviewed with line managers, at regular intervals.

When new staff commence in the planning department, they are inducted into the department by their relevant line manager on their first day of service. An induction check list, as compiled by the HR department must be completed by both the new staff member and line manager and returned to the training officer.

While the HR induction covers general HR issues, given the challenging environment for recruiting planners, and against a trend of losing staff to outside opportunities, it would be worthwhile for the planning department to prioritise onboarding and mentoring for new staff.

A greater emphasis on continuous professional development would also support a wider framework for career development from graduate through to senior levels. Such initiatives could include, for example, the establishment of a CPD committee to inform staff of events / conferences taking place throughout the country, encourage staff participation, and circulate circulars, guidelines, new legislation, legal cases, etc.

It is noted that the planning department have been proactive in engaging with both second level and third level students, through their forward planning functions, in developing strategic links with planning schools in both Queen's University Belfast and University of Galway and facilitating student placements over many years. This form of active engagement with students and universities can help to build future talent pipelines and is commended by the Office.

Considerations and recommendations

Overall, there is a clear intention by senior management in the planning department to appropriately manage and support staff. However, it appears that support is often delivered in a reactive manner, rather than through managed structures. The teams in the planning department have been delivering planning functions despite significant challenges including high staff turnover and vacancies, particularly at planner grades, and increasing workload, in both scale and complexity. However, the limited level of documented procedures, the neglect of PMDS and the overall unstructured approach to staff meetings and internal communication, are issues that, if addressed, could assist by increasing effectiveness.

At a more strategic level, the structure and resourcing of the planning department does not reflect the context of the county in terms of geographic size, complexity of planning applications, requirement to engage in active land management, coupled to the forthcoming required changes to plan making and development management provided for under the 2024 Planning Act. The recommendations of the Strategic Workforce Plan should be given appropriate consideration so as to provide for continuity of business planning, improved service delivery and improved alignment with service delivery goals.

While there are established communication arrangements in place between senior staff members, it is important that this ethos permeates down through all staffing levels and teams. Furthermore, the department needs to place a stronger emphasis on business planning by ensuring that all team meetings take place on a regularly scheduled and consistent basis. All staff should be kept apprised of operational priorities and issues of wider strategic importance, as well as being provided with opportunities for feedback. Meetings should be scheduled appropriately at team and departmental level, with a focus on building departmental capacity, but also team resilience and morale, through a more inclusive approach to the organisation of workload. Regular staff meetings coupled to individual personal development plans under the PMDS process need to be prioritised and progressed on an ongoing basis.

Finally, given the informal way conflicts of interests are currently managed within the Council, the planning department should take the opportunity to be proactive in establishing a formal procedure to ensure that staff are aware of their obligations on actual, or perceived, conflicts of interest.

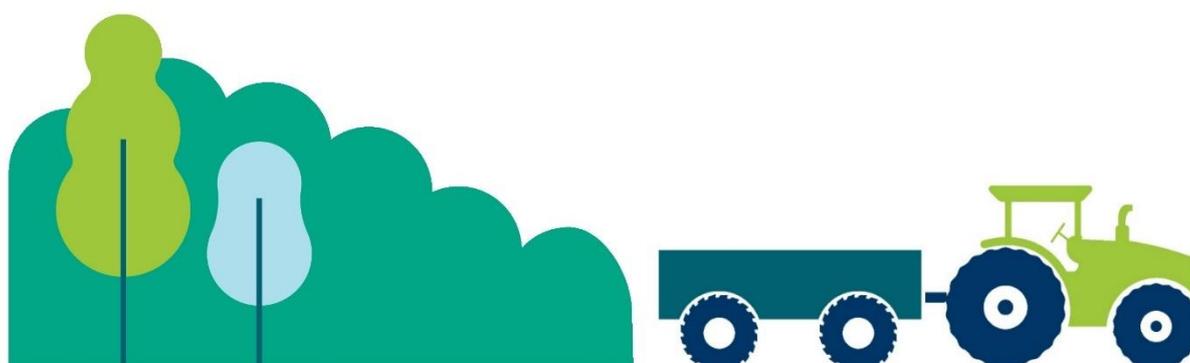
Recommendation 1 – Resourcing and staff development

The Council should clearly identify the intended structure of the planning department having regard to the findings of the Strategic Workforce Plan to ensure that the strategic and operational functions are strengthened and to ensure the future management and resourcing of the department is provided for with sufficient skills, capacity and resilience. This will help to ensure service continuity, skills alignment, retention and recruitment, operational alignment and strategic integration. The planning department should place a renewed focus on staff development matters including the PMDS process and preparation of a departmental training plan for 2026.

Recommendation 2 – Conflict of interest

The planning department should develop a procedure for staff to proactively identify and manage potential conflicts of interest. This 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	Resourcing and staff development	Critical	Director of Services
2	Conflict of Interest	High	Senior Planner



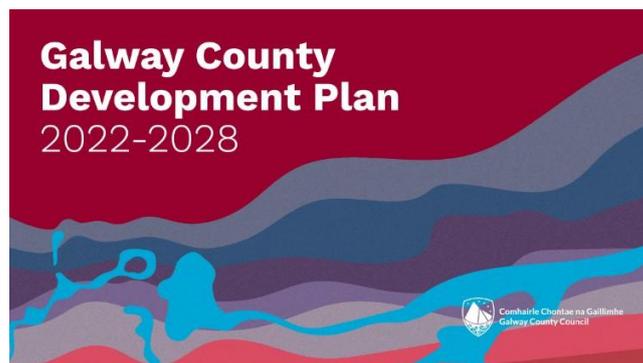
4 Forward Planning



Galway county has a significant role in the delivery of the National Planning Framework (NPF) with the city in particular recognised as a key regional growth centre and a driver of economic activity. The NPF (and subsequent revision) recognises the county as an enabler of significant strategic investment, supported by a sustainable pattern of population growth with a focus on strategic national employment and infrastructure development, quality of life and strengthening of the urban cores of the county towns and other principal settlements.

The Northern and Western Regional Assembly's Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy (RSES) provides a long-term, strategic development framework for the future physical, economic and social development of the region. Ballinasloe and Tuam are identified as key towns that provide high-quality transport links to Dublin, Galway, Limerick and the wider northwest region.

The Galway County Development Plan aligns planning policy at county and local levels with regional and national policy. The development plan outlines the Council's commitment to the creation of an attractive county to live, work, visit and enable businesses to flourish, with a high quality, sustainable environment for all. The implementation of national, regional and local objectives demands the ongoing implementation of a robust forward planning framework for the county.



The development plan recognises the town of Athenry as a place of strategic potential, while the settlements of Oranmore, Bearna and Baile Chláir, which are located in the Galway Metropolitan Area (GMA) have been identified in the development plan as having the potential to deliver sustainable jobs and housing in this area of development pressure. The development plan hierarchy also recognises the importance of the self-sustaining towns of Gort and Loughrea and the small growth towns of Clifden, Maigh Cuilinn, Oughterard, Portumna and Headford.

Further to this, with 78% of the population living in rural areas, the Development Plan notes that rural areas will form a key part of the county's strategic development.

The development plan has adopted a tiered approach to the distribution of the housing targets, with the Galway Metropolitan Areas containing the highest housing targets, followed by the key towns of Ballinasloe and Tuam, which are then followed by the strategic potential town of Athenry. Self-sustaining towns, small growth villages and the rural area comprise the remainder. Densities have also been identified in the development plan for each of the identified settlements which range from 11 units to the hectare for small

growth villages to 35 units to the hectare for the planned growth areas of Briarhill and Garraun, along with the key towns of Ballinasloe and Tuam.

To complement the county development plan, the Council has prepared a series of local area plans, namely for Ballinasloe, Athenry, Tuam, Gort and Athenry.

It is a key role of the forward planning team to carry out an evidence-based approach and analysis of data in the policy formulation stages, but also to monitor, measure and develop a selection of indicators to ensure that the development plans which are being prepared are achieving their key objectives and targets.

The planning department has been monitoring development management decisions, specifically those relating to residential and commercial planning permissions since the development plan came into effect in 2022. A database of policy objectives is also being maintained. However, it was acknowledged that such work is not formalised in a process nor is it being done on a continuous basis which does create a backlog of data analysis which then needs to be addressed.

Forward Planning resources

The forward planning team is organised around three core responsibilities – plan making; URDF; and heritage / conservation, with the senior planner having oversight over all operations. The senior staff officer, who works between the forward planning and development management teams, oversees and performs plan making and conservation, heritage and biodiversity administrative duties. The senior staff officer is supported by an assistant staff officer who is a dedicated support to the conservation, heritage and biodiversity sub team and two clerical officers, one of which is also dedicated to the conservation, heritage and biodiversity sub team.

Plan making

A senior executive planner leads on plan making, with the support of two assistant planners. A further assistant planner and a graduate planner are available as the need arises (a shared resource with the development management team). There are three planner vacancies within the team - one executive planner, one assistant planner and one graduate planner. There is no GIS Officer or in-house support available to the team; such expertise is procured as the need arises.

The team meets once a quarter, or if pressing work requirements necessitate, more frequently. The primary purpose of the meetings is to set out the upcoming work priorities.

URDF

An acting senior executive planner has been designated to oversee the URDF Call 2 project at Oranmore Train Station, with support as needed from the assistant planner and graduate planner who also deal with plan making duties and development management (as noted above). There are three distinct but related projects around Oranmore Train Station - railway infrastructure upgrades, a detailed design of the local centre and associated car park structure and a landscaping and design typology study to implement the Urban Framework Plan, as prepared by the Council for Garraun.²²

Conservation and Heritage

Within this team is a conservation officer, a heritage officer and biodiversity officer. As noted, the senior staff officer on the forward planning team provides administrative support, along with an assistant staff officer and a clerical officer, both of which are a dedicated administrative support for this sub team. The key duties of the

²² A further Urban Framework Plan has also been prepared by Galway County Council for Briarhill

conservation officer relate to built heritage and are covered later in this report. The heritage officer plays a key role in the conservation, promotion, and management of local heritage, including the preparation of the country heritage and biodiversity plan, engaging with the public, securing funding, and facilitating community involvement in heritage initiatives. The biodiversity officer promotes, manages and co-ordinates biodiversity related activities in the county, and is responsible for making funding applications and project delivery in relation to biodiversity. Both the heritage officer and the biodiversity officer oversaw the preparation of the Galway County Heritage and Biodiversity Plan 2024-2030.

All three sub teams report to the senior planner. More specialist expertise, such the preparation of transport plans, environmental assessment and specific GIS work, is procured to external expertise. The department identified a need for an ecologist on the team, and a business case was prepared in support of a shared ecologist resource amongst various teams, however the case was unsuccessful.

As reported, while there is no GIS technician within the planning department, there is GIS expertise in the wider Council and as such, there is limited availability for this resource to provide dedicated support to the forward planning team. The department does have access to ArcGIS Pro and there are some team members with limited knowledge and skills in this regard, however no formal upskilling of such staff has taken place. The planning department indicated that a need for GIS expertise was identified during the workforce planning exercise.



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Forward planning procedures

A forward planning procedure manual is in place, covering a range of functions, including plan making, preparation of the development contribution scheme and monitoring of plans. In addition, the manual contains several appendices which include detailed guidance on specific tasks, including the phasing of the task and the person responsible for the completion of such tasks. Other useful items include details around the preparation of a public engagement strategy and template newspaper notices for various forward planning procedures.

During the review process, the planning department highlighted the additional time implications as well as the financial outlay required to translate every forward planning document into Irish. Such translations must be completed in a timely manner to ensure the availability of the translated document in accordance with statutory timelines. The additional project management requirements and careful time management associated with this vital work should be reflected in the manual.

While the forward planning manual is acknowledged, it appears to focus on formal requirements which are established via statutory guidance, rather than the more detailed or day-to-day procedure. There is scope to compile and update the various components over time into an overall procedures manual to guide staff, in particular new staff, regarding the essential functions of the team, including the role of the various technical and administrative team members.

Preparation of the County Development Plan

The Galway County Development Plan 2022-2028 came into effect in June 2022. The development plan consists of a written statement (volume one), settlement strategy (volume two), as well as several associated documents, strategies and environmental reports undertaken on the plan. The settlement strategy contains settlement maps for the GMA, small growth towns and small growth villages.

The commitment by the planning department and its teams to progressing the county development plan when pandemic restrictions were in place is noted and commended. The level of commitment required by all staff to progress this statutory document in accordance with the legislative requirements, while such challenges were presenting, is recognised. In particular, new methods of consultation were developed in an effort to increase the numbers engaging in the plan making process, which included online webinars, including with the Galway Public Participation Network (PPN) and the Planning, Environment, Agriculture and Emergency Services Strategic Policy Committee (SPC), and the integration of the national online consultation portal. Further to this, the forward planning team launched a specific webpage documenting the process of the preparation of the county development plan and developed a number of videos on the plan making process, as well as other themes, which was aired on the Council's social media platforms, and placed on the Council's website.

The team was particularly aware of the need to reach different demographics and to ensure that persons less technically adept had ways to engage with the process. This was achieved through the use of dedicated phone lines to the planners, meeting planning staff by appointment (where restrictions allowed), and airing adverts on local radio.

Having regard to the extensive area of the Galway Gaeltacht, as reported earlier in this Review, and the number of inhabited Islands in the county, the planning department ensured that all development plan promotional videos, and indeed development plan reports and documentation were prepared in both English and Irish. In addition, specific stakeholder engagement took place with Údarás na Gaeltachta, and public consultation events were carried out on the Islands, all of which demonstrate the planning department's important role in helping to support sustainable and vibrant Gaeltacht and island communities.

This combined method of engaging with the public resulted in the receipt of 2,877 submissions²³ on the draft development plan. The high volume of submissions positively reflects the team's extensive public consultation efforts, but it also presented a significant challenge for a small team in processing the substantial amounts of material and ensuring that all issues raised were accurately and robustly addressed in the Chief Executive's report.

²³ This figure includes submissions from members of the public, elected members and prescribed bodies

Amenity objectives

Chapters 8 and 10 of the development plan contain objectives in relation to natural amenities such as landscape protection, and the protection of trees, hedgerows, etc. It is an objective of the Council to collaborate with key stakeholders, including adjoining local authorities to support initiatives in relation to, for example, the Burren and Cliffs of Moher UNESCO Global Geopark, which due to its location can infer knock on benefits to sustainable tourism development in the county. The development plan also commits to maintaining partnerships with all relevant stakeholders to facilitate and support the ongoing work of the Joyce Country and Western Lakes aspiring Geopark and its application for full UNESCO Global Geopark status. The Joyce Country and Western Lakes Geopark was officially granted UNESCO Global Geopark status in September 2025, making it the first UNESCO Geopark in Connaught and the first on the island of Ireland to include a Gaeltacht region. Galway County Council was a core member of the multi-agency partnership that led the Geopark initiative, collaborating with Mayo County Council, Geological Survey Ireland (GSI), and local communities to develop and manage the Geopark framework.

The development plan contains a landscape character assessment, which inter alia, identifies scenic routes and areas of landscape sensitivity in the county. The character assessment contains four classifications (1 Low; 2 High; 3 Special and 4 Iconic) of landscape sensitivity which seek to safeguard the landscape character across the county. Policy objectives and supporting text pertaining to the assessment are set out in Chapter 8 of the development plan with additional standards set out in Chapter 15. Scenic routes and viewpoints are also protected under the landscape character assessment. The internal mapping system within the planning department contains layers relating to the character assessment specifications.

The development plan includes a policy objective to identify, map and protect verified existing public rights of way over its lifetime, and to establish a register of public rights of way in the county within the lifetime of the plan. The development plan does not contain maps of rights of way but states that these will be drawn up as appropriate. However, the Council has highlighted the significant legislative and resource implications of implementing this policy. In this instance, the inclusion of such a policy in the development plan needs to be carefully considered at the plan making stage and weighed up against the practical ability of the council to action such tasks, in order to secure the policy objective. Presently, there is no programme of work that identifies a timeframe for the completion of this work, or the resourcing requirements to do so. This Office would strongly encourage the planning department to plan for, and thereafter progress, this project over the lifetime of the development plan.

Mandatory objectives

Section 10 of the Act sets out a range of mandatory objectives that every development plan must include in their written statements and maps, as appropriate. Given that a local authority's approach to incorporating the mandatory objectives is central in undertaking a qualitative assessment of a development plan, exploring the work around research, engagement and drafting to ensure compliance with this provision of the Act is an important insight into qualitative aspects of plan-making.

As part of the preparation of the Galway County Development Plan, the forward planning team compiled a checklist of the mandatory objectives listed at section 10(2) of the Act, which was used to confirm that each mandatory objective was addressed in the development plan.

Climate action objectives

All of the development plan policy objectives have been climate proofed to secure sufficient contribution to the climate action agenda. Chapter 14 addresses the effects of climate change including the increasing risks from flooding within County Galway. A renewable energy strategy was prepared as part of the development plan process. The renewable energy strategy outlines the potential for a range of renewable energy resources and developments and acknowledges the significant contribution that they can make to the county in terms of energy security, reduced reliance on traditional fossil fuels, enabling future energy exports, meeting assigned national targets and the transition to a low carbon economy. The strategy contains estimates of existing capacity and potential future capacity categorised per energy type. Of note, the strategy estimates that by 2030, onshore wind energy has the potential to create output of 965MW with solar accounting for 193MW. The inclusion of such renewable energy targets demonstrates that the Council recognises the significance of the challenge posed by climate change and the crucial role local authorities will play in mitigation and adapting to it. In this regard, it is crucial that the planning department monitors the achievement of such targets.

Monitoring and reporting progress on Development Plan objectives

Under the provisions of section 15(1) of the Act, the Council has a statutory obligation to secure the implementation of the objectives of the development plan. While the planning department state that all policy objectives set out in the development plan are monitored (and to this effect, submitted a wide variety of Excel spreadsheets to the Office in relation to policy objectives and permitted residential and commercial developments) there is no evidence to suggest that a comprehensive approach or framework for plan evaluation, monitoring and reporting has been developed or implemented.

This is further reinforced by the lack of a 2-year progress report of the county development plan (as required under section 15(2) of the Act), and the lack of an 'Annual Development Plan Monitoring Report'.²⁴ The Council cited reasons relating to capacity constraints within the forward planning team, caused by the progression of statutory LAPs, the drafting of the RZLT maps, along with the preparation of the development contribution scheme as to why such reports have not been prepared. It was stated that consultants had been procured to prepare the SEA monitoring report, however the 2-year progress report of the county development plan has not to date been completed. Further there is no evidence from the Council's website that an annual development plan monitoring report has been prepared for 2023 and 2024.

In this regard it is further noted that the impending requirements of the 2024 Planning Act will place greater emphasis on development plan monitoring, under which future development plans will also be subject to an interim report on the implementation of objectives and policies contained in the development plan. The legislation, once commenced, will require a detailed statement on the progress in implementing each of the key strategies and the objectives of the plan, with the emphasis firmly being on implementation. In the short term, a recommendation of this report will be for the Council to fulfil their statutory requirements under section 15(2) of the Act, along with the policy requirement of the Guidelines.

There are specific resource requirements in developing a comprehensive monitoring system or framework, which may include human resources, financial resources and IT resources as well as planning department resources. A significant challenge is presented as the planning department does not have a dedicated GIS resource.

²⁴ The preparation of an Annual Development Plan Monitoring Report' is a policy and objective of the Development Plans Guidelines for Planning Authorities (section 10.3.1)

The Office acknowledges the work being carried out to date, however the importance of developing a comprehensive monitoring regime and reporting on this to the elected members and the public must be emphasised. Given the geographical extent of the county, the need for a system to spatially record and monitor such data, which would benefit from ongoing access to GIS expertise, and a wider capability to develop systems that will accurately record, analyse and illustrate crucial information, must be highlighted. While various staff members within the planning department have upskilled to a certain level in GIS capability and are responsible for recording data in relation to permitted residential and commercial units on various Excel spreadsheets, it is important that further investment in terms of training, technologies and resources be provided to support continuity within the planning department's overall monitoring framework.

Notwithstanding the absence of such expertise, the planning department should, in the interim, develop a framework and standardised methodology for development plan monitoring, which is carried out on an ongoing basis to ensure the implementation of the policy objectives set out in statutory plans.

Preparation of Local Area Plans

Local Area Plans (LAPs) have been prepared, or are in the process of being prepared, for the key towns of Tuam and Ballinasloe, the self-sustaining towns of Gort and Loughrea and the strategic growth potential town of Athenry. All LAPs are accompanied by an infrastructural assessment, local transport plan, and the legislatively required environmental assessments.

The Office commends the planning department on the substantial workload undertaken to date in the preparation of the various LAPs. In particular, the extensive engagement with elected members is acknowledged. At the commencement of each of the various LAPs, the planning department contacted the elected members to inform them of the beginning of the LAP process and thereafter maintained an open-door policy with the planning department staff. Workshops were held with the elected members of the relevant municipal district. As the LAPs are adopted at the municipal district level, rather than at full Council, such an effective means of communication and relationship-building ensured that the department and the elected members were in communication throughout the various states of the plan making process, particularly in relation to the strategic priorities for each of the towns, and adherence to the legislative requirements of the Act.

In addition to the positive engagement with the elected members, the planning department forged strategic ties with second and third level institutions during the LAP making processes. For the preparation of the Athenry LAP, the students of Athenry Presentation College and University of Galway were invited to participate in and undertake survey and public engagement tasks and to put forward concepts, ideas and insights in relation to the town. The planning department noted the positive impact of such relationships in terms of knowledge exchange, research, collaboration and crucially the development of evidence-based plans that address local needs. In addition, such links can act as an attractor for careers in planning into the future.

The planning department engaged in a programme of public engagement for each of the LAPs, with webinar and public drop-in sessions held in central locations in the relevant towns. The planning department also highlighted the importance of cross departmental engagement across the Council in the LAP making process, notably with the regeneration office, in the identification of key opportunity sites.

The extensive work carried out by the forward planning team in preparing the LAPs will benefit the Council into the future as the transitional provisions under the 2024 Act provide for the continuation of any LAPs that are in force at the time of the repeal of the current provisions.

Environmental Assessment

The Council engaged consultants to prepare Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), Appropriate Assessment (AA) and Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA) as part of the development plan making process. In terms of monitoring the significant environmental effects of the implementation of the plan in accordance with the SEA Directive and Development Plan Guidelines, it was stated that SEA monitoring would be carried out by the relevant consultants who prepared the SEA for the development plan. To date, there is no evidence that such a monitoring report has been prepared.

Joint Strategies

Galway City Council and Galway County Council collaborate on several strategic initiatives, particularly within the Galway Metropolitan Area, to manage growth and development. These efforts are supported by the RSES which targets population growth within the Galway Metropolitan Area, encompassing both the city and surrounding county.

Presently, being led by the acting senior executive planner over URDF for the County Council, both local authorities are overseeing the preparation of a Joint Retail Strategy and a Joint Economic Strategy for the Galway City and County Metropolitan Area. The Joint Retail Strategy will provide an important framework for guiding the development of a vibrant and competitive retail sector within the City and County Metropolitan Area and will seek to promote continued vitality and investment in the main retail area and safeguard Galway's status as a key driver of economic development and competitiveness in the region. External consultants have been procured to prepare the strategy, with both Councils working collaboratively to provide a framework for retail development, ensuring it aligns with the overall growth and development goals contained in the respective development plans. The Council is encouraged to continue with the progression of this Strategy to deliver on policy objective RET 3, as contained in the development plan.²⁵

Performance rating and recommendations

Recognising the team's ongoing achievement in meeting its statutory plan-making requirements, the Council's delivery of its forward planning function is considered to be **satisfactory**.

In particular, the extensive work carried out in the preparation of the county development plan and, following that, the programme of LAPs is recognised. In both the LAP and development plan making process, wide-ranging public engagement was carried out, which ensured the involvement of a variety of stakeholders in the processes. The collaboration with the City Council in the preparation of the Joint Retail Strategy and Joint Economic Strategy for the Galway Metropolitan Area is also acknowledged.

In addition, the incorporation of URDF responsibilities into the forward planning team, with dedicated resources, demonstrates the Council's commitment to proper planning and sustainable development in the delivery of a high quality, contemporary and compact new public transport focused community at Garraun and has facilitated a strategic approach towards the utilisation of national funding initiatives. This is an effective assignment of resources, which works towards the achievement of local and national government policies and priorities in relation to compact growth and sustainable transport and demonstrates a commitment to active land management.

²⁵ Policy Objective RET 3 of the Development Plan contains an objective that the Planning Authority and Galway City Council will prepare a joint retail strategy, and a Working Group will be set up to prepare and deliver the Strategy for the Galway Metropolitan Area. The policy objective contains a timeframe of 1 year for the completion of the Retail Strategy and the adoption of same by way of variation to this Plan.

It is evident that the forward planning team is carrying a significant workload which requires careful consideration to be given to the deployment of resources and the assignment of priorities, which should be reflected in the departmental risk register. Presently the risk register had recorded the risk to service delivery as 'moderate'. The risk to service delivery was evident whereby the preparation of the two-year monitoring report was paused as the RZLT maps had to be prepared. Given the volume of work before the forward planning team and the risks posed through staff turnover, it is important that a work programme, with medium and long-term priorities identified, is prepared, reviewed and adjusted as required, on a regular basis. Such an exercise could identify the various dependencies and critical success factors, including details of the technical resources required and skill gaps to be filled.

It is also important to recognise that plan monitoring must be carried out on an ongoing basis, using formalised structures, which are documented. In this regard the planning department needs to put in place a robust and transparent mechanism to monitor progress in the implementation of the development plan policies and objectives.

Recommendation 3 – Development Plan monitoring

In the short term, the Council should, as a matter of urgency fulfil their statutory requirements in terms of the preparation and publication of a two-year progress report of the county development plan (as required under section 15(2) of the Act). Further, an 'Annual Development Plan Monitoring Report' as required under Ministerial Guidelines should be prepared for the elected members and, thereafter, published on the Council's website.

In the longer term, the Council should establish a formal system for monitoring progress on the delivery of development plan objectives. Building on existing work carried out to date, the data collection, monitoring and reviewing should be a permanent function of the planning department - before, during and after the plan-making process - and should extend beyond the capture of data on residential and commercial development activity, not only to address plan monitoring requirements, but also to contribute to the development and implementation of other strategic projects and policy initiatives. Ensuring that monitoring and analysis is conducted with adequate expertise will necessitate the ongoing availability of a GIS resource to the planning department, which could be realised through new or shared resources, while attention should also be given to the upskilling of staff within the department.

Recommendation 4 – Forward planning procedures manual

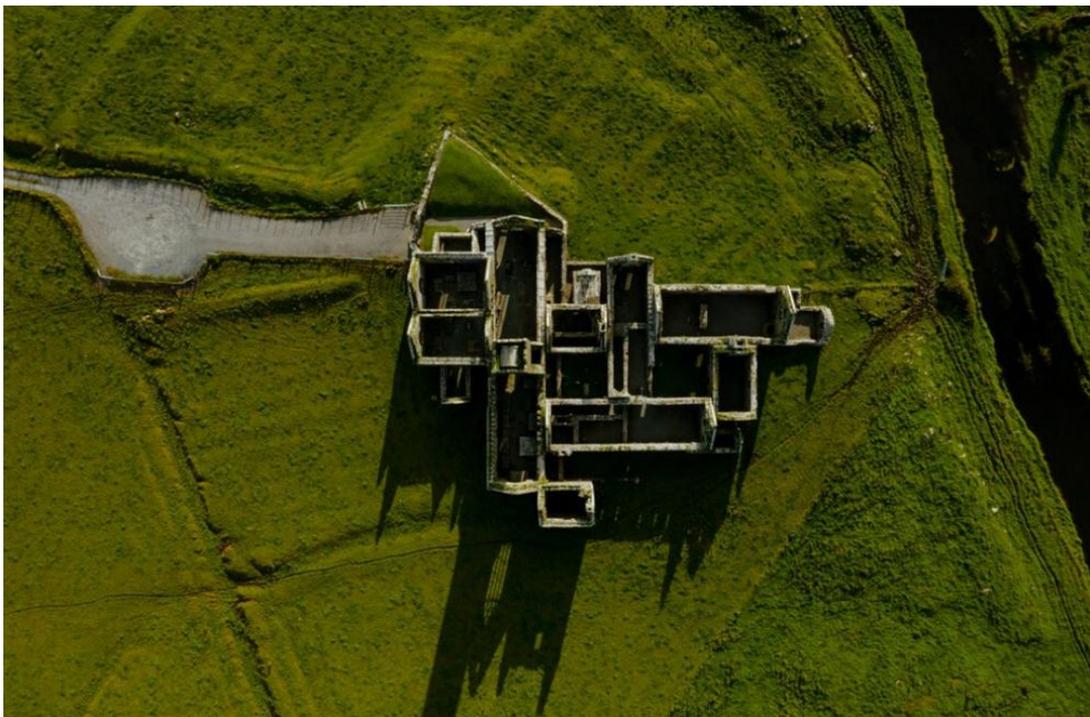
The planning department should review the existing operating procedures manual to include a greater emphasis on procedures for data collection requirements, analysis, drafting, consultation phases, reporting, environmental assessment, publication and adoption of statutory plans, as well as the variation / 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 relation 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
3	Development Plan monitoring	High	Senior planner
4	Forward planning procedures manual	Medium	Senior planner

5 Architectural Heritage



County Galway has a rich architectural heritage including demesne estate houses, vernacular buildings which form the streets of the many towns and villages across the county and thatched structures. There are 1,541 structures on Galway County Council's Record of Protected Structures (RPS), which forms an appendix to the county development plan. The RPS has been updated over a number of development plan cycles, with the most recent update conducted during the current development plan making process. Policies to support the conservation and protection of the built heritage across the county are contained in chapter 12 of the county development plan. In addition, the location of all structures on the RPS is available to view on the Council's maps and data portal, with a description and accompanying appraisal of each structure. This substantial body of work undertaken by the Council is to be commended as it enhances public access to such information and allows for easier identification of such structures.



Ross Errilly Friary, National Monument, Headford, Co. Galway. © Fáilte Ireland

There are 20 architectural conservation areas (ACAs) designated in the county development plan, the boundaries of which are all mapped and available for viewing in the development plan, as well as on the Council's maps and data section of the website. Details in relation to each architectural conservation area, along with a statement of significance are included in appendix 7 of the development plan. Policies in relation to the protection and enhancement of conservation areas are included in chapter 12 of the development plan. The Office commends the Council on the preparation of this document which provides clear and concise detail in respect of the various ACAs, thereby providing for important character preservation into the future.

The Council also has responsibility for ensuring that owners carry out certain works to ensure the preservation of protected structures and has other powers to secure protection, including compulsory purchase order powers. Section 57 of the Act allows owners to request the local authority to declare the type of works that are exempt.

Presently the Council has one executive architectural conservation officer, based in the forward planning unit, who is responsible for overseeing the implementation of architectural heritage functions, including the maintenance of, and additions and deletions to, the RPS, Section 57 declarations, conservation reports for development management functions (including planning applications and Section 5 declarations), management and administration of built heritage grant schemes, painting schemes and annual town walls conservation grant schemes, as well as public engagement in relation to architectural heritage. There is shared administrative support for the conservation officer, the heritage officer and the biodiversity officer.

The Council outlined that the current priorities of the conservation office include reviewing the RPS and administering funding applications. The Council noted that a long-term programme of works for the conservation office included the updating of the architectural heritage section of the website, co-ordinating training / workshops for Council staff, and the provision of training for elected members.

Standard operating procedures

To fulfil the architectural conservation functions, the following SOPs are in use:

- Standard template for protected structure inspections, along with templates from the DHLGH
- Database maintained for all structures on the RPS, including owners contact details
- Standard referral procedure to the conservation office regarding pre-planning inquiries, planning applications, Section 5 declaration requests, etc.
- Standard template and procedure for the assessment and administration of grants
- Standard template for Section 57 declaration assessments.

The provision and implementation of such SOPs demonstrates a recognition by the Council of the importance of having such procedures in place for the consistent and robust management of the architectural heritage function. In addition, the forward planning procedures manual contains procedures in relation to additions / deletions from the RPS, the administering of the conservation grants scheme and the community monument grants scheme.

While acknowledging the work on developing SOPs carried out to date, the preparation of a dedicated architectural heritage procedures manual, with a practical focus on the preparation of an annual work programme, the development of a robust public engagement strategy, the management of funding schemes, and the provision of in-house training for staff and elected members would provide for a greater level of resilience within the team.

Public engagement and conservation grants

The public play an important role in relation to architectural heritage conservation. As with other Council services, the Council's website is generally the first point of contact for members of the public to engage with the conservation office. Under the architectural conservation section of the website, guidance, documentation and various application forms in relation to architectural heritage are available for members of the public. This includes guidance in relation to protected buildings, a list of useful contacts, the Section 57 declaration application form and the Galway Shopfront design guide.

The availability of grant schemes plays an important role in promoting public engagement with architectural heritage. Such grant support for the conservation, repair and enhancement of historic structures, has a clear community and public benefit, through enhancing public amenities, preventing dereliction and providing opportunities for public access and engagement with heritage. The Council outlined the priority that funding applications are given, having regard to the timelines and resource-heavy nature associated with processing and administering grant funding. As such, the conservation officer is required to plan the work programme around schemes.

The Council has advised of the payment of the following grants:

Built Heritage Investment Scheme	No. of projects	Value €
2022	29	125,000
2023	15	180,924
2024	22	110,189

Table 4 | Conservation grants as awarded by Galway County Council

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. Data gathered from such monitoring can also have practical benefits when engaging with members of the public on the benefits of the scheme, in that it can reveal the types of projects that are successful and highlight common challenges, which can thereafter play an important role in land activation or regeneration projects being undertaken by other Council departments involving built heritage. The Office encourages the development of a framework for such monitoring.

Along with the promotion of the various grant schemes, the conservation office has been proactive in facilitating various architectural heritage community workshops and training, such as the masonry and lime workshop and the facilitation of an apprenticeship scheme for traditional thatching. While such schemes and workshops are highly commended, there is an opportunity for the Council to build greater public awareness regarding these positive initiatives.



Clonfert Church, Co. Galway. © Fáilte Ireland

Performance rating and recommendations

The Office considers the delivery of the architectural heritage function to be **satisfactory** and further recognises Galway County Council's overall positive and proactive commitment to the protection of heritage and engaging the public.

While the team has developed a set of SOPs, which have the benefit of ensuring efficiency within the team, the preparation of a dedicated architectural heritage procedural manual would build on this work, and ensure operational consistency, reduce risk of statutory failings, facilitate effective staff training and onboarding, as well as building operational resilience.

Recommendation 5 – Architectural Heritage procedures manual

An architectural heritage procedures manual should be prepared to assist the ongoing delivery of the Council's architectural heritage duties. The manual should be developed over time to encompass all areas of responsibility, including the management, oversight and monitoring of conservation grant schemes, processes of engagement with owners / occupiers of protected structures, public engagement strategy and the preparation of an annual work programme. In due course, the manual should document the cyclical processes for updating the Record of Protected Structures and identify procedures for the delivery of conservation training / workshops to Council staff (including outdoor staff) and elected members.

No.	Recommendation	Grading	Responsibility
5	Architectural Heritage procedures manual	Low	Conservation officer



6 Land Activation and Projects



A proactive approach by local authorities to land management and activation and regeneration projects is of critical national importance in meeting Government targets for housing delivery and the revitalisation of the country's towns and villages. This includes strategies on land acquisition, zoning, the implementation of initiatives such as the Residential Zoned Land Tax (RZLT) and engagement with housing providers generally to identify and encourage the development of suitable land. The identification of vacant land / dwellings, and the implementation of the derelict sites legislation also forms part of overall land activation responsibilities.

Organisational context

Presently, Galway County Council's utilisation of the various mechanisms available for land activation and special projects are delivered on a cross-departmental basis with the various departments (housing, regeneration, environment and planning) overseeing the various initiatives, as illustrated in Table 5 below.

Policy / regulatory	Department	Delivery / activation	Department
Planning policy	Planning	Local Authority housing	Housing
		Town Centre First	Regeneration
Vacant Site Levy	Planning	Public Realm projects	
		URDF / RRDF	
Residential Zoned Land Tax	Planning	Derelict sites	Environment
Croí Cónaithe	Housing	URDF Call 2 (Garraun – specific project)	Planning
Town Centre First	Regeneration		

Table 5 | Land activation in Galway County Council

In addition to the departments outlined above, the Council is progressing with the establishment of a project management office, which will be integrated with the regeneration team, and will be responsible for master planning, design and delivery of strategically important projects.

While cross-departmental land activation functions can result in enhanced active land management planning, policy and delivery, it is important that the various departments do not become siloed in their structures, with different departments operating independently. Due to interwoven public policy issues in relation to delivering housing, sustainable development, promoting economic investment in urban areas and supporting sustainable communities in urban and rural locations, it is imperative that the Council adopts a strategic, rather than fragmented approach to land activation.

Notwithstanding cross departmental delivery structures, a high performing local authority that is successful in implementing land activation measures will ensure that each responsible department has:

- Effective systems and procedures
- Proactive engagement with landowners and developers
- A track record in successfully harnessing legislative mechanisms, and
- Up-to-date survey material and data and an effective monitoring system that is publicly accessible, demonstrating the awareness and resolve of the Council.

Housing delivery

The county development plan plays a crucial role in land activation by providing the strategic framework, zoning, and policy objectives that guide the proper and sustainable development of land for housing and other uses. Further to this, the core strategy provides an evidence-based, spatial vision for the county. The development plan outlines an expected population increase of 18,655 persons between 2022 and 2028, with an average population increase of 2,655 persons per annum between 2022 and 2028 (inclusive) and an estimated housing supply target over the plan period of 10,738 units (1,790 per annum).²⁶ Of this, over the life of the plan, 3,221 units are to be delivered on infill / brownfield sites, while 7,517 are to be delivered on greenfield sites.

CSO data illustrates the challenge, with annual targets not having been met in any year since 2021, and an overall delivery rate that is 50% below target over the four-year period.

Year	Target	No. of units completed	Difference
2021	1,790	745	1,045
2022	1,790	896	894
2023	1,790	959	831
2024	1,790	965	820
Totals	7,160	3,570	3,590

Table 6 | Housing targets and housing completions²⁷

In July 2025, the DHLGH published new guidelines instructing local authorities to update housing targets in line with the revised National Planning Framework (NPF). The guidelines contain a revised annual housing supply target for Galway County Council of 2,008 residential units per annum between 2025 and 2034 (increasing to 2,288 units annually for the years from 2035 to 2040).

According to CSO data, planning permissions in respect of 1,086 residential units were approved by the Council during 2024 (819 houses and 217 apartments), while 965 units were completed during the same period. These figures suggest a modest signal of future supply but also point to a potential future ‘completions gap’, where, for example, in 2024 the shortfall between housing targets and both the number of units for which planning permissions were granted and the number of housing completions is very apparent. This shortfall may then be further exacerbated by prevailing market conditions like construction delays, funding issues, labour availability or changing market conditions might inhibit the construction of permitted units, thus resulting in an even larger shortfall between targets and completions.

²⁶ At the time of the review, a proposed variation to the County Development Plan to provide for annual housing growth requirements in line with the Section 28 Guidelines - NPF Implementation: Housing Growth Requirements was being undertaken by the Council.

²⁷ Targets are derived from the Galway County Development Plan. Completions are derived from [the CSO](#).

While the Council may not be in a position to control external issues, it is imperative that the Council continues to proactively monitor the availability and development of all key sites including brownfield sites and vacant urban areas, which are generally serviced to support compact growth. The development plan states that approximately 30% of housing need will be delivered on infill and brownfield lands. The planning department are maintaining a database of permitted residential units within settlements and have identified whether such developments are on brownfield or greenfield lands. There is scope to expand upon this to ensure that the quantum of developed and available brownfield and greenfield lands in each settlement is clearly identifiable. The use of GIS would be greatly beneficial to the Council in this regard.

Further, the planning department should place a focus on engagement with relevant landowners and those engaged in housing delivery as a key active land management measure to understand any barriers to development in circumstances where construction activity has not materialised in respect of planning permissions. In addition, the planning department should engage with landowners and developers to ensure the delivery of enabling infrastructure as identified under the various local area plans.

It is welcome to note that the Council have adopted a plan led approach to local authority provided housing delivery across the county, with provision based primarily on the development plan settlement hierarchy. A review of Part 8 proposals shows that the Council, having regard to the settlement hierarchy as contained in the development plan, have been active in relation to local authority housing provision in the key towns of Ballinasloe and Tuam and self-sustaining towns of Gort and Loughrea. The strategic potential town of Athenry has also benefitted from local authority housing developments, with proposals put forward for the development of 55 houses through the Part 8 process in the first half of 2025 alone.

Housing provision is not the only factor in active land management. In this sense, the Council has been proactive in proposing various developments, drawing on funding from the RRDF. For instance, proposals for the redevelopment of a long term vacant town centre building into a community and enterprise hub alongside the regeneration of the public realm of Athenry's historic town core; the regeneration of Loughrea Town Hall, which comprises a derelict heritage building in the centre of the town, to provide a cultural, enterprise and tourism hub; and repurposing of the historic Tuam Town Hall as a multi-purpose remote working, innovation, cultural and community space. Further to this, the Council has been using the provisions under section 179A of the Act for other land activation measures which includes a proposal to redevelop a terrace of houses in Ballinasloe to provide 16 residential units and convert a disused pub into commercial use.

The Council has produced urban framework plans for the metropolitan settlements of Garraun and Briarhill to provide strategic vision and guidance for development in these areas, to create compact and walkable neighbourhoods with public transport availability and recreation and amenity facilities.

Regeneration

Galway County Council established an urban and rural regeneration team in January 2020 (sitting in the Planning & Economic Development Directorate). The team, which is led by an acting senior executive engineer, works with local communities and stakeholders, helps identify regeneration opportunities and applies for financial support through a variety of funding streams. The town centre first officer also sits on this team.

The regeneration team has conducted significant public consultation through representative Town Teams that have been established in Athenry, Gort, Ballinasloe, Headford, An Cheathru Rua and Oranmore. In addition, funding from Town Centre First supports have provided additional investment for developments in the smaller settlements, for example:

Town	Grant Funding	Project Description
Eyrecourt	€48,925	Project will progress and complete design studies and obtain planning permission for a playground, skate park and outdoor community recreation space beside the village square in Eyrecourt
Clonbur	€50,000	Project relates to the refurbishment and renovation of the community centre in Clonbur. Project will draft and agree detailed designs and estimates to progress the project to shovel ready stage. A second project element is for a health and safety structural report on the Court House which has been vacant for over 20 years.
Ahascragh	€50,000	Project will complete detailed designs and engage professionals to progress redevelopment of the local parish hall.

Table 7 | Town Centre First supported projects



Gort, Co. Galway. © Fáilte Ireland

In terms of capital projects, the regeneration team outlined the significant work that has been undertaken to date in relation to the Tuam Station Quarter Project. The Station Quarter was highlighted as a key project in the previously prepared non-statutory Tuam Regeneration Masterplan. Leveraging the Masterplan, the Council initially secured €200,000 for the redevelopment of the Station Quarter through the THRIVE strand 1 funding. More recently, funding to the amount of €6.6 million through the most recent THRIVE funding stream has been secured to transform the Station House into a multi-purpose enterprise hub and social space. The regeneration team is the leading department for such redevelopment works, due to the presence of the railway station that is a protected structure and involves co-ordinated input from the planning department, Irish Rail and the DHLGH.

The team also noted the progression of works in Gort, Athenry, Tuam, Clifden and Portumna.

Town	Proposed works	Funding €	Funding Stream	Status
Gort	Public realm works and car park	€798,584	RRDF	Part 10 application submitted to ACP
Athenry	Public realm works and community and enterprise hub	€6,075,518	RRDF	Construction commenced
Tuam	Redevelopment of Station Building	€6,600,000	European Regional Development Fund	Part 8 application approved
Clifden	Public Realm enhancement works	€792,030	RRDF and Destination Towns funding (Failte Ireland)	Part 10 application submitted to ACP
Portumna	Redevelopment of Portumna Courthouse into an Arts, community and enterprise hub	€2,950,749	RRDF	Development completed

Table 8 | Regeneration projects

A Town Centre First plan is also being progressed for Ballinasloe, with a specific focus on addressing vacancy and dereliction in the town.

These projects reflect the Council’s ongoing commitment to strengthening the social, cultural, and economic fabric of towns and villages throughout County Galway. This commitment is also evident in the Clifden Town Centre and Loughrea Long Point Enhancement projects, which are currently progressing through the planning process.

The planning department was successful in attaining circa €12 million funding under the URDF in March 2020 to deliver:

1. Railway infrastructure upgrades at the existing Oranmore train station
2. Design of the local centre and lands around of the train station
3. A study on the design development of typologies to implement the Garraun Urban Framework Plan.

To this end, a dedicated unit was established within the forward planning team to oversee the delivery of infrastructure enabling works and associated development in accordance with the funding awarded. The primary focus is on 60 hectares of land around the train station in Oranmore which are the subject of the Garraun Urban Framework Plan (UFP) and is included as an appendix to the development plan.

The planning department engaged with the DHLGH, the National Transport Authority and Irish Rail to establish a governance structure for this multi-agency programme of works. The URDF sub team is progressing with consultants with respect to the design of the local centre, ecopark and density typology study with finalisation due in Q3 of 2025. In particular the density typology study has significant potential to ensure the optimisation of land in Garruan, and to ensure the most appropriate building types and densities for this area, thereby maximising the use of land while respecting the surrounding environment and context.

In the strategic context, the recognition by the planning department of the importance of proactive land management by supporting the efficient delivery of enabling infrastructure at this location, as well as the preparation of the UFP, reflects the corporate position of the Council to support the sustainable delivery of communities, which provide for good quality housing, social infrastructure and sustainable transport modes.

Land Activation Tools

Local authorities in Ireland have various tools available to them to assist in land activation, including the Vacant and Derelict Sites Registers, Residential Zoned Land Tax (RZLT) and through incentivising measures incorporated into development contribution schemes. Strategic land use monitoring, to provide detailed land information, track changes over time, and inform policy implementation, is also important.

Vacancy and Dereliction

In Galway County Council, the derelict site function is overseen by the environment department. Derelict sites, by their existence, represent a considerable challenge for the economic, social and cultural wellbeing of an area. Notwithstanding, significant opportunities can also be derived from repurposing derelict residential and commercial properties, providing an opportunity to improve housing supply in key locations, deliver more sustainable settlement patterns, utilise existing wastewater infrastructure and to ensure towns and villages are economic, social and cultural hubs for their wider hinterlands.

While the environment department has an SOP in place to identify and progress the implementation of the Derelict Sites Act, at the time this review was being conducted, there were only five sites listed on the derelict sites register (which is available on the Council's website). One site has been on the register since 2022, one since 2024, and three sites were added in 2025, of which two are awaiting a valuation.

These numbers are in sharp contrast to the data captured in the GeoDirectory Residential Report Q2 2024²⁸ which reported 1,776 derelict residential addresses for County Galway (8.7% of the national total of 20,413). While it is acknowledged that GeoDirectory methodology has a broader remit to identify sites than the derelict sites legislation, and also that the figure includes city and county administrative areas, this is an indication of the Council's limited application of the derelict sites register as tool.

The Council needs to address the issue of derelict sites as a key aspect of strategic land management and activation, to allow for the more efficient use of infrastructure in existing urban areas. Immediate, targeted and co-ordinated action is required by the Council in this regard. Recent Government announcements, including the intended restructuring that will see penalties collected by Revenue as a tax, and Government's expectation that authorities will apply the initiative more proactively (including the compulsory purchase of derelict sites) places an even greater emphasis on the need for additional action in County Galway.

The Council's Vacant Homes Officer (VHO), based in the housing department, is responsible for promoting the return of vacant properties to residential use, by promoting and leading the uptake of various initiatives and schemes designed to address vacancy, and by providing support and advice to property owners.

Data from the 2023 Geo Directory Vacancy Data Survey²⁹ was utilised by the VHO and all 817 residential properties identified in the survey were assessed. To date, the Council has advised that 207 properties have been activated, with a breakdown as follows:

²⁸ GeoDirectory, '[Residential Buildings Report Q2 2024](#)', (2024).

²⁹ The Geo Directory Vacancy Survey surveyed 1708 properties identified by DHLGH within a 1km buffer of 43 settlements within the County. Of the 1708 properties surveyed, 773 were deemed to be vacant and 44 were deemed to be derelict. For the purposes of the

- 21 properties with works carried out following initial approval of the Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant
- 11 properties sold or put up for sale
- 175 properties with works carried out privately

Since the beginning of the Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant scheme, the Council has received 583 applications and approved works to 358 to date (with a potential value exceeding €19 million). 111 applications have been withdrawn or rejected due to ineligibility for the scheme. 37 grants have been paid to date. This represents a significant investment in local communities. The Council highlighted the importance of the grants as a valuable tool for addressing vacancy and dereliction. In order to provide a clear evidence-base of the benefits being derived from the scheme, it would be beneficial for the Council to monitor and spatially map the properties where the grants have been paid to date.

The planning department oversees and manages the vacant site register. It is acknowledged that the vacant site register is no longer the primary mechanism for recording those sites which are suitable for housing development but have not been put forward for development. While the register has now been replaced by the RZLT, any sites which had previously been placed on the register, and remain vacant, remain liable for the levy. Such levies must be paid to the relevant local authority.

However, while the Council has general information on vacant sites and levies on their website, no sites are included on the vacant sites register. While there is a general consensus that the vacant sites register does not capture the real quantity of vacant sites across the country (for example, in January 2024, there were 11 local authorities with either no vacant site register (on their website) or who had a register with no entries), and the enforcement of the levy has encountered issues due to varying interpretations of what constitutes a ‘vacant site’, the fact that Galway County Council did not place any sites on the register, and consequently did not collect any levies, points to ineffectiveness on the part of the Council to deliver on the principal purpose of this piece of legislation.

Overall, there is an urgent need to enhance coordination between the management of various derelict sites, vacant sites, and town and village regeneration by the Council. By working together in a targeted and co-ordinated manner, the Council can ensure that towns and villages will be improved by activating and utilising existing vacant and derelict properties and drawing down on appropriate funding streams for future regeneration projects. An ad-hoc approach to tackling regeneration, including vacant and derelict properties, will not deliver – there needs to be an urgent, streamlined and co-ordinated approach to tackle vacancy and dereliction and realise the regeneration of these towns, that is evidence based, and outcome focused.

Residential Zoned Land Tax (RZLT)

The RZLT essentially aims to incentivise landowners to activate existing planning permissions for housing on identified lands, or to encourage owners to progress planning applications for land which is suitably zoned and appropriately serviced. The Council’s website provides detailed information on the process, including a section on frequently asked questions. The Council prepared and published a draft RZLT Map for 2026, which is available to view on the website and in hard copy at the planning offices. The Council accepted submissions to the draft 2026 Map through a variety of channels – in writing, email and the Council’s public consultation platform. 38 submissions on the draft 2026 Map were received, 14 of which were rezoning requests.

survey, a “Derelict” property is one which shows signs of previous occupation but is missing windows, doors or a roof. In the case that windows are boarded up rather than missing such a property is not considered derelict unless one of the other rules (door/roof) applies. This is notably different from the definition of “Derelict” under the Derelict Sites Act 1990.

An app was developed and used to manage the workload emanating from the RZLT process, and the planning department advised that a new set of procedures was developed. It is important that the Council ensures that the procedures are sufficiently robust for this annual workload, with individual roles clearly delineated. This is particularly important in terms of the GIS mapping of the relevant sites, as it is noted that expertise from the Council's IT department who had originally carried out this task, were laterally not available to the planning department.

Development Contribution Scheme

At the time of the review, the planning department was in the process of preparing a new development contribution scheme. The existing scheme provides for full or partial exemptions to promote certain categories of development, including:

- 100% exemption for development of a site on the Derelict Sites Register
- 100% exemptions for development consisting of the conversion or renovation of upper floors of buildings into business/commercial or residential uses in areas zoned as 'Town Centre' in Local Area Plans
- Vacant Sites as identified under the Urban Regeneration and Housing Act 2015 are subject to a 50% reduction.

While the draft development scheme was not available to view at the time of this review, the Council advised that consideration is being given to the inclusion of supplementary development contribution reductions to fund the proposed eco-park as contained in the Garraun Urban Framework Plan, as well as reduced contributions for developments located within the metropolitan area. The Office would encourage the Council to continue their work regarding the preparation of a new development contribution scheme which can act as a key enabler for land activation measures. The Council is reminded to have regard to the 'Development Contributions – Guidelines for Planning Authorities in this regard.

Performance rating and recommendations

It is important that Galway County Council focusses on land activation in a collaborative and holistic way to address housing and infrastructure targets, encourage compact and sustainable growth, generate local revenue, and address community needs by bringing vacant and underutilised land into productive use. Positive land activation measures can control urban sprawl, utilise existing infrastructure efficiently, and address the housing crisis by increasing the supply of homes and commercial spaces in areas where services are already available.

The establishment of a dedicated regeneration unit within the Council has provided a strong basis for both accessing funds and the activation of key capital projects throughout the county. Further, the Council has been proactive in the provision of housing, and other ancillary developments through the Part 8 process, which is being progressed having regard to the settlement hierarchy as contained in the development plan. However, it is also clear that the land activation function could be delivered in a more coherent fashion, with the planning department taking a more pivotal role.

While it is considered that the Council's delivery of its land activation responsibilities is **satisfactory**, urgent actions are required, which should be led by senior management within the Council, to manage land activation in a more holistic and integrated manner. The establishment of the capital project management office provides the Council with an effective basis to establish collaboration in land activation measures between the various internal departments.

However, there are areas of concern that the Council must address. The vacant sites levy is not being utilised meaningfully. Further, the Council has not been using the mechanisms available under the Derelict Sites Act effectively, there is significant scope for positive action to be taken more widely than the approach being taken by the environment department in this regard. For example, area engineers and community wardens who are located in municipal district offices throughout the county, can actively engage in the initial identification process. This type of activity would require a process-driven procedure to be developed, which would apply to all relevant departments. Crucially the housing delivery targets set for the county are a long way off being met and more coordinated action will be necessary to make progress.

Designating a senior manager within the Council with a role to drive collaboration across the various operational areas of the Council could generate increased synergy between the various tools at the Council’s disposal (from levies to development contributions to regeneration initiatives). There are also important linkages to be created between project development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation in the context of the established objectives of the county development plan. As has been highlighted previously in this report, the Council needs to place a key emphasis on strategic data collection and analysis. This is particularly important in relation to land activation which requires that key elements be appropriately recorded and mapped to proactively inform development strategy and made available to the wider actors in land activation within the Council.

Recommendation 6 – Coordination of land activation mechanisms

While noting the Council’s move to establish a project management office to drive the delivery of significant projects, given the housing delivery, dereliction and vacancy challenges faced, there is an opportunity to implement wider coordination between departments to strategically deliver on land activation objectives. The objective should be to provide a structure for information sharing, joint analysis, the integration of initiatives to achieve policy objectives, project development, decision-making, cross-departmental prioritisation, monitoring and reporting.

It is suggested that a working group of the key responsible individuals (representing derelict sites, vacant homes, social housing delivery, regeneration and project delivery, planning, etc.) be established under terms of reference, with reporting responsibility to the Director for Planning & Economic Development. The planning department should play a key role in ensuring coordination opportunities to deliver development plan objectives.

An initial objective of the working group should be to consider the opportunity for the Council’s enhanced utilisation of the derelict sites register to deliver on housing and regeneration objectives and to ensure the Council is primed to meet future statutory requirements. This should include the preparation of a strategy to identify derelict sites on a cross-departmental basis, for engagement with owners, and the development of an accelerated procedure for placing sites on the register.

No.	Recommendation	Grading	Responsibility
6	Coordination of land activation mechanisms	High	Director of Services

7 Development Management



The range of tasks assigned to development management teams across local authorities are generally standardised 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 Planning & Development Regulations 2001, as amended ('the Regulations'). The development management team in Galway County Council has responsibility for:

- Processing and assessing of planning applications
- Section 247 pre-planning consultations
- Preparation of AA and EIA screening reports
- Processing and assessing of Section 57 applications
- Issuing Section 5 Declarations
- Assessing Section 96 Certification of Exemption applications
- Assessments of notifications as submitted under Article 10(6) of the Regulations
- Processing planning compliance submissions
- Issuing observations in relation to decisions appealed to An Coimisiún Pleanála
- Issuing of Section 254 Licences in relation to appliances, cables, street furniture, telecommunication infrastructure etc. on public roads
- Assessment of licence applications in respect of events / control of funfairs
- Compiling monthly statistical returns to CSO and central government.

Development Management Team

As outlined in Chapter 2, at the time of the review, the development management team comprises a designated cohort of 10 planners (two of which are a shared resource with the forward planning team) and two technicians. The team is supported by an administrative team of 16 persons (13.1 FTE), who collectively deliver this statutory function. The senior planner has oversight of the strategic delivery of this core business operation. At the time of the review, there were two planner vacancies, at executive planner and assistant planner level, along with a vacancy for a technician (grade II).

The technical team is led by an acting senior executive planner who oversees the day-to-day running of the team. The core functions of the acting senior executive planner include the preparation of large-scale residential development applications, the countersigning of certain planning application reports, the weekly allocation of files based on a weighting system of distribution and scheduling monthly team meetings. The team is structured on a municipal district basis – with each of the six executive planners managing a municipal district (given its size, the Connemara Municipal District is managed by two executive planners), with support coming from assistant and graduate planners. Each planner is issued with a tablet, making it convenient when working across various sites.

Monthly team meetings cover day-to-day operations, relevant corporate updates, An Coimisiún Pleanála decisions, and decisions on large / complex applications. The acting senior executive planner highlighted the benefits of such meetings, which help to ensure consistency of approach in the application of legislation, circulars, guidelines, and policy in the assessment of planning applications. The meetings are intended to enhance communication, collaboration and improve overall team performance by providing a broad understanding of planning issues occurring outside of their immediate area of management (i.e. outside the relevant MD area).

The validation of applications is carried out by a technician and assistant engineer and is overseen by the acting senior executive planner. The validation officers undertake the digital mapping on planning applications and Section 5 declaration requests. In recent times the department has implemented a new mapping system – PACE. The validation officer identifies the internal departments and prescribed bodies to whom the application must be referred and thereafter, referrals are processed by a member of the administration team (assistant staff officer). The acting senior executive planner assumes ultimate oversight of the validation process.

Having regard to the geographical extent of the county, the number of towns and villages, the rural and coastal hinterlands, the islands, the Gaeltacht, along with the natural heritage and biodiversity attributed to both designated and non-designated ecological sites, the typology of developments is varied and can result in more technically complex planning applications and assessments. While single rural housing accounts for a significant percentage of such applications, the Council advised that approximately 30% of applications comprise of a more complex nature. These include, for example, renewable energy applications, quarries, largescale residential developments, rural enterprise developments, tourism projects, bog restoration applications and large commercial mixed-use developments.

It is recognised that the development management functions of the team are not limited to the processing of planning applications. Other duties include assessing Section 5 declarations, pre-planning consultations, a certificate of exemption in accordance with Section 97, Large-scale Residential Development (LRD) opinions and meetings, Part 8 applications, Section 254 license applications, etc. Furthermore, given the fluctuating technical staff resources within the team, the senior planner not only fulfils a strategic / management role but also actively contributes to workload progression, as required.

Standard operating systems and procedures

It is apparent that there is good communication between the development management team members and the senior management of the planning department, and the department has prepared procedural guidance in relation to:

- Processing of planning applications, including the processing of submissions received, further information responses, and compliance requests*
- Planning application validations
- Large-scale residential developments
- Pre-planning consultations*
- Part 8 applications
- Management of decisions*
- An Coimisiún Pleanála appeals*³⁰
- Validation process

In addition, a standard template for planning application assessments, which include AA and EIA screenings, is in use which acts to guide and onboard new technical staff. However, there is an absence of an overall development management procedure to guide technical staff and ensure consistency in approach, efficiency and knowledge retention in the management and assessment of the various development management applications. This is particularly pertinent at a time of flux in resourcing.

³⁰ * Indicates the guide relates to administrative processes

File allocation

Presently, on receipt of a planning application, following validation by the validation officer, referrals of the planning file are carried out by a member of the administration team, with crosschecking carried out by the acting senior executive planner. All such files are thereafter given to the acting senior executive planner for allocation to the various planners, based on a weighted system. There is an area planner in each of the municipal districts, and having regard to its geographical size, the Connemara municipal district is structured into two areas for the purposes of the delivery of the development management function – Connemara North and Connemara South, with an area planner for each of these sub-areas. Generally, the acting senior executive planner ensures that all planners are allocated a similar number of files on a weekly basis. However, in the event that a particularly complex application is submitted, the area planner for that municipal district will be allocated a reduced number of planning files to ensure that they have additional time to consider the application. The Council has advised that there is no formal procedure in place with regards to the allocation of files, but rather a common-sense approach is utilised to ensure that files are fairly allocated across the team.

While the allocation system as applied is acknowledged, having regard to the number of planning applications, along with the other functions that the development management team perform, and the complexity of certain applications, the introduction of a written procedure regarding the weighting and allocation of files, while allowing flexibility, would benefit the team. A formal system of file allocation would enable timely reports to be prepared as well as an equitable division of work. Further, such a system can improve flexibility around annual leave and opportunities for continuous professional development and ensure that sufficient time is allocated to other functions carried out by the team.

Countersigning

The Council has advised that the acting senior executive planner countersigns all planners' reports pertaining to a grant and / or refusal of planning permission, while the senior planner countersigns all reports that relate to a request for further information. It is important that such a countersigning procedure is embedded in a development management manual for use by the team. Such an exercise plays a crucial role in oversight and adherence to established policy and procedures, which is particularly relevant in the ever changing and complex legislative context in which planning operates.

Environmental assessment

Development management related environmental assessments are generally carried out by the relevant case planner. There is no designated environmental assessment officer within the department. While templates are in use for AA and EIA screening for development proposals, the planning department does not have a specific operational procedure for the processing of applications which are accompanied with an environmental assessment (be it an Environmental Impact Assessment Report (EIAR), Natura Impact Statement (NIS) or a Flood Risk Assessment (FRA)).

Galway County Council provided an example of a planning application for a manufacturing facility which was accompanied by an EIA Report and an NIS, and where an EIA and AA had been undertaken. The Council also provided a planning report carried out for a slatted shed, for which AA and EIA screening was carried out. An analysis of a dip sample of planners' reports demonstrates that the Council carry out an EIA preliminary examination of all planning applications and EIA screening is carried out for all sub-threshold developments. The dip-sample also confirmed that AA screening is carried out on development proposals. The Council had advised that the OPR practice notes on Appropriate Assessment Screening and Environmental Impact Assessment Screening were a significant resource in upskilling planners on the screening processes.

In relation to flood risk, the Council advised that the area planner typically assesses a proposal for flood risk. Their internal mapping system has identified areas of flood risk, (flood risk A, flood risk B and flood risk C), and the proposal is assessed against same. In the event that a flood risk assessment is submitted with the application, it is assessed by the planner, however the Council has acknowledged that there would be a reliance on the information as contained in the submitted report as being correct.

While it is clear that the Council has invested in upskilling existing planners, there is a recognition by senior management that expertise in this field is required, particularly given the extent of European designations in the county. To this end, the Council is presently preparing a framework for procuring external expertise to be available to the planning department when the need arises.

Elected members representations

The Council advised that a monthly list is maintained which contains a record of representations made by elected members on planning files. It was also advised that the Council operates an 'open door' policy with regard to elected member access to planning staff, which provides that elected members may consult with planners as and when required. While such a policy can undoubtedly build and sustain a positive relationship between the staff of the planning department and the elected members, the department are also conscious that no perceived conflict of interest should arise in dealing with elected members, especially given that members may have a professional interest in the planning and development sector. This is a unique position that the planning department (as opposed to the wider Council) would find itself in, and as such requires a bespoke procedure which all staff and elected members should adhere to.

In accordance with Circular Letter PL 11/2018, existing DHLGH guidance requires that all observations / submissions on individual planning applications be maintained on file. While the Council has advised that a record is maintained of all representations made by elected members, in the interests of transparency and to demonstrate compliance with existing DHLGH guidance, the Council should ensure that a procedure is put in place that requires that all observations / submissions on individual planning applications are received in writing from the elected member and thereafter maintained on the relevant planning file and should be available for inspection via the Council's website.

The Galway Gaeltacht and the Islands

The Galway Gaeltacht covers extensive parts of County Galway stretching from Baile Chláir to the east of the city to Cloch na Ron in west Connemara, a distance of approx. 100km and from Oileáin Árann northwards to Duiche Sheoigheach which borders County Mayo, while the Council's jurisdiction includes four inhabited islands - the three islands of Oileáin Árann and Inishbofin. Both at the strategic level and operational level, the Council aims to support and facilitate the sustainable development of the Gaeltacht and Island communities through policy objectives contained in the development plan and by conducting, for example, pre-planning meetings on the Islands and ensuring that a fluent Irish speaker is on the development management team.

The Development Plan reports that this linguistic community in the Gaeltacht Areas is under severe pressure for many reasons, one being the pressure of people with no ability to speak the Irish language moving into the area, as well as other external influences and a lack of service provision in their own language. The official Gaeltacht consists of several different communities in the county, and the Council recognises that the Irish language is stronger in some communities than in others. In this regard, a policy objective of the Development Plan requires the submission of the linguistic impact statement for housing proposal for two or more houses in the Gaeltacht area to protect and strengthen the Irish language and cultural heritage of the Galway Gaeltacht areas. A language inurement clause of 15 years duration applies to approved development, of two or more units. The Council has advised that the development management team has a

fluent Irish speaker who covers the Gaeltacht area and can conduct pre-planning meetings through Irish when required. The assessment of linguistic impact statements and subsequent inurement clause as a condition of planning permission and the availability of a fluent Irish speaker places additional resource requirements on the development management team. It is important that such resources remain in situ going forward to support the policy objectives that are contained in the development plan.

The planning department has established an excellent partnership with the Islands Committee³¹ and the community wardens, who, due to their permanent presence on the Islands can assist in, for example, the inspection of site notices (within the 5-week statutory period for display of same), or advise of potential unauthorised developments. The Council also facilitates pre-planning meetings on the Islands as required.

It is evident that the Council is managing and proactively ensuring the delivery of a quality planning service to Gaeltacht and island areas. By adopting such inclusive engagement practices, it allows the planning departments to gain enhanced buy-in and participation in planning processes from communities and stakeholders, leading to more informed and better-quality decisions, improved outcomes, and an overall more efficient planning process. This approach is a key highlight which the Office notes will promote innovation, reduce conflict, and help ensure that developments are sustainable and integrated into existing communities.



Inis Mór harbour, Aran Islands, Co. Galway. © Fáilte Ireland

Development management output

Planning data published by the DHLGH provides details on all local authorities' outputs and allows comparison between authorities and national trends.³² Since 2015, the volume of planning applications received in Co. Galway has increased from 1,393 to a peak of 2,276 in 2021, which since reduced to 1,598 in 2023. This is consistent with national trends that show increasing numbers of applications since 2015, with a high in 2021, and returning to pre-Covid numbers in 2022, with the number of planning applications received by the Council increasing by approximately 13.7% between 2015 and 2023. These figures are significantly above the average number of valid planning applications received by planning authorities nationally. Comparatively, the counties of Mayo, Donegal and Kerry which are of a similar geographical area, received 1,094, 1,790 and 1,279 respectively in 2023.

³¹ The Islands Committee consists of two representatives from each island, nine Connemara Councillors, the Director of Services for the Infrastructure & Operations Unit, two Roads Senior Engineers, and technical staff from the Conamara Area Office.

³² Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, ['Annual Planning Statistics 2015-2023'](#), (June 2025).

According to the June Monthly Management Report³³, the Council received 823 planning applications between 1st January 2025 – 31st May 2025, of which 693 were deemed to be valid applications. The figures for 2023 would indicate, based on 9 FTE planners (including the acting senior executive planner) within the development management team as indicated at the time of the review, that each planner dealt with an average of 178 planning application files per annum. In making this rough estimation, it is acknowledged that the scale of work associated with each file will vary significantly depending on the complexity of the matters involved (e.g. habitats, environmental, heritage issues), the location of the development, the volume of objections and submissions, and whether the decision is ultimately appealed to An Coimisiún Pleanála.

While noting the average volume of files handled by the department’s planners, it is also worth acknowledging that the Council has indicated that the number of planners within the department is in a near constant state of flux, with planners from the forward planning team, in addition to their core workload, providing assistance to the development management team to achieve their statutory functions.

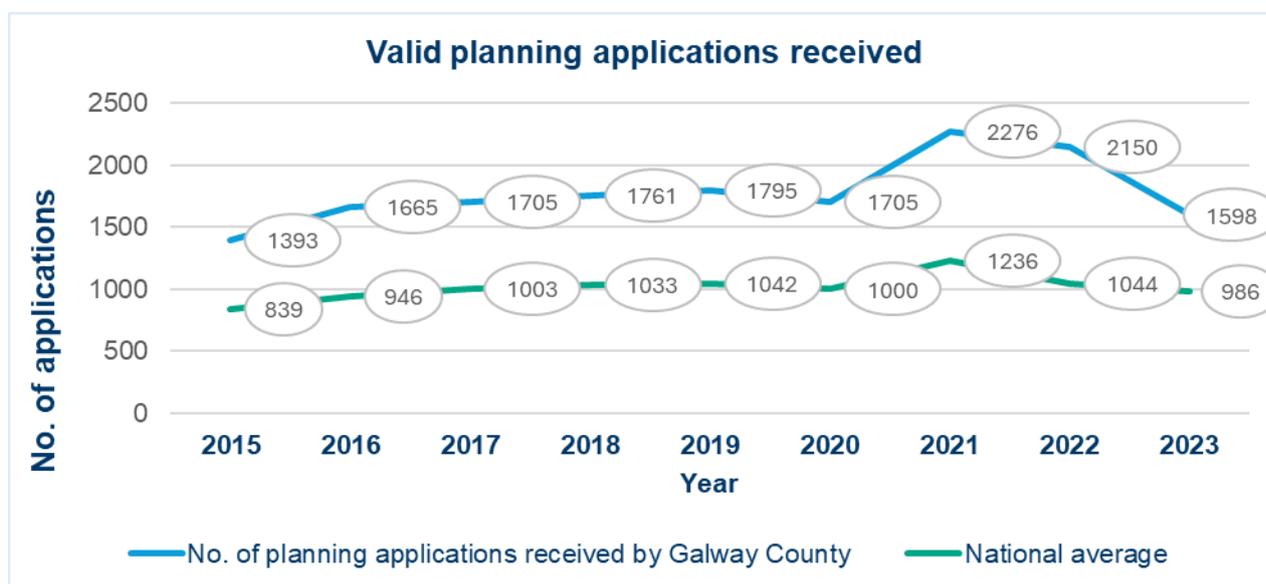


Figure 3 | Valid applications received³⁴

It is clear from these trends that Galway County Council’s rate of processing planning applications is consistently significantly higher than the national average. Further, given the county’s location and geographical extent, it is important to acknowledge that many of the applications are complex and are located within extremely sensitive landscapes.

An analysis of CSO data would indicate, based on the data in relation to applications granted permission, that applications for single housing in the countryside were a significant driver of increased applications in 2021 and 2022. However, in 2023 and 2024 the number of dwellings within residential schemes granted planning permission were more on-par with that of single dwellings, which would point to an increase in such applications. While apartments continue to be the less dominant unit type granted permission, 2024 saw a peak (analysing figures between 2021 and 2024) of 217 apartments (within 27 developments) permitted by the Council.

³³ Galway County Council, ‘June Monthly Management Report’, (available on the Council’s website).

³⁴ ibid

Year	Single Dwellings	Residential units within housing schemes	Apartment units	Residential units granted permission	% of national total
2021	616	257 (19 developments)	118 (19 developments)	991	2.31
2022	746	270 (18 developments)	62 (11 developments)	1078	3.16
2023	388	201 (17 developments)	17 (10 developments)	606	1.47
2024	461	408 (23 developments)	217 (27 developments)	1086	3.35

Table 9 | Types of dwellings granted permission³⁵

Between 2021 and 2024, the number of housing units granted planning permission by Galway County Council accounted for on average 2.5% per annum of the total residential units granted planning permission nationally during this period.

Large-scale Residential Developments

The Council has advised that 6 LRD opinions have issued over the last 12 months. From a review of the Council's ePlan platform, at the time of the review, decisions have been made on 3 such LRD applications – one in Oranmore, one in Gort and one in Athenry. The Council have developed a standard operating procedure for LRD development, which includes the holding of LRD meetings and the issuing of opinions, to ensure that such applications are processed in a consistent and efficient manner. At the time of the review, the acting senior executive planner in development management manages all the LRD applications and any associated pre-planning, however the Council indicated that it is their intention to have a single senior executive planner overseeing all strategic developments, including LRD applications.

Validation of planning applications and ePlanning

Accurate and proper planning application documentation is very important in ensuring the correct information is available for the public and the effective assessment of applications. Accordingly, the Regulations specify strict standards that applications must reach before a planner assesses them. Where applications do not reach required standards, they are invalidated. The Council has developed a validation process to ensure the efficient operation of the system. It includes a checklist for the various required applications, public notices, maps, drawings and fees.

The invalidation rate in Galway County Council had traditionally been significantly below the national average ranging between 5 and 10% between 2015 and 2021. However, the invalidation rate increased from 7% in 2021 to 21% in 2022. This increased further in 2023 to 23%. It is acknowledged that nationally the invalidation rate increased in 2022, however the national increase in invalid planning applications between 2021 and 2022 was recorded to be 13%, while the invalidation rate in Galway County Council increased by 200% during the same period. It is notable that this difference coincided with the introduction of ePlanning in the Council.³⁶ Further, following the COVID-19 pandemic, the Council no longer provides an on-counter validation service.

³⁵ CSO, 'Planning permissions', (2025).

³⁶ Along with Tipperary County Council, Galway County Council was piloted for the introduction of ePlanning prior to the national rollout

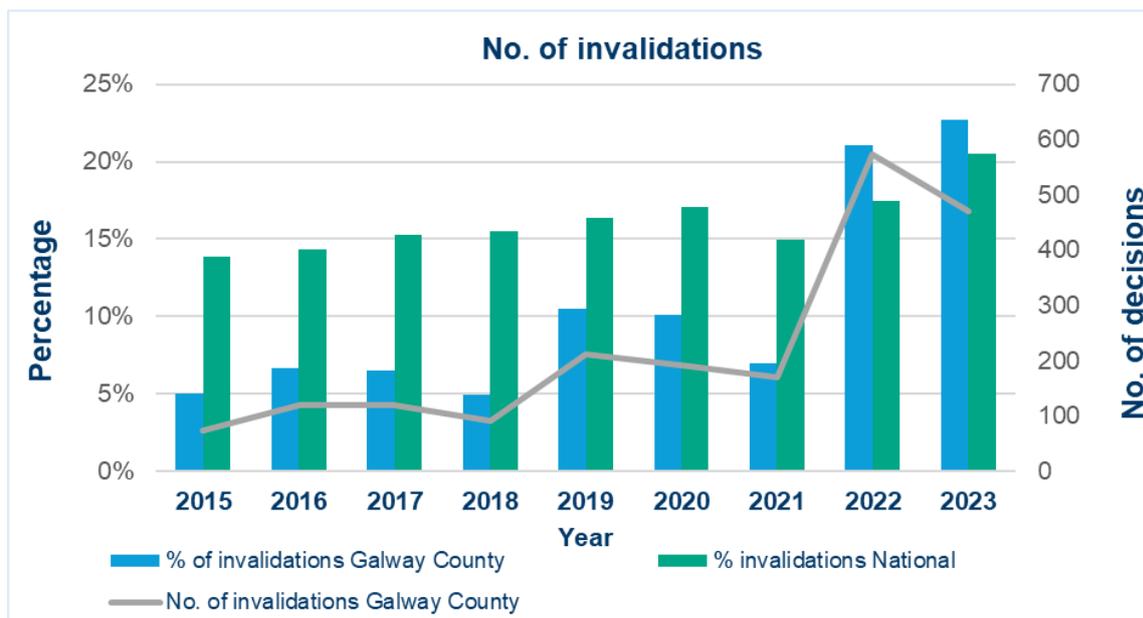


Figure 4 | Invalid planning applications³⁷

In practical terms, the recent surge in invalid planning applications, as recorded in 2022 and 2023, places an additional burden on both customers and staff. The Council has advised that the invalidation rate is being monitored, along with the substantive reasons that would render a planning application invalid. Further to this, the Council is identifying agents whose planning applications are repeatedly being returned as invalid.

In respect of monitoring patterns, given the quick turnaround with resubmitting a new application, it appears that some applications are being submitted by agents via the ePlanning portal without the required level of detail as a means of an unofficial ‘pre-application’ validation, which invalidates the application but also provides a list of the outstanding issues to be resolved.

In the past, the Council provided many seminars for planning agents, which covered a wide range of topics. It is encouraging to note that the Council has recently recommenced such training seminars, with one held in November 2025. Invalidation reasons will be a topic of such a future seminar. It is encouraging that the Council are seeking to proactively address the high invalidation rate and engage with the relevant stakeholders to develop and implement initiatives designed to encourage quality applications to reduce this trend.

Galway County Council was a pilot for the introduction of ePlanning (along with Tipperary County Council). Since 2022, planning applications can be submitted to Galway County Council online. There has been a substantially high uptake of this service since its implementation, with the Council reporting through the 2022 Annual Report that more than 70% of applications were submitted via the ePlanning portal, while the 2023 Annual Report notes that this figure increased to 89%. The success of ePlanning and the efficiencies derived has been widely acknowledged by senior management within the Council.

Internally the Council’s IT department engaged extensively with the LGMA and established a working group for the implementation of the platform, which both the senior planner and administrative officer sat on. The benefits of establishing such a working group are clear as various IT issues, such as software updates encountered by the planning department upon the introduction of ePlanning, were quickly addressed by the IT department.

³⁷ Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, [‘Annual Planning Statistics 2017-2024’](#), (June, 2025).

Upon commencement of the ePlanning platform, the planning department developed procedures on receipt of an ePlanning application which assist with onboarding of new staff members and ensuring a consistent approach to operations is applied.

Decisions granted and refused

The percentage of planning applications resulting in a refusal by Galway County Council has been incrementally increasing since 2018, resulting in a refusal rate which is significantly above the national average. In 2022, 1 in 4 of all planning applications received by the Council resulted in a refusal of planning permission. While this trend decreased in 2023, it remained the case that over 1 in 5 planning applications were refused permission.

The Council has been monitoring the refusal reasons and has advised of certain trends regarding the refusal rate, noting that issues around environmental protection, roads and flooding generated the primary reasons for refusal of planning permission, particularly in the sensitive landscapes within the Connemara area.

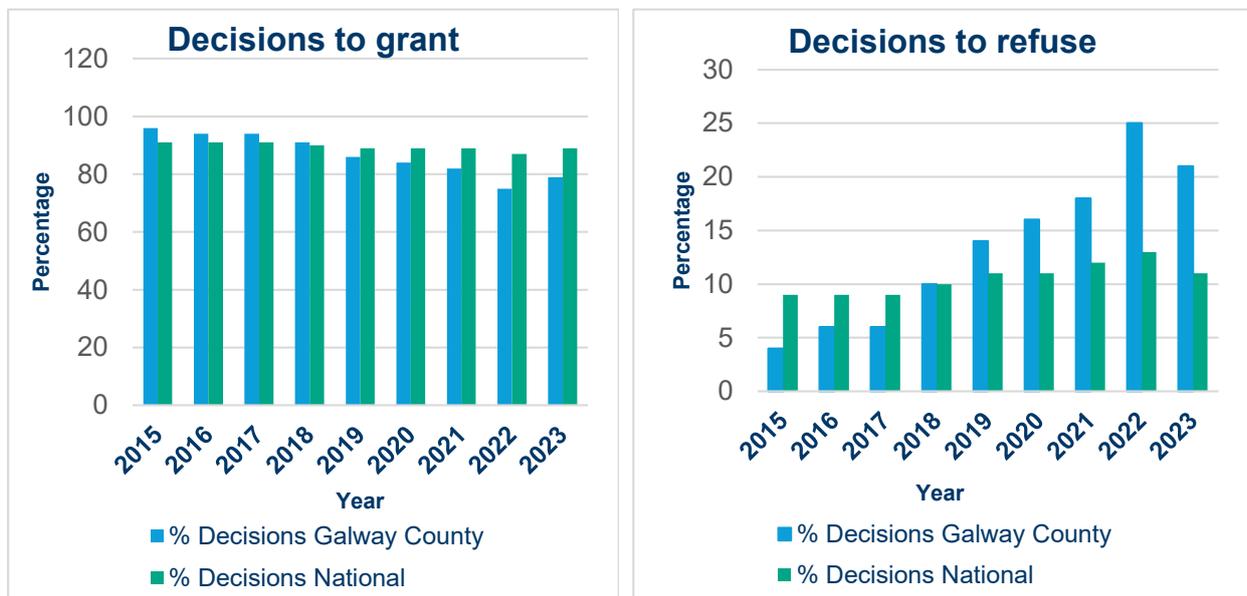


Figure 5 | Decisions to grant and refuse³⁸

Decisions made within eight weeks

Figure 6 below illustrates the percentage of decisions made by Galway County Council within eight weeks of receipt of a valid planning application, each year since 2015. The Council's rate was generally in line with the national average, until 2023, where just 52% of applications were decided within 8 weeks, compared to a national average of 62%.

³⁸ Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Annual Planning Statistics', (June 2025).

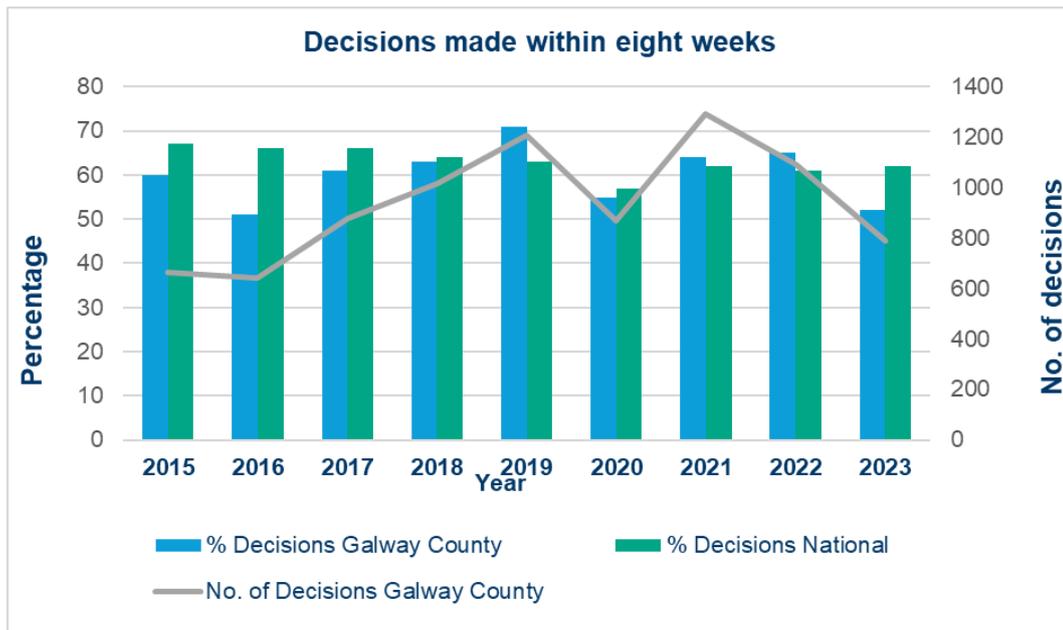


Figure 6 | Decisions made within 8 weeks³⁹

Related to this, figures as compiled by DHLGH, indicate that between 2015 – 2021, Galway County Council’s rate for seeking further information was generally in line with the national average. However, in 2022, this trend for seeking further information shifted upwards, such that it was 26% above the national average. This shift may be explained with the adoption of the Galway County Development Plan in 2022, and the policy changes contained in same. However, the Council has also observed that in some instances, the quality of planning applications is also contributing to the increase in further information requests. It is anticipated that the resumption of the agent’s seminars will go some way to addressing this.

The Council has further confirmed that the rate of seeking clarification on further information responses as submitted is very low, being the exception rather than the rule.

Appeals and Overturns from An Coimisiún Pleanála

Since 2015, the average rate of planning applications appealed to An Coimisiún Pleanála nationally has been consistently below the national average of 7%, most recently at 5% (or 88 appeals) in 2024. Given the high volume of planning applications that are decided upon each year by the Council, the appeal rate would indicate a general acceptance by the public with planning decisions.

Generally, the percentage of the Council’s appealed decisions that were reversed by An Coimisiún Pleanála is above the national average. In 2023, the reversal rate fell below the national average (73 appeals to An Coimisiún Pleanála, of which 15 were reversed), however in 2024, this rate jumped substantially with 37% of all appeals made to An Coimisiún Pleanála reversed (88 appeals, of which 33 were reversed), compared to a national average of 24%.

The Council has advised that all An Coimisiún Pleanála determinations are analysed and disseminated at the team meetings. The Council is encouraged to continue with this practice, which will contribute to the robustness of future Council analysis and decision making and may assist in reducing the percentage of decisions overturned on appeal.

³⁹ Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, [‘Annual Planning Statistics’](#).

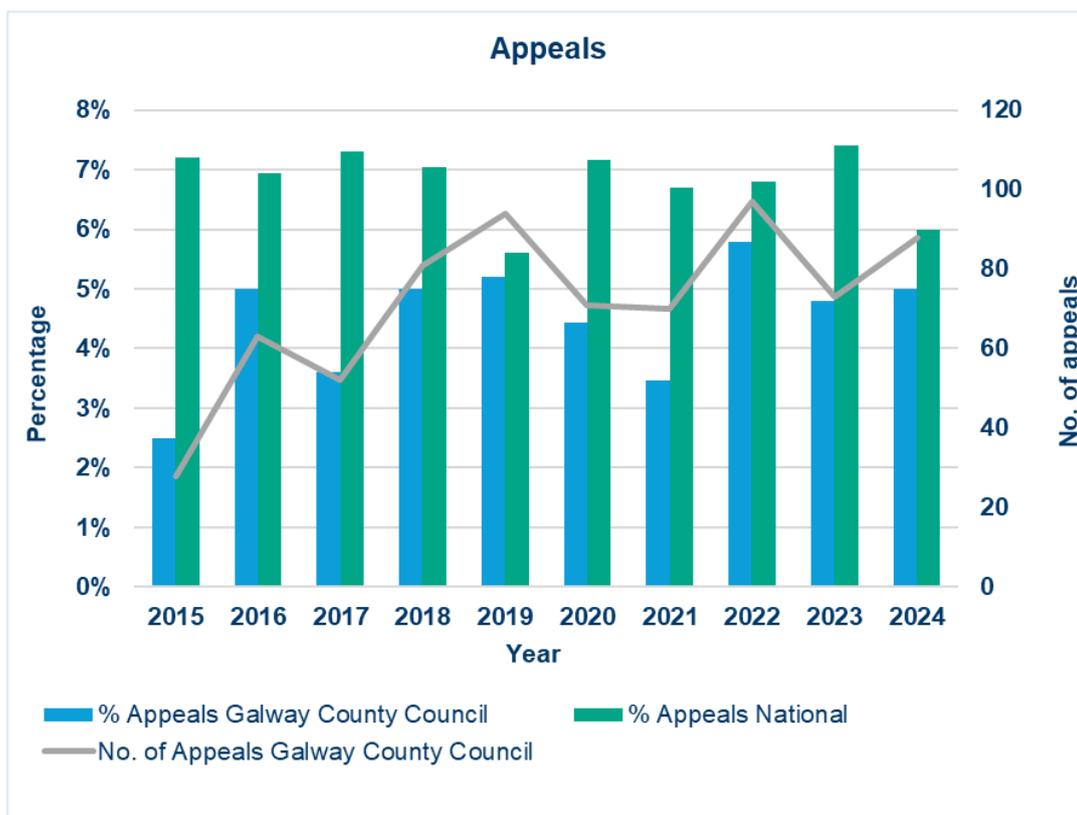


Figure 7 | Appeals to An Coimisiún Pleanála⁴⁰

In this regard, it is noted that in the past the Council has refused housing development proposals in settlements on the basis that densities referenced in the development plan would have been exceeded. While acknowledging that particular densities may have been identified in the development plan, it is imperative that the Council pays due regard to national policy framework updates, including in relation to the minimum densities that must be achieved for the various hierarchies of settlement, rather than creating the clear risk of decisions being overturned by An Coimisiún Pleanála. Where development plan policies are outdated, due to updates in national guidance, it is important that future applications are assessed against the prevailing assessment criteria.

Planning conditions and compliance

The planning department does not currently have a formal register in place to manage and track compliance submissions received and approved. Further, there is no formal documented procedure or guidance in place for managing, recording and completing condition compliance. The Council confirmed that there is a dedicated compliance officer in the planning department who assesses all compliance submissions and prepares a report thereafter. This report is then countersigned by the relevant area planner. Example compliance letters were noted by the Office.

The high number of planning applications granted by the Council each year would, most likely, result in a consequent high number of compliance submissions made annually. While it is a positive initiative to have a dedicated member of staff dealing with compliance reports, the introduction of a system / procedure for the clear tracking, management and completion of compliance submissions (both those received via hard and soft copy) would reduce any risk of statutory failings.

⁴⁰ Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, '[Annual Planning Statistics](#)', (June 2025).

The Council would benefit from the implementation of a software solution to manage compliance submissions and could potentially use existing CRM software. The Council should have regard to the planning compliance dashboard as introduced by Meath County Council and highlighted as a case study in the OPR Review of Meath County Council.

Section 5 declarations

Section 5 declaration requests are processed in broadly the same manner as planning applications – they are registered and recorded on the planning register and online mapping. However, a technician assesses the declaration request, rather than a planner. A standard template is in use. While the template provides for AA screening, it does not include EIA preliminary examination or EIA screening, which must be undertaken as part of the determination process. The Council may consider updating this template having regard to OPR Practice Notice 02 on Environmental Impact Assessment Screening which provides guidance on the EIA screening that must be carried out for Section 5 declaration requests.

From the information supplied by the Council, the number of Section 5 declaration requests has been increasing year on year. 2022 saw 79 such declaration requests submitted to the Council. This figure increased to 132 in 2023 and further increased to 157 in 2024 (double the figure from two years earlier). The Council noted an increase in the number of Section 5 declaration requests in relation to Croí Cónaithe grants and international protection accommodation as factors in this regard.

The Council advised of a temporary pause on uploading Section 5 declarations and associated documentation to their website.⁴¹ It is a requirement under section 5(7B) of the Act that a copy of the Section 5 declaration request (i.e. the question being asked), any submissions / observations received, a copy of the report prepared by the Council and a copy of the declaration as issued is placed on the local authority's website, within 3 days of issuing the declaration, for a period of at least 8 weeks. While it is acknowledged that the Section 5 register for 2022, 2023 and 2024 is online, there is no register or associated documents available online for 2025.

Having regard to the increasing number and indeed complexity of Section 5 declaration requests, it is recommended that documented procedures are prepared, encompassing both the administrative and technical aspects. Such a procedure would include, but is not limited to, the use of a standardised template for the planning assessment (including an AA and EIA screening template) and the provision of a timeline and procedure for the publishing of the relevant case documentation on the Council's website.

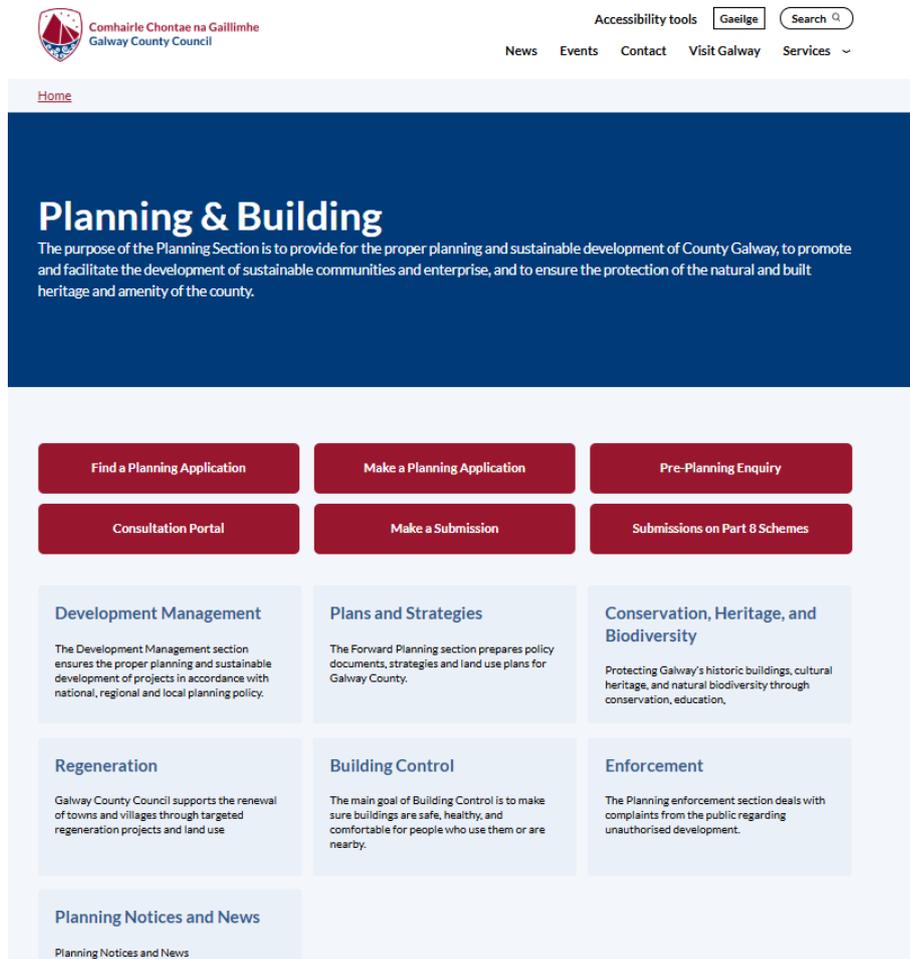
Online availability of documents

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 local authorities, Galway County Council's planning files can be accessed online, through the LGMA's planning inquiry platform (iPlan).

Under the Regulations, weekly lists of planning applications are required to be published to the website within specified timeframes. The Council publishes an interactive weekly list, where a customised report on planning applications received, granted, refused, further information requested and further information received, as well as invalid applications, appeals to An Coimisiún Pleanála and decisions by An Coimisiún Pleanála can be viewed, and filtered by date. In addition, members of the public can sign up for 'planning alerts' on the Council's website, whereby a list of planning applications received and decisions on planning applications within a defined geographical area are emailed.

⁴¹ To this end, it is acknowledged that the Council has advised that the existing website is under review by the I.T. Department with a view to developing a new website.

The interactive planning lists and the planning alerts email system are positive initiatives by the Council to involve members of the public in the planning system.



Galway County Council, planning department website

Section 247 procedures

Recently the Council launched their online pre-planning enquiry system which can generate a free online report in relation to an identified site. The platform collates common planning information relating to land use zonings, flood risk, protected structures and other topics. Details of the system are set out below as a case study.

Case Study 1



Online pre-planning Enquiry System

Approach

The Council introduced an online tool enabling members of the public, planning agents and elected members to conveniently submit pre-planning enquiries in relation to proposed developments. The system allows for the generation of real time information on a site, as well as streamlining the collection, management and communication of pre-planning information between applicants and the planning authority. Ultimately, the system enhances efficiency and accessibility of the pre-planning process for all stakeholders.

Process

A dedicated user-friendly website <https://galway.preplanning.ie/en/> contains general information about the process, as well as a list of FAQs. Any interested party can create a report by using the online map to outline the proposed site boundary. The website uses several “lookup layers” of mapped information which are individually cross referenced against the outlined site boundary. This information is collated across a number of topics such as:

- Nearby planning applications and decisions
- Zoning designations
- Building and conservation
- Administrative boundaries
- Infrastructure and waterways
- Landscape characterisation
- European sites
- Flood information

Outcomes

The system produces a free report for users in relation to any proposed site boundary, collating the available site-specific planning related information, such as planning history, land use zonings, flood risk and other designations. The system, which is fully digital and available at all times, generates immediate reports for users which can be revisited and updated if necessary. As part of the Section 247 procedure the Council requires that the online pre-planning enquiry platform is engaged with before a formal pre-planning consultation meeting will be arranged.

Impact

At the time of the review, over the space of approximately 14 months, over 3,400 reports have been had been generated, illustrating the high level of engagement with the system. From an efficiency perspective, the automatic collation and communication of pre-planning information to customers has a knock-on effect in reducing the volume of phone / email queries to planning staff. Both elected members and planning agents have also been proactively engaging with the website and promoting its benefits to the public.

In terms of the wider applicability of this innovation, it is recognised that the system is reliant on the availability of certain software. Notwithstanding, the principle of the system could be adapted or developed by other local authorities, depending on budgetary constraints, in-house ICT expertise, etc.

It is important to acknowledge that the Council still conducts Section 247 pre-planning consultations when requested, once the potential applicant has already used the pre-planning enquiry tool. In this respect, the Council has an internal pre-planning procedure document. Pre-planning consultation request forms are available on the Council's website. Upon receipt of a pre-planning consultation request by the planning department, the request is recorded on a register and classified as a proposal for either a major or a standard development before being assigned to a case planner. Requests deemed to be in respect of major developments are assigned to the acting senior executive planner, while the relevant area planner is assigned all other requests. Once the request has been registered, it is given a unique reference number.

It is notable that the planning department's guidance states that pre-planning consultations will not be facilitated in respect of developments for retention, developments that have been refused under the existing development plan and unauthorised developments. The rationale for these categories is that the planning policy context will be available to the applicant by way of the planning report on an application which was refused and/or through engagement with the enforcement section.

Data provided by the Council indicates that 307 Section 247 meetings took place in 2024, and 120 meetings had taken place in 2025, up to the end of May.⁴² The Council has conducted an analysis of waiting times for such meetings between 1st March 2025 and 31st May 2025. Based on this snapshot in time, 81% of applicants were waiting less than 4 weeks for a meeting, while 19% of applicants were waiting more than 4 weeks but less than 8 weeks for a meeting.

Following the Section 247 consultation, the relevant planner completes the consultation report (using a standardised template), which is subsequently emailed to the applicant. The meeting record must be included in any subsequent planning application made to the Council, which is thereafter placed on the relevant planning file.

The pre-planning procedure as adopted by Galway County Council serves to ensure that the requirements of Section 247 of the Act are being adhered to and ensures consistency of approach in situations where staff turnover is an issue or where the particular development proposal has a long time-span. Presently, pre-planning consultations are not mapped on the Council's GIS system. The use of GIS to facilitate retrieval of pre-planning consultation data would further enhance the robustness of the existing procedure.

Section 254 licences

In the recent past, Section 254 license applications were assessed by the relevant area engineer, overseen by the senior planner and issued by the planning department. Presently the assessment of Section 254 licenses is being carried out exclusively by the senior planner. The planning department has developed a standard template for use in the assessment of such applications, as well as a checklist for the validation of such applications. Presently, such licence applications are not included in the weekly lists (which is uploaded to the Council's website), however a register of receipt of such applications and the decision of the Council thereafter is available to the public on request. The Council has provided detailed guidance on their website on the section 254 application process, the required documents along with the applications. A dedicated email address for queries in relation to the licenses is also provided.

In response to a surge in section 254 license applications (specifically for Clifden during busy summer / tourist season), the planning department developed a protocol for engagement with key stakeholders in the local community with respect to the facilitation of outdoor tables and chairs in the town. This protocol has since been rolled out throughout the County. Details of the protocol are outlined in the case study below.

⁴² Due to the Covid pandemic which coincided with a period of adjustment, figures for 2021 – 2023 were not recorded

Case Study 2



Section 254 Licenses – Outdoor dining

Approach

Following the COVID-19 pandemic and the facilitation of outdoor dining, the planning department received an increased number of Section 254 licence applications for certain towns in Co. Galway. In one such town, Clifden, the facilitation of outdoor dining under the Section 254 licencing process became a challenge, in terms of facilitating tables and chairs on the public road verses the consequent loss of car parking spaces and impediments on the public footpath.

To facilitate an equitable outcome, the planning department, in consultation with the local business community developed a set of guidelines to facilitate a fair and equitable scheme. A working group was established which comprises of the senior planner, the area engineer, the town regeneration officer and the chairperson of the Clifden Chamber of Commerce. The community warden also plays a key role in the monitoring of licence conditions.

Outcomes

Following engagement with the local businesses, a set of criteria was drawn up and agreed upon. Each business that wishes to apply for a license would be afforded a maximum of two car parking spaces on which they could place their tables and chairs. No furniture would be permitted on the public footpath. As per the agreed protocol, the formal application to the Council would include a copy of the insurance certificate indemnifying Galway County Council, and drawing(s) depicting the number and location of the tables and chairs, a letter of no objection from the premises owner / occupier directly adjoining the premises seeking the license and details of movable surrounds to enclose the table and chairs. If the licence is granted, conditions are applied which the licence holder must adhere to.

A key aspect of the procedure is that applicants must obtain the consent of the occupiers of adjoining properties to be granted a licence. Licences are granted for a 12-month period. Consequently, should dissatisfaction arise in relation to the applicant's implementation of the licence, the occupiers of adjoining properties are in a position to withhold consent for any subsequent application.

This model has since been adopted in respect of all such licence applications in the county, with annual stakeholder engagement taking place.

Impact

This collaborative approach, which involved the identification of key influential stakeholders at the outset ensured a coordinated and agreed approach with respect to the issuing of licences, and the facilitation of outdoor dining. Further the procedure now in place brings stronger safeguards in relation to ongoing compliance with the conditions attached to licences.



Clifton, Co. Galway. © Fáilte Ireland

Performance rating and recommendations

It is the Office's opinion that Galway 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 clear 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, digital transformation, climate change and the wider issue pertaining to the recruitment and retention of planners.

Recognising the high numbers of planning applications received annually and the nuanced consideration of development proposals in the Gaeltacht and the Islands, the development management function has been delivered by a skilled and resourceful team under significant pressure in recent years. The planning department frequently experiences high workloads, especially within areas undergoing significant development. The constant demand coupled with a constant flux of planners, can stretch the capacity of existing staff.

Regardless of day-to-day workload pressures, through innovations such as the implementation of its online pre-planning enquiry tool, and the protocol adopted for Section 254 license applications, the development management team has also demonstrated an ability to be innovative in the face of new challenges and to manage the delivery of legislative requirements in new and efficient ways. The team's positive promotion and adoption of ePlanning also signifies their approach to achieving efficiency and effectiveness through innovation.

While the team’s overall achievements are recognised, there is scope for strengthening procedures in relation to the development of a planner’s manual which includes procedures, report templates, standard conditions as well as procedures in relation to file allocation and countersigning of planner’s reports. The formal recording of elected members representations on planning files should be undertaken in accordance with Circular Letter PL11/2018. Due to the high number of compliance submissions received, the statutory timeline by which same are to be decided upon and the requirements to record data in relation to certain compliance submissions, there is a need to develop a system for managing planning compliances. Finally, procedures in relation to Section 5 declarations, including the online availability of such files requires attention.

Recommendation 7 – Development management procedures manual

The Council should develop and implement a development management procedures manual for planners, to be used across the team to ensure that the entirety of the development management function operates in an efficient and consistent manner. The manual could include procedures and templates for all aspects of the development management function, particularly for planning application assessment reports, including LRD and SID applications and Sections 5 reports. The manual should also include an SOP for the formal system of file allocation based on an equitable weighting system, to ensure timely reports can be prepared as well as an equitable division of work. Finally, on an advisory note, the manual could consider the inclusion of a formal system of planner report countersigning.

Recommendation 8 – Section 5 declarations

The Council should update its planning report templates for Sections 5 declaration requests to ensure compliance with statutory EIA and AA requirements. The Council should ensure that the details of any Section 5 declaration, including the question arising, a copy of any submissions or observations received and a copy of the declaration as issued by the Council are placed on the Council’s website within 3 working days of issuing the declaration, and thereafter remain on the website for a minimum period of 8 weeks.

Advisory 1 – Elected member representation

The Council should ensure that all observations / submissions made by elected members on individual planning applications are received in writing and recorded on the relevant planning file and should be available for inspection via the Council’s website.

Advisory 2 – Planning compliance

To ensure adherence with statutory timelines, the Council should develop and implement a software solution for the tracking, management and completion of compliance submissions (both those received via hard and soft copy).

No.	Recommendation	Grading	Responsibility
7	Development management procedures manual	Medium	Senior planner
8	Section 5 declarations	High	Senior planner

8 Enforcement



As previously reported, the Council's planning enforcement function is delivered by a team which consists of a senior executive planner, one senior executive technician and two technicians (grade I), with operational support from five full time equivalent administrative staff. At the time of the review, there were two vacancies on the team – in respect of a graduate planner and a technician (grade I). This team is responsible for all enforcement matters including the enforcement of quarries. While the assessment of complaints, preparation of relevant reports, issuing of warning letters and the serving of enforcement notices are a key component of the team's work, other resource-intensive activities, such as pre-court site inspections, pre-court report writing, legal consultations, court attendance and weekly engagement with agents / owners / solicitors also significantly shape the team's workload. The team development plan for 2022⁴³ states that area meetings with the senior executive planner take place on a fortnightly basis, with full enforcement team meetings to take place twice a year.

Standard operating procedures

An internal procedures manual is in active use by the administrative staff of the enforcement team. In addition, the team's administrative staff have been utilising a bespoke enforcement CRM system since 2017. The manual sets out the various steps that are taken on receipt of a complaint from a member of the public (or identified by an internal source) – a new case file is created, assigned a unique reference number and inputted into the CRM, including any accompanying documents i.e. maps, photos graphs, Eircode, etc. In this way, the system, in effect, generates and maintains the planning department's enforcement register, along with the team's GIS, as enforcement sites are also mapped.

The CRM autogenerates deadlines with respect to inspections, issuing of warning letters, etc. as well as a list of complaints received from the previous week. A workflow is generated and forwarded to the senior executive planner from which cases are assigned to an enforcement officer, for whom a new workflow is created. If the senior executive planner rejects the complaint, a workflow is generated and forwarded to the administration team with reasons as to why the complaint is not being pursued.

New complaints are considered by the relevant enforcement officer. Unless the enforcement officer determines that the complaint is frivolous or vexatious or without substance, a warning letter is served in accordance with section 152 of the Act as soon as may be but not later than six weeks after receipt of the complaint. In certain instances, the warning letter is served in advance of a site inspection being undertaken.

Following the opening of an enforcement file, the enforcement officer (as assigned) is required to investigate the new complaint and thereafter report on same within five weeks of receipt of the complaint, in accordance with the site visit standard operating guideline and risk assessments as contained in the process manual. All enforcement officers use a tablet to assist in their site inspection and can refer to documents maintained on the system from their tablet.

Following a site inspection, a report is prepared by the enforcement officer using a standardised template and recommendations, which include issuing an informal letter, closing of the file, issuing a warning letter (if not previously done), issuing an enforcement notice or commencing legal action.

⁴³ The 2022 Team Development Plan for the enforcement team is contained as an appendix to the enforcement procedural manual.

The process manual contains procedures in relation to the posting and recording of warning letters, preparation of a chief executive order in relation to an enforcement notice, updating of the CRM regarding various processes that have been undertaken, initiating legal proceedings and closing an enforcement file. While the technical capabilities of the CRM system, and its ability to manage cases and assist with administrative outputs was noted it is concerning that the system is not currently being used by planners in the enforcement team, which must be addressed at the earliest available opportunity. In this respect, targeted training delivered by those team members who are proficient in the use of the system would deliver a key benefit to the wider team.

Enforcement action and output

Enforcement output from 2015 to 2024 is illustrated in the graph below. The graph highlights that the total number of cases on hand grew from 1,481 in 2015 to 1,762 at the end of 2023. However, this figure dropped to 1,246 by the end of 2024. The cases closed remained very low (at 255) relative to the cases on hand during this period. Two notable peaks, one in 2017, where 535 cases were closed and one in 2023 where 800 cases were closed, are acknowledged. The Council outlined that a targeted effort in 2023, which was facilitated by the deployment of additional personnel to the team, and a review of historical cases, resulted in the closure of 800 enforcement files. However, the Council advised that such resources are no longer in place on the team.

Notwithstanding the record number of cases closed in 2023, the cases on hand did not decrease at an equivalent rate. The Council advised that this was primarily due to the closure of historic files, which had not previously been recorded electronically. The Council has since advised NOAC of this discrepancy, and with the application of a correction, the enforcement team estimate that the number of cases that were being investigated at the end of 2023 was between 1,200 – 1,300. With this estimation in mind, the number of cases on hand at the end of 2024 was in or around the same figure, at 1,246.

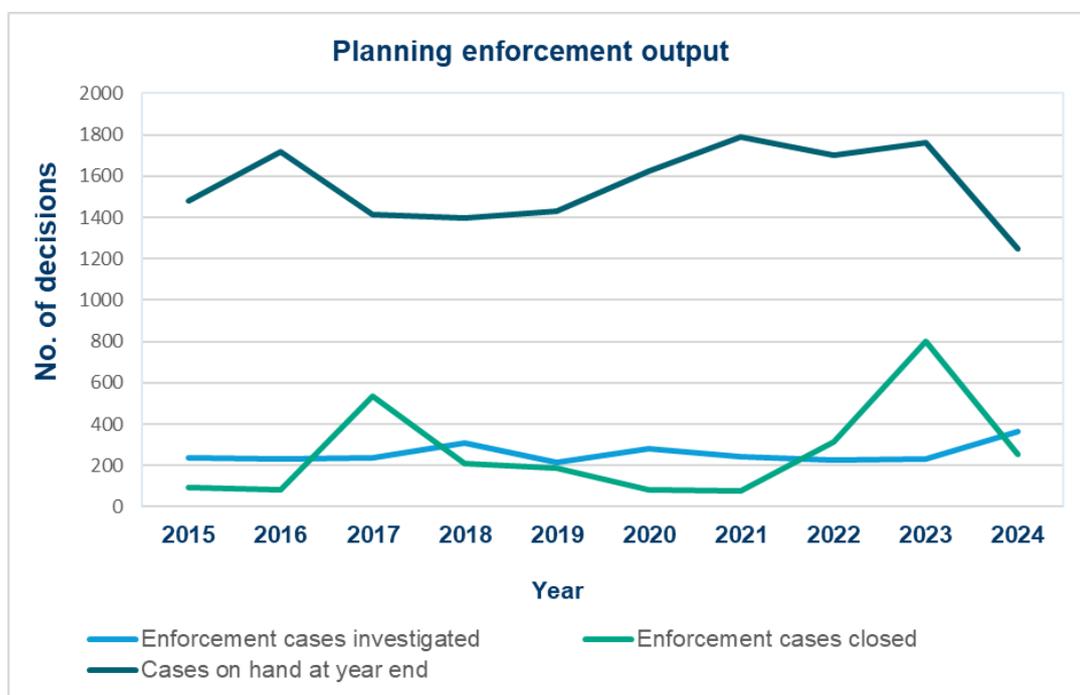


Figure 8 | Planning Enforcement output⁴⁴

⁴⁴ NOAC, 'Local Authority Performance Indicator Reports 2016-2024', (2025)

As can be seen from the figures above, collated by NOAC, the number of cases investigated⁴⁵ has remained at a near constant between 2015 and 2023, however in 2024 the figure increased by 129 (on the previous year's figure) to 365 cases investigated. The number of cases closed has varied over the last 10 years, and the Council report that such fluctuations can be attributed to the resourcing of the department whereby targeted resources particularly in 2023, resulted in a higher number of cases being closed. Notably, while the number of investigated cases increased between 2023 and 2024, the number of enforcement cases closed did not increase at a commensurate rate.

Figure 9 illustrates the percentage of cases that were closed as resolved. NOAC reporting shows that the number of enforcement cases dismissed by the Council has been consistently high since 2017. In 2023, NOAC reported that in the Council's administrative area, 96% of enforcement cases were dismissed⁴⁶, compared to a national average of 51%. This figure reduced to 81% for 2024, however this was still substantially above the national average of 52%. These high percentages may be attributed to the targeted work in 2023 which resulted in the closure of 800 cases, of which a large volume were historic cases, and a continuation of the closure of such historic cases into 2024.

The 2024 NOAC report reported that just over 1% of cases were closed due to enforcement proceedings⁴⁷ while 18% were closed due to negotiation.⁴⁸ However, the NOAC figures also indicate that of the 255 cases that were closed in 2024, enforcement proceedings (i.e. the issuing of a warning letter, serving of an enforcement notice or prosecution or injunction proceedings) were taken on just 4 of these closed cases. As previously reported, that may be due to the targeted approach to close historic cases in 2023 which continued into 2024, coupled with the high number of cases that were dismissed as trivial, minor or without foundation or were closed because they were statute barred or an exempted development.

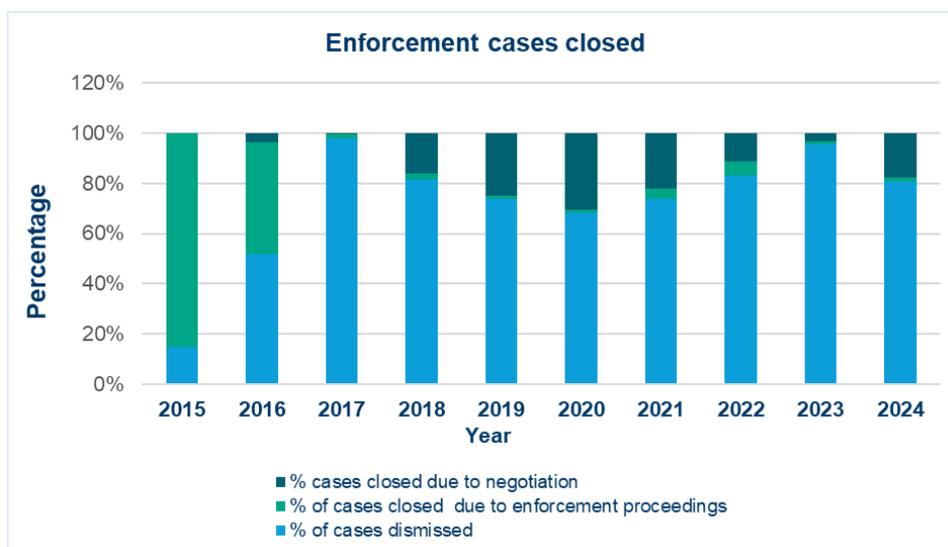


Figure 9 | Enforcement cases closed⁴⁹

⁴⁵ The enforcement cases investigated are those cases received and investigated in a year.

⁴⁶ This figure relates to cases that the local authority closed because, on investigation, it deemed the issue too trivial / minor to pursue or was not capable of being pursued because it was statute barred.

⁴⁷ In this context, the figure relates to cases closed after any type of enforcement action having been taken, from issuing a warning letter up to and including prosecution or injunction proceedings. It also includes cases where a prosecution has been unsuccessful and the case is closed, where a retention permission is granted subsequent to the issue of a warning letter/ enforcement notice in that year, and where a case has been 'withdrawn' because of action to the authority's satisfaction on foot of a warning letter or enforcement notice.

⁴⁸ The figure relates to cases that the local authority closed because, on investigation, remedial action to resolve the issue was taken by the subject of the complaint and the matter never got to the stage of the local authority having to issue a warning letter or an enforcement notice. It also includes cases where the subject of the complaint, who was not issued a warning letter or enforcement notice, submitted a retention application.

⁴⁹ NOAC, 'Local Authority Performance Indicator Reports 2016-2024', (2025)

Enforcement activity during the period from 2022 to 2024, as reported by the Council to the Office as part of this review, is illustrated in Figure 10. Over this period, the number of warning letters issued increased year on year, as did the number of site inspections, which increased by 100% between 2023 and 2024. The number of enforcement notices served, and legal proceedings initiated by the Council between 2023 and 2024 increased by 164% and 71% respectively.

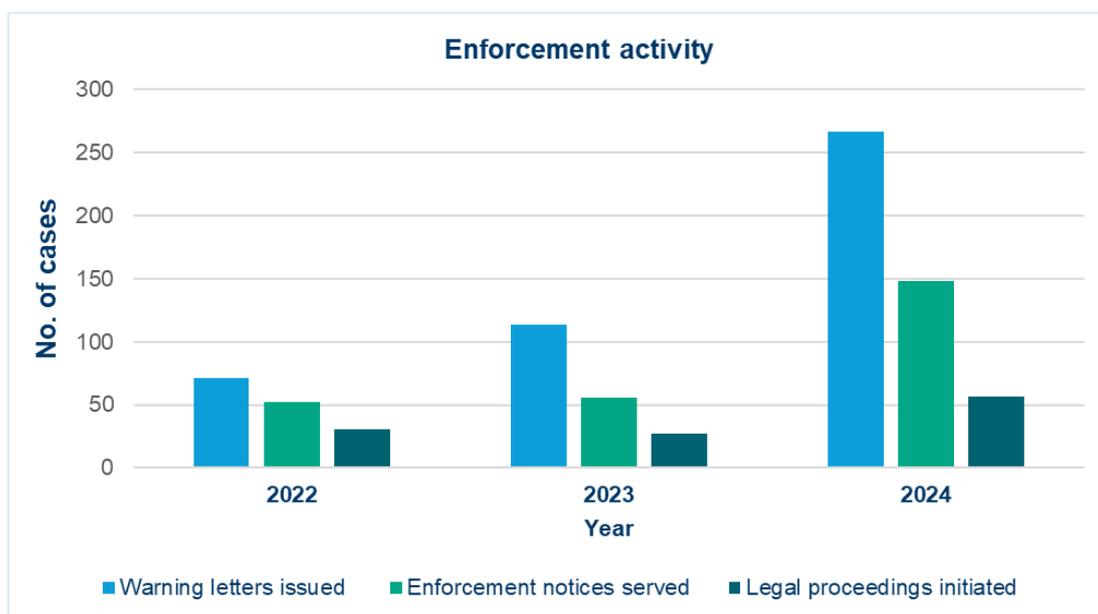


Figure 10 | Enforcement activity 2022-2024⁵⁰

The Council explained that due to resource constraints, it was decided in 2024 to issue a warning letter prior to carrying out a site inspection, once it had been determined by the senior executive planner that the complaint was not vexatious, frivolous or without substance or foundation. Figures from the 2025 January monthly management report⁵¹ in respect of enforcement activity for 2024 outline that 361 complaints were received during that year. Based on the above figure in respect of the number of warning letters issued (267) during 2024, this would indicate that such warning letters were issued on approximately 74% of the total complaints received for that year.

While noting the above enforcement activity, it must be borne in mind that Galway County Council has the seventh highest national number of enforcement cases on hand per capita for 2024. It is acknowledged that this position is an improvement on the 2023 figure, in which it had the highest number of enforcement cases on hand per capita. Whilst vacancies in the enforcement team play a factor in the high rate, it is important that at the senior management level, this trend is managed and reversed given the level of enforcement cases on-hand. While additional staffing resources will undoubtedly help (as can be seen from 2023 statistics), the Council should consider other measures, such as enhancing the information on enforcement currently on the Council's website. This can be particularly useful in outlining the type of complaints the Council can investigate and also assist with managing public expectations regarding the timeframes for investigation.

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Galway County Council, 'January 2025 monthly management report', (available on Galway County Council website).

Through the OPR's case handling function, the Office previously engaged with Galway County Council in relation to the delivery of its planning enforcement function and issued recommendations intended to strengthen its service. The recommendations required the preparation of a strategy to address the backlog of open / active enforcement cases, and identify the resources required to address the backlog. The OPR recommendations further sought the Council to commit to proactively manage new enforcement cases and adhere to expected procedures and to implement a programme of activity monitoring and reporting. During the course of this review, it was outlined that, while resourcing of the enforcement function has been an ongoing consideration, a strategy linking the delivery of enforcement responsibilities to the required resource inputs had not been developed.

Despite some good work being done in more recent times in relation to enforcement activity, the high volume of open enforcement cases is an ongoing and significant concern. This concern is exacerbated when it is noted that for the most part the cases that have been closed have been concluded on an administrative basis (historic, deemed trivial, statute barred, etc.) rather than as a result of proactive enforcement activity. Neither does it appear that any significant reporting of the issue is being presented to the elected members.

Quarries

Section 261A of the Act requires authorities to complete a survey of every quarry to identify what quarries should have been subject to EIA or screening for EIA or AA and whether this had been carried out. The Council has not provided detail in relation to the number of quarries examined as part of this process. The Council has advised that due to various factors, including resourcing, it has not been possible to extensively review and revisit section 261A case files. Further the Council has committed to reviewing the quarry register and publishing same on the website soon. In the interim, all quarries in the country can be spatially viewed on the maps and data section of the website.

From a review of the Council's GIS and having regard to data obtained from the EPA Extractive Industries Register⁵² it would appear that there are approximately 230 quarries in the county, which is the highest number of quarries on the EPA register in the country, with 58 live enforcement cases, also the highest in the country. Research carried out by the OPR and contained in the Quarries and the Local Authority Development Plan Case Study Paper states that the last review of quarries was carried out in 2012 – 2013 by the Council. This Case Study Paper further notes that 10 quarry-related complaints were received by the Council in 2023.⁵³

Given the extensive number of quarries in the county, there is scope for improved monitoring and operational procedures of existing quarries, particularly as all 230 quarries on the EPA register are listed as 'active'. In this regard, and noting the resourcing difficulties experienced by the department, there is potential for inter-departmental collaboration between the waste management and/or environment section of the Council and the enforcement team.

Short-term lettings

The enforcement team has reported that very few complaints are received in respect of short-term lettings. While this may be the case, that is not to say that there are no unauthorised short-term lettings in the county, but rather that the enforcement team is relying on the receipt of written complaints rather than proactively pursuing the issue. Ensuring development is planning compliant is not a responsibility based solely on complaints being received from the public.

⁵² EPA, [Extractive industries register](#), (2025).

⁵³ OPR, ['OPR Case Study Paper CSP07 - Quarries and the Local Authority Development Plan'](#), (2025).

Rent Pressure Zones were introduced nationwide during 2025. Under the Regulations, the use of a dwelling (or part of), which is not exempted, for short-term lettings without planning permission constitutes unauthorised development and should lead to planning enforcement. It is important, having regard to the cultural, linguistic and economic sustainability of the Galway Gaeltacht that a distinction is made between the operation of a short-term let on an ongoing basis, and the provision of informal, community type accommodation operated typically as part of a cultural and or educational programme. The latter generally operates on a hospitality basis and is seasonal and short term. In this regard, the importance of the Mna Ti structure in the Galway Gaeltacht is recognised at Government level, with the Programme for Government 2025 committing to maintaining and enhancing support for Mna Ti, acknowledging their central role in Gaeltacht sustainability.

However, a perfunctory search of an online short-term letting platform indicates in the region of 1,000 such lets in Co. Galway, yet no evidence of the regularisation of such units is to be noted through a sampling of the Council's planning approvals. Clearly there is a buoyant short-term letting industry in the county, however it would not appear that there are significant levels of planning compliance in this regard.

A recent media report⁵⁴ cited four planning investigations by Galway County Council had taken place to date in 2025 in relation to short term lettings, while 2024 and 2023 saw zero investigations take place. The Council noted the challenges in enforcing this issue, in that the use of a dwelling can be difficult to detect. The gathering of necessary evidence to bring a prosecution, particularly as there is a requirement to prove beyond reasonable doubt that the use of the property is unauthorised, is also proving problematic.

Given the significant local housing need pressures in the county, to only consider pursuing enforcement activity on foot of written complaints is not adequate – a more proactive approach is required. While again this might be indicative of the team's resourcing needs, there are simple measures that can be taken by members of the team other than enforcement officers. There is potential for the Council to leverage a multi-pronged approach that includes data analysis, public engagement, and targeted enforcement actions. This could involve, for example, reviewing online platforms, cross referencing data with planning permissions, targeted enforcement action in areas of high concentrations of short-term lets and engagement with local communities to raise awareness about the Regulations and the importance of compliance.

Performance rating and recommendations

While the recent work by Galway County Council's enforcement team is acknowledged, there is an urgent need to accelerate progress in relation to the substantial enforcement caseload that prevails. Furthermore, while it is noted that significant volumes of cases have been closed in recent times, it must also be recognised that most of these cases were concluded on administrative grounds. This indicates that day-to-day enforcement investigatory activity is not being delivered to the levels expected. Consequently, the Council's delivery of its enforcement function is currently considered **unsatisfactory**.

The effectiveness of planning policies and development plan objectives, and maintaining the integrity of the planning system, is dependent on a proactive enforcement service being provided by local authorities. In this regard, the Development Management Guidelines for Planning Authorities⁵⁵ set out that a culture of enforcement is critical to ensure that the planning control system works properly and for the benefit of the whole community. The Guidelines outline that a lack of enforcement proactivity can erode public confidence and support for a local authority, and the planning system as a whole, and can send an implied signal that non-compliance will be tolerated, creating a greater risk of more widespread breaches.

⁵⁴ Irish Independent, '[Revealed: Councils investigate 1,600 Airbnb-style lets suspected of planning breaches](#)' (13th Oct. 2025).

⁵⁵ Development Management Guidelines for Planning Authorities, June 2007

It is clear that the Council's enforcement function is delivered by a skilled and resourceful team, that is working under the pressure of a significant caseload and has managed to make inroads to reduce the number of cases on-hand. However, given the ongoing volume of new caseload and the context of resourcing deficiencies, it is also apparent that the overall service is not being delivered to the standards required of the legislation. This point is further emphasised with the rating as contained in the departmental risk register of the risk of the enforcement function not meeting / achieving its objectives as 'moderate'. Under-delivery in planning enforcement creates additional pressures for administrative staff as pressure grows from the repeated need to engage with dissatisfied complainants and can result in additional Freedom of Information / Access to Information on the Environment requests and investigations

It is imperative that the Council recognises the importance of embedding a culture of planning enforcement. The OPR Practice Note on Enforcement provides practical guidance as well as useful templates to inform the legal requirements associated with planning enforcement, the management systems and the resources necessary to ensure an effective and efficient enforcement service. The 2013 Policy Directive on Planning Enforcement, which directs local authorities to ensure that sufficient and appropriate human resources are made available for planning enforcement, must also be noted.



The Development Management Guidelines state that each planning authority should review the operation of its enforcement system annually, which should include an analysis of trends or enforcement issues within the area and suggest actions for improved performance. It would appear based on the available evidence that such monitoring and consequential service adjustments are not being made. While the implementation of the CRM system is acknowledged, and in certain ways has improved the internal flow of work, the full potential for efficiencies will not be realised without the full adoption of the system.

Recommendation 9 – Enforcement strategy

The planning department should prepare a strategy to address the backlog of open / active enforcement cases across the county. This strategy should provide operational details on every case, including length of time on hand, categorisation, and priority status. The strategy should include realistic target timeframes for the processing, and conclusion, of the backlogged cases. This strategy should be linked to the identification of the resources required to implement the strategy, including the feasibility of staff in other operational areas (in particular technicians) being trained / upskilled to provide assistance to the enforcement team. This strategy should be presented to the Council's senior management team for urgent consideration. Progress on the implementation of the strategy should be reported to the Council's elected members at least twice a year.

Recommendation 10 – Quarries

The Council should prepare and publish the Quarry Register. Thereafter an inter-departmental enforcement working group, with staff from the relevant MD Office, the waste enforcement section, the environment section and the climate action team, should be established to ensure that every quarry in the county is adhering to the required regulations and conditions of its operation. It should be an objective of the working group to regulate and monitor quarries using robust and measurable metrics, so that policy regarding the environment, health and safety, public amenity and sustainable development can be developed.

Recommendation 11 – Short-term letting

The Council should prepare a framework for a multi-pronged approach for enforcement activity in relation to unauthorised short-term lettings. The framework should include procedures for collaboration with external agencies and internal Council departments, data analysis, public engagement, and targeted enforcement actions in relation to short-term letting.

No.	Recommendation	Grading	Responsibility
9	Enforcement strategy	Critical	Director Of Services
10	Quarries	Medium	Senior Planner
11	Short-term letting	High	Senior Planner

9 Other Planning Related Functions



9.1 Part 8 / Local Authority Own Development

Local authority own-development, often referred to as 'Part 8' development, is provided for under section 179 of the Act, while part 8 of the Regulations sets out procedures for the processing and approval of such proposals.

Under Galway County Council's procedures for delivering Part 8 projects, the relevant promoting department takes full responsibility for the preparation of the development proposal, ensuring a pre-planning meeting with the senior executive planner (over development management), and submission thereafter to the planning department. Further, the promoting department must engage with the relevant municipal district elected members prior to the application entering the statutory process.

The planning department assumes an oversight role in relation to:

- Compliance with the relevant legislation, including a check of a draft public notice
- Uploading the application onto the Council's website and LGMA's online portal
- Acceptance of submissions from the public and prescribed bodies
- Conducting the site inspection and preparation of the planning assessment
- Preparation of the chief executive's report.

Once those steps have been completed, the proposing department presents the proposal and chief executive's report to the relevant municipal district.

As required under the statutory code, public consultation is a key element of the Part 8 process, including making key stakeholders aware of proposals. However, the planning department's procedural documents do not reference how third-party submissions are made available for public viewing, as required under article 83(2) of the Regulations. Furthermore, it is not detailed if or how participating members of the public, i.e. those who made submissions, are informed of the decision of the elected members as is required under article 84(1) of the Regulations. While this may happen in practice, it is important that it would be detailed in procedures, with responsibilities identified.

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

Further to the undertaking of screenings, article 120(3)(b) of the Regulations provides that any person may apply to An Coimisiún Pleanála for a screening determination as to whether the local authority own-development would be likely to have significant effects on the environment. Circular letter PL 10/2018 issued by DHLGH indicates that Part 8 public notices should indicate that any person may refer the matter to An Coimisiún Pleanála for a screening determination as to whether the development would be likely to have such effects. While some public notices did include this requirement (including the newspaper notice sample furnished to the Office), it was not included in a number of Part 8s reviewed.

To ensure consistency of approach and to avoid any possible shortcoming in relation to procedural requirements, the Council should develop a comprehensive procedures manual for Part 8 proposals, and provide it to all departments within the Council, as well as for internal planning department use.

Specifically, the procedures document should identify the statutory requirements for Part 8 proposals in respect of public notices (templates); the referral of documents to relevant prescribed bodies; the making available of all documentation submitted with a Part 8 proposal on the Council's website, as well as in public buildings, and the timeframe for same; procedures in relation to the receipt of third party submissions; the preparation of the chief executive's report to the elected members (in accordance with section 179 of the Act); and the public availability of the chief executive's report and copy of the minutes of the Council meeting which approved the Part 8 proposal.

The manual should also include a procedure for the post completion checking of delivered Part 8 projects, to confirm consistency with the project as approved, as well as ensuring that any member of the public who made a submission is informed in writing of the resolution passed by the elected members. The statutory timelines that must be adhered to should be clearly outlined and defined in the templates. Furthermore, templates should include the requirements under articles 120 and 250 of the Regulations, in relation to environmental screening and should indicate that any person may refer the matter to An Coimisiún Pleanála for a screening determination as to whether the development would be likely to have such effects.

This procedures manual should be presented to senior management for consideration and approval and thereafter implemented for use by the Council in respect of all Part 8 proposals.

Performance rating and recommendations

The Council's overall delivery of its Part 8 function is considered **satisfactory**. However, in the absence of a comprehensive procedural manual, there is a risk that various steps in the overall process may not be implemented as expected when development proposals (including statutory notices) are being prepared by departments across the Council.

Recommendation 12 – Part 8 procedural manual

The senior management should approve a procedures manual to be adhered to across the Council for the preparation and implementation of Part 8 projects. The manual should provide instruction for all Council departments in relation to Part 8 project delivery, from pre-planning through to post-project review, including planning and environmental considerations, public consultation requirements, engagement with elected members and adherence to statutory timelines. The Council's procedures should also outline the planning department's role, as well as making clear the responsibilities of other promoting departments.

9.2 Taking-in-Charge

The taking-in-charge function in Galway County Council moved a number of years ago from the planning department to the transport department. The team comprises an administrative officer, an executive engineer, two assistant engineers (one of which is a vacant position), two assistant staff officers and one clerical officer. The team reports to the senior engineer in the roads department. There is ongoing consultation between the planning department and the roads and transportation section in this context. The team manages and progresses the taking-in-charge of housing estates in the county, which includes technical inspections and compliance checking; legal and administrative processes; financial management and bonds; and coordination with other departments and stakeholders, including developers, banks, elected members and members of the public.

The taking-in-charge team has developed a process manual which guides the relevant staff through the process. In order to monitor progress, the taking-in-charge team has developed and maintains a comprehensive database of all housing developments which have been taken in charge, which is available on the Council's website for members of the public to view. It is noted that there are two separate areas on the website for viewing taking-in-charge information and that the list of estates taken in charge under the planning tab does not correspond to that list under the roads and transportation tab. This issue needs to be addressed in terms of operational procedures in order to avoid confusion and / or miscommunication in the public domain. In this regard, it would be beneficial for the team to have direct website access in order to update taking-in-charge information efficiently. That being said, it is reassuring that the Council has confirmed that recent website upgrades will ensure the synchronisation of relevant updates across the planning and roads functions.

In addition, the team maintains an internal register of all existing housing developments in the county including those that have been taken in charge, and those that have not yet been taken in charge (including details of recently permitted developments). The decision regarding the taking-in-charge of estates is recorded for all existing developments, along with comments received from Uisce Éireann.

The Council has advised that all completed and taken-in-charge estates are fully mapped, with PSCI surveys undertaken upon declaration as public roads. It would be beneficial for members of the public who wish to engage with the taking-in-charge process that such maps are made publicly available on the Council's GIS system.

A taking-in-charge policy document, which is available on the Council's website, sets out the required actions, timeframes and responsibilities at each stage of the process including details of:

- The facilities that can be taken in charge
- The application process
- The standards required for a development to be considered for taking-in-charge
- Details of potential grants available
- Details of a taking-in-charge register following completion of the process.

The Council's policy document sets out the details of section 180 of the Act as well as information for developers, or residents, regarding how to apply to have a development taken-in-charge. The policy outlines that those developments with private infrastructure such as wells, water treatment plants, wastewater treatment plants (and associated pumping stations that were provided by developers as part of the housing development and cannot be connected to the public water and wastewater treatment) will only be considered for bond release, and not taking-in-charge. Holiday developments, gated developments, mixed use developments are also precluded from the Council's taking-in-charge policy and will only be considered for

bond release. The policy also notes that while it is not normal practice to take partially completed estates in charge, such estates will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Since the completion of the 2015 National Taking-in-Charge Initiative, some 700 housing estates in the county have been processed, which breaks down as follows:

No. of housing estates	No. of housing estates taken in charge	No. bond released	No. to be taken in charge ⁵⁶	Other ⁵⁷
700	113	12	514	61

This would indicate that approximately 16% of estates in the county have been taken in charge over the last 10 years, with a further 73% to be taken in charge. Applications for taking-in-charge are progressed on a date received basis, rather than priority basis. The team have an annual target of 12 estates to be processed for taking-in-charge and/or for bond release. In 2024, this target was reached, with 12 estates taken in charge, and 2 bond releases (estates not taken in charge).

The team noted the taking-in-charge process can be protracted and indicated an average time of 65 months from receipt of the request, to conduct the process. The team cited delays in the process which can be incurred when a file is forwarded to the enforcement section, resulting in a pause in the taking-in-charge process pending completion of enforcement proceedings. Other delays can be because of incomplete or non-compliant development, outstanding issues with infrastructure, and the need for thorough inspections and certifications, along with Uisce Éireann requirements, such as the securing of wayleaves. Significant staff turnover, with 16 technical staff departing since 2018 has also contributed to such delays. The team confirmed that full staff complement has been restored since Q4 2025.

The analysis indicates that the requirements of Circular PD 1/08 (summarised in Circular PL 5/2014) which outline the following, are not being met:

- In relation to those requests for taking-in-charge estates currently on hand where the planning permission has expired, the condition of such estates should as soon as possible, be assessed.
- New requests for the taking-in-charge of estates must be promptly assessed and then dealt with in accordance with the following:
 - Estates satisfactorily completed: Where an estate is completed in accordance with the terms and conditions of permission, it should be taken in charge without delay on foot of a request to do so, but not later than 6 months from the date of the request.
 - Priority list for estates not completed satisfactorily: A priority list should be drawn up of requests for taking-in-charge of uncompleted estates, taking into account such factors as date of application, condition of the estate and the length of time it has been left unfinished.
- New requests for unfinished estates should be added to the priority list, as appropriate.

The team confirmed that there are two unfinished housing estates in the county, both of which are currently with receivers. The Council is in active engagement with both receivers.

⁵⁶ The number provided by the Council at the time of the review

⁵⁷ The Council clarified the 'other' figure of 61 as duplicate entries due to multi-phase estates.

The Council stated that €3,818,651 in bonds have been secured for remedial works through negotiation. However, the total value of live securities held has not been submitted to this Office. Additionally, the processes to keep bonds as collected up to date have not been outlined nor has the value of any securities 'called in' over the past three years.

The resourcing pressures and competing priorities within the Council are noted throughout the report, however, it is also the case that the taking-in-charge function is not reliant on the availability of planners, as there are no planners within this team. As is the present situation, engineers and technicians are performing the function but there needs to be a focus on delivering this function in a more expedient manner, by way of additional resourcing or otherwise. The enhanced municipal district structure that the Council are currently undertaking may play a role in this regard. Additionally, the implementation of an improved information management system would allow for greater monitoring and analysis of data relating to housing developments and the taking-in-charge process.

Performance rating and recommendations

While the Council has been active in the carrying out of this function, it is clear that the process is protracted, with a substantial backlog of estates awaiting taking-in-charge. This situation will further be exacerbated as the level of construction activity and active sites continue to rise in the county, which will undoubtedly necessitate the requirement for further resources to ensure that the process is progressing at a pace which meets the public's expectations.

An average time of five and a half years to progress a taking-in-charge application is excessive. As such the Council's delivery of its taking-in-charge function is currently considered **unsatisfactory**. There is a requirement for a focus of the Council to work on reducing the number of estates awaiting taking-in-charge in the county and consideration should be given to formalising a phased and detailed delivery schedule for the progression of this work.

Recommendation 13 – Taking-in-charge

Noting that this function is external to the planning department, the Council should provide additional resourcing to the taking-in-charge team as a matter of urgency. With appropriate resourcing in place, new requests for the taking-in-charge of estates must be promptly assessed and dealt with in accordance with Circular PD 1/08 (summarised in Circular PL 5/2014). To assist in this, the Council should consider the implementation of an improved information management system to allow for greater monitoring and analysis of data relating to housing developments and the taking-in-charge process and the phased taking-in-charge of all remaining housing developments.

9.3 Marine Spatial Planning

Marine spatial planning, as part of Ireland's broader National Marine Planning Framework, involves coordinating the use of the marine area to balance various activities and ensure sustainable development. This includes managing resources, infrastructure, activities and renewable energy development. Ireland has set ambitious targets to achieve 5GW of offshore renewable energy generation by 2030 with a further target of 20GW by 2040 and 37GW by 2050 as set out in the Future Framework for Offshore Renewable Energy Policy Statement 2024.

Designated Maritime Area Plans (DMAPs) are a key component of Ireland's plan-led approach to developing offshore renewable energy, particularly offshore wind. While the first DMAP focused on the south coast, a new National DMAP is being developed to cover all of Ireland's maritime area, including the west coast, with the goal of designating sites for at least 15GW of offshore wind by 2040.

The development of floating offshore wind is crucial for Ireland meeting its 2040 and 2050 climate targets. An application in relation to offshore renewable energy off the Galway coast, the first of its kind since the introduction of the Maritime Act, is presently a 'live' application with An Coimisiún Pleanála for which a decision has yet to be made. As part of the process, the Council prepared and submitted a report to An Coimisiún Pleanála which sets out the views of the authority on the effects of the proposed development on the environment, the implications of the proposed development for maritime spatial planning, the likely effects on any European site, where relevant, and the proper planning and sustainable development of the area of the authority.

In this respect, the planning department reported the resource intensive nature of preparing same and the significance of co-ordination with both Council departments and various statutory bodies in respect of the assessment of implications of this type of application. An acting senior executive planner oversaw the completion of the report, with support coming from the relevant area planner. The report took approximately six weeks to prepare. The planning department has an established template in respect of Strategic Infrastructure Development (SID) applications to An Coimisiún Pleanála, which was altered to aid in the completion of the marine spatial planning application.

Going forward, it is the intention of the Council to upskill specific planners within the department, who will complete all such marine spatial planning reports. While this would be an effective use of resources, as has been reported previously in this review, it is important that the planning department establish effective learning and development strategies and thereafter implements same through the PMDS structure.

Performance rating and recommendations

As marine spatial planning is a relatively new function for the planning department and noting that the Council fulfilled its statutory function under section 291 of the Act and was in a position to dedicate a fulltime resource to the sole function of preparing a report to An Coimisiún Pleanála, it is considered that the Council's performance in relation to this function is **satisfactory**.

While no formal recommendation is included in relation to this function, the Council should consider identifying and upskilling a dedicated marine spatial planning resource within the department through the formal PMDS structures (with reference to Recommendation 1).

No.	Recommendation	Grading	Responsibility
12	Part 8 procedural manual	Medium	Senior Planner
13	Taking-in-charge	High	Director of Services

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	Resourcing and staff development	The Council should clearly identify the intended structure of the planning department having regard to the findings of the Strategic Workforce Plan to ensure that the strategic and operational functions are strengthened and to ensure the future management and resourcing of the department is provided for with sufficient skills, capacity and resilience. This will help to ensure service continuity, skills alignment, retention and recruitment, operational alignment and strategic integration. The planning department should place a renewed focus on staff development matters including the PMDS process and preparation of a departmental training plan for 2026.	Critical	Director of Services
2	Conflict of interest	The planning department should develop a procedure for staff to proactively identify and manage potential conflicts of interest. This 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	Senior Planner

		Forward Planning		
3	Development Plan monitoring	<p>In the short term, the Council should, as a matter of urgency fulfil their statutory requirements in terms of the preparation and publication of a two-year progress report of the county development plan (as required under section 15(2) of the Act). Further, an 'Annual Development Plan Monitoring Report' as required under Ministerial Guidelines should be prepared for the elected members and, thereafter, published on the Council's website.</p> <p>In the longer term, the Council should establish a formal system for monitoring progress on the delivery of development plan objectives. Building on existing work carried out to date, the data collection, monitoring and reviewing should be a permanent function of the planning department - before, during and after the plan-making process - and should extend beyond the capture of data on residential and commercial development activity, not only to address plan monitoring requirements, but also to contribute to the development and implementation of other strategic projects and policy initiatives. Ensuring that monitoring and analysis is conducted with adequate expertise will necessitate the ongoing availability of a GIS resource to the planning department, which could be realised through new or shared resources, while attention should also be given to the upskilling of staff within the department.</p>	High	Senior Planner
4	Forward planning procedures manual	<p>The planning department should review the existing operating procedures manual to include a greater emphasis on procedures for 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 relation 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.</p>	Medium	Senior Planner

Architectural Heritage				
5	Architectural Heritage procedures manual	An architectural heritage procedures manual should be prepared to assist the ongoing delivery of the Council's architectural heritage duties. The manual should be developed over time to encompass all areas of responsibility, including the management, oversight and monitoring of conservation grant schemes, processes of engagement with owners / occupiers of protected structures, public engagement strategy and the preparation of an annual work programme. In due course, the manual should document the cyclical processes for updating the Record of Protected Structures and identify procedures for the delivery of conservation training / workshops to Council staff (including outdoor staff) and elected members.	Low	Conservation officer
Land Activation and Projects				
6	Coordination of land activation mechanisms	<p>While noting the Council's move to establish a project management office to drive the delivery of significant projects, given the housing delivery, dereliction and vacancy challenges faced, there is an opportunity to implement wider coordination between departments to strategically deliver on land activation objectives. The objective should be to provide a structure for information sharing, joint analysis, the integration of initiatives to achieve policy objectives, project development, decision-making, cross-departmental prioritisation, monitoring and reporting. It is suggested that a working group of the key responsible individuals (representing derelict sites, vacant homes, social housing delivery, regeneration and project delivery, planning, etc.) be established under terms of reference, with reporting responsibility to the Director for Planning & Economic Development. The planning department should play a key role in ensuring coordination opportunities to deliver development plan objectives.</p> <p>An initial objective of the working group should be to consider the opportunity for the Council's enhanced utilisation of the derelict sites register to deliver on housing and regeneration objectives and to ensure the Council is primed to meet future statutory requirements. This should include the preparation of a strategy to identify derelict sites on a cross-departmental basis, for engagement with owners, and the development of an accelerated procedure for placing sites on the register.</p>	High	Director of Services

Development Management				
7	Development management procedures manual	The Council should develop and implement a development management procedures manual for planners, to be used across the team to ensure that the entirety of the development management function operates in an efficient and consistent manner. The manual could include procedures and templates for all aspects of the development management function, particularly for planning application assessment reports, including LRD and SID applications and Sections 5 reports. The manual should also include an SOP for the formal system of file allocation based on an equitable weighting system, to ensure timely reports can be prepared as well as an equitable division of work. Finally, on an advisory note, the manual could consider the inclusion of a formal system of planner report countersigning.	Medium	Senior Planner
8	Section 5 declarations	The Council should update its planning report templates for Sections 5 declaration requests to ensure compliance with statutory EIA and AA requirements. The Council should ensure that the details of any Section 5 declaration, including the question arising, a copy of any submissions or observations received and a copy of the declaration as issued by the Council are placed on the Council's website within 3 working days of issuing the declaration, and thereafter remain on the website for a minimum period of 8 weeks.	High	Senior Planner
Enforcement				
9	Enforcement strategy	The planning department should prepare a strategy to address the backlog of open / active enforcement cases across the county. This strategy should provide operational details on every case, including length of time on hand, categorisation, and priority status. The strategy should include realistic target timeframes for the processing, and conclusion, of the backlogged cases. This strategy should be linked to the identification of the resources required to implement the strategy, including the feasibility of staff in other operational areas (in particular technicians) being trained / upskilled to provide assistance to the enforcement team. This strategy should be presented to the Council's senior management team for urgent consideration. Progress on the implementation of the strategy should be reported to the Council's elected members at least twice a year.	Critical	Director of Services

10	Quarries	The Council should prepare and publish the Quarry Register. Thereafter an inter-departmental enforcement working group, with staff from the relevant MD Office, the waste enforcement section, the environment section and the climate action team, should be established to ensure that every quarry in the county is adhering to the required regulations and conditions of its operation. It should be an objective of the working group to regulate and monitor quarries using robust and measurable metrics, so that policy regarding the environment, health and safety, public amenity and sustainable development can be developed.	Medium	Senior Planner
11	Short-term letting	The Council should prepare a framework for a multi-pronged approach for enforcement activity in relation to unauthorised short-term lettings. The framework should include procedures for collaboration with external agencies and internal Council departments, data analysis, public engagement, and targeted enforcement actions in relation to short-term letting.	High	Senior Planner
Other Planning Related Functions				
12	Part 8 procedural manual	The senior management should approve a procedures manual to be adhered to across the Council for the preparation and implementation of Part 8 projects. The manual should provide instruction for all Council departments in relation to Part 8 project delivery, from pre-planning through to post-project review, including planning and environmental considerations, public consultation requirements, engagement with elected members and adherence to statutory timelines. The Council's procedures should also outline the planning department's role, as well as making clear the responsibilities of other promoting departments.	Medium	Senior Planner

13	Taking-in-charge	<p>Noting that this function is external to the planning department, the Council should provide additional resourcing to the taking-in-charge team as a matter of urgency. With appropriate resourcing in place, new requests for the taking-in-charge of estates must be promptly assessed and dealt with in accordance with Circular PD 1/08 (summarised in Circular PL 5/2014). To assist in this, the Council should consider the implementation of an improved information management system to allow for greater monitoring and analysis of data relating to housing developments and the taking-in-charge process and the phased taking-in-charge of all remaining housing developments.</p>	High	Director of Services
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**Oifig an
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