

Review Report

September
2026

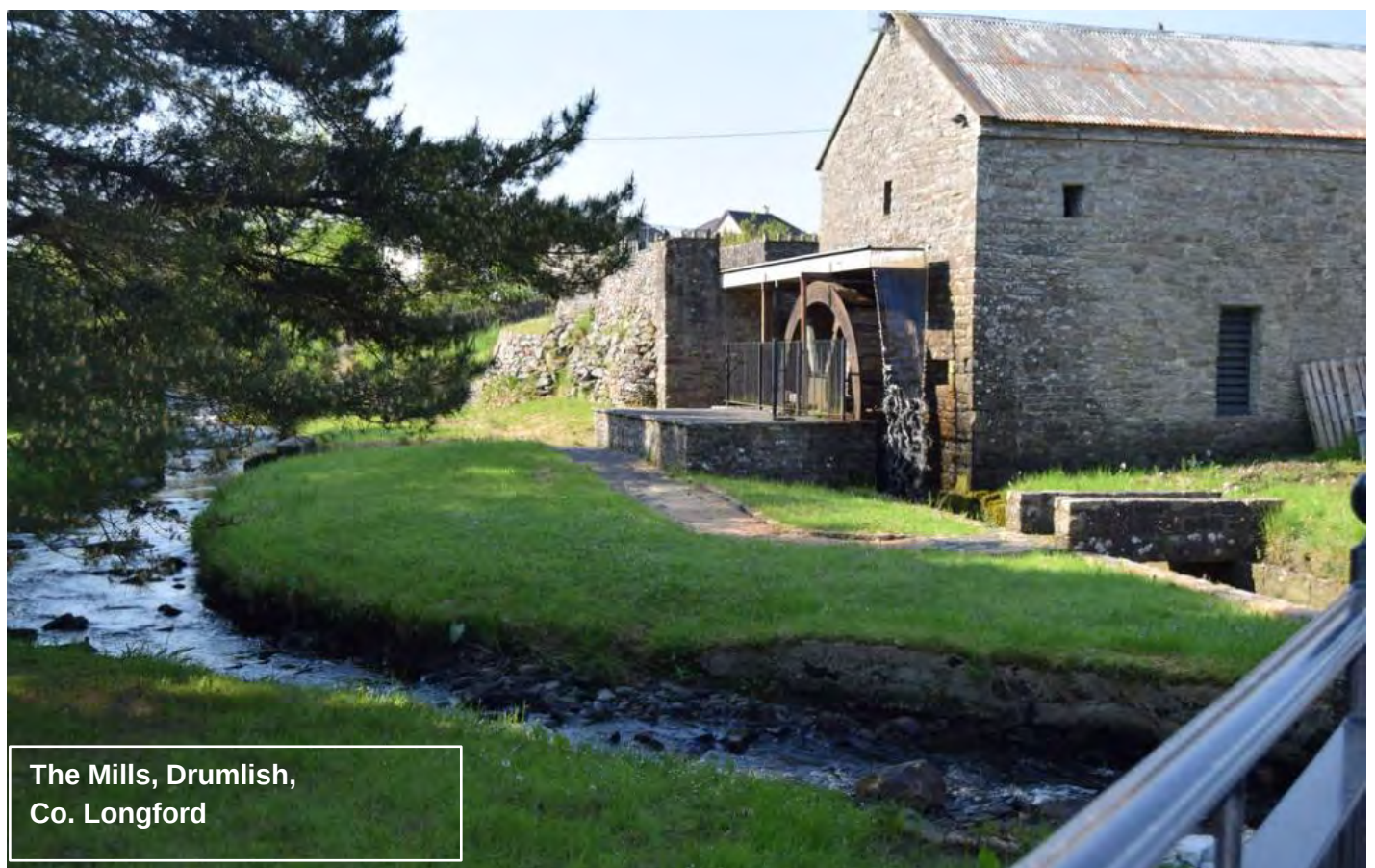
OPR planning review of Longford County Council



Oifig an
Rialaitheora Pleanála
Office of the
Planning Regulator

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The Mills, Drumlish,
Co. Longford

1 Introduction



Background

The OPR is statutorily empowered to review how local authorities perform their planning functions. This review of Longford County Council's planning department is the eleventh such review to be conducted by the Office since the first one was published in 2021.

The OPR's approach to the review process is to identify good practice and achievements and to highlight areas where services can improve. Overall, the emphasis is on supporting continuous improvement across the Irish planning system.

The reviews are designed as a developmental support. Every review includes recommendations designed to enhance service delivery and consistency in planning practice. The Office continues to engage with each local authority following the publication of the review report to support the planning department in the implementation of recommendations.

Scope

Reviews are conducted in accordance with statutory provisions, and, on this basis, the emphasis is on the systems and procedures used by a local authority to deliver its planning functions. In this regard, the review process is concerned with current operations rather than focusing 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 Longford County Council to the OPR during the review process.

Process

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

The Longford County Council review involved extensive engagement with the planning department over several 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.

At the time the review process was being conducted, the provisions of the Planning & Development Act 2000 remained largely in effect, with the provisions of the 2024 Act being commenced on a phased basis. Accordingly, the referencing and terminology used throughout this report refer to those under the 2000 Act.

The OPR wish to express thanks to Longford 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.



Ruins of Inch Mor monastery, Aughnacliffe, Co Longford

Ratings and Recommendations

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

The ratings are defined as follows:

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

The ratings and recommendations are provided to encourage the ongoing improvement of robust procedures for statutory functions and to collectively evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of the delivery of the local authority's planning services.

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

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



2 Overview of Key Findings



In the period before the last Census was conducted (2016-2022), County Longford had the most significant level of population increase in Ireland at county level, reaching a population of 46,751 with a 14% increase. County Longford is also strategically located, well placed on national transport corridors, with broad scope to benefit from its urban and rural development potential across various economic sectors, from agriculture to tourism, as well as domestic and international direct investment opportunities.

The successful delivery of its planning functions is key for Longford County Council to harness the county's development opportunities. However, such delivery is being hampered by resourcing challenges, particularly a significant level of vacancy across critical grades, creating operational challenges that are unsustainable in the long term.

The key finding of this review is that a range of short to medium and longer-term actions need to be put in place to ensure that, in the first instance, the planning function is supported through a period of ongoing vacancies and that, subsequently, the department is in a position to attract skilled staff to drive the delivery of Longford County Council's strategic objectives.

Of a designated staffing allocation of 22, six positions were unfilled at the time the review was being conducted, creating a scenario whereby the entire operational area was being delivered by just 16 members of staff. Within this, there were five planner positions unfilled out of an intended cohort of nine approved posts, resulting in high levels of pressure being imposed on the remaining members of technical staff.

While the commitment of the team members must be commended in relation to their fulfilment of the department's core operational responsibilities, given the focus on statutory deliverables, it was not surprising to find that there are many functional areas that would benefit from attention being given to improved business processes and the documentation of clear procedures. Nor should it be unexpected that the department's overall resilience would be under strain.

In this regard, the OPR has made recommendations that seek to address the planning department's operational capacity issues. This must include the Council's senior management team giving consideration to any additional support that can be provided to the department, beyond filling vacant planner positions.

There are a range of important operational tasks carried out within the department that could be greatly assisted with support from skillsets that would be available across the wider organisation. Given the position the department finds itself in, it is vital that supports are put in place. In addition to specialist skillsets, valuable support might include senior administrative expertise, which would assist in refocussing the department's business planning processes, team management and staff development.

At the more strategic level, capacity in relation to land activation and housing delivery is also a concern. The Longford County Development Plan contains a target for the delivery of 428 housing units each year, however, an average of just 111 units has been achieved annually in the period between 2018 and 2025.

For a county that experienced a 14% population increase in the period leading up to the last Census, these trends are concerning. Accordingly, the findings of this report point towards actions that are designed to support the day-to-day operation of the planning department so that it can be in a position to play a greater role in support of the Council's wider strategic objectives.

Plan Led Development

Longford County Council has been successful in meeting its statutory forward planning obligations to date, despite the limited staffing available. Statutory plans have been reviewed and updated within the required timeframes and policies have been developed transparently, including quality participation in the process being supported by online consultation portals.

While acknowledging the low housing output figures outlined above, it must also be recognised that 54% of the housing units delivered in the 2018-2025 period have been single houses, highlighting the limited amount of development activity occurring at any significant scale in urban centres. These trends indicate significant challenges in realising the sound policy objectives set out in the county development plan. The Council has proven successful at securing significant funding through national regeneration initiatives; however, given the scale of the challenge, the planning department could be more integrated in efforts to drive the Council's land activation programme.

There is a significant opportunity for the Council to enhance Longford's role as a gateway between the Northern & Western and the Eastern & Midland regions and for Longford Town's potential to develop further as a strategic employment and service hub. This includes its connectivity via the N4 / M4 and Dublin-Sligo rail line, as well as the considerable levels of vacancy and dereliction, all of which provide opportunities for compact growth and regeneration in line with national policy objectives under the National Planning Framework.

Actions implemented to address these opportunities should be informed and prioritised by an evidence base of data and strategic analysis. Additional capacity needs to be built into the Council's forward planning function so that the department can play a fundamental role in relation to policy implementation and the coordination arrangements for initiatives to support land activation.

Managing for Sustainable Development

The planning department's resourcing issues were being felt most acutely in its development management team at the time the review was being conducted. With five positions unfilled at the time (including four of the six planner roles), the remaining staff were under significant pressure to achieve the range of duties required of them. Notwithstanding the challenges, Longford County Council has been managing to meet its statutory development management requirements, with output metrics generally being within a favourable range compared to national rates, including a low number of decisions being appealed (and a low level of appealed decisions being upheld).

However, in some respects, the limited volume of planning applications, which are predominantly single-house applications, has been a key factor in preventing the development management team from being overwhelmed. Further, the pressure on the limited resource of planners to deliver these outputs has come at the cost of the department not being in a position to engage in wider strategic activities that are essential in stimulating significant development activity.

Similarly, in relation to planning enforcement, the Council's overall rate of cases on hand is relatively low. However, attention should be given towards the increasing rate of cases on hand, which has crept upwards on an ongoing basis over the past decade. Likewise, while the planning department has attended to the key fundamentals of preparing a record of protected structures and provided evidence of taking action in relation

to endangered structures, the limited capacity within the department has left this important statutory responsibility without a clear management structure to coordinate the various tools that are available to secure the protection of architectural heritage.

The ongoing availability of staff within the planning department poses a clear risk to the Council's ability to manage development across each of its functions, and the findings of this review point towards actions that can be taken to stabilise and strengthen the various operations. Given the demands that staff are under, and the urgent need for additional supports to be provided, it is not surprising that the need to document and update procedures was a recurring theme. In a pressurised operational environment, where staff turnover is a factor, the absence of clear and comprehensive procedures increases vulnerability to error and reduces the potential for efficiency.

Delivering Quality Planning Services

The commitment of Longford County Council's planning department staff to fulfilling the department's obligations in difficult operational circumstances must be recognised. The department has continued to succeed in delivering a range of planning services against the backdrop of limited resources, staff turnover and significant vacancies.

In this regard, the OPR generally found the Council's fulfilment of its planning functions to be satisfactory and, in terms of service delivery, notes its positive rates for planning decisions made within the statutory timeframe, with low numbers of appeals and a small overturn rate. The department should also be commended for meeting its pre-planning consultation obligations in a timely manner despite the considerable pressure that staff are under.

However, delivering quality services goes beyond adherence to statutory timeframes, and in this regard the Council overall must consider supporting the planning department so that time can be given towards business process improvement and staff development, and in turn can aspire towards building best practice in service delivery.

Transparency and engagement are cornerstones in building confidence in the quality of a planning service. The report identifies a number of actions that should be taken to improve public access and engagement with planning matters, including in relation to Part 8 projects, exempted development declarations, enhanced website content for architectural heritage and the publication of enforcement and quarry registers.

While the successful utilisation of technology to support service delivery is evident through the implementation of the ePlanning system and the county development plan review consultation portals, the report identifies other functional areas where the need for enhanced systems must be supported. This includes the need for an updated enforcement case management system and additional support to develop robust systems for monitoring the implementation of development plan objectives, which in turn should be integrated with the Council's approach to the prioritisation of land activation projects.

While no best practice case study examples are included in this report, this is not unexpected given the availability of the planning department. This report acknowledges that the Council has been successful in securing investment through national funding initiatives for a range of regeneration projects. However, while these are worthy projects, the core focus of these schemes has not addressed the fundamental issue of ensuring housing development through the activation of available land. Making significant progress in relation to this overriding priority for the people of Longford must be considered as a key indicator for quality in service delivery.

3 Operating Context and Organisation of the Planning Department



Area profile

County Longford covers approximately 1,091km and, by area, is the fourth smallest county in the country. According to the Census 2022 results, the population of the county increased by 5,878, from 40,873 in 2016 to 46,751 in 2022, representing a 14% increase in population.¹ This is a significant increase when compared to the national population, which increased by 8% over the same period. The 14% increase in County Longford was also the highest percentage growth in population in the country, on a county basis. The Longford County Development Plan 2021-2027 had estimated that the County's population would reach 45,800 by 2027; however, as noted above, the 2022 census revealed that this figure had already been surpassed.

In 2022, County Longford had a population density of approximately 42 persons per km², which is significantly lower than the national average population density of 73 per km². The County is predominantly rural in nature, with the 2024 Corporate Plan indicating that 67% of the population lives in rural areas and 33% lives in urban areas. The current county development plan identifies that in 2016, 20,919 of the total population of 40,873 lived in the rural settlement clusters / open countryside. Accordingly, it was estimated that the largest population growth to 2027 would be in such areas. Between 2016 and 2022, towns such as Longford and Edgeworthstown experienced population increases, while towns such as Granard and Ballymahon had population decreases. According to CSO figures, in 2025 Longford County Council had 99 new dwelling completions, of which 78 were single houses.²

County Longford is bordered by counties Westmeath, Roscommon, Leitrim and Cavan. In a regional context, County Longford is part of the Eastern & Midlands Regional Assembly area. Three of the four bordering counties, Roscommon, Leitrim and Cavan, are all located within the Northern & Western Regional Assembly area, whilst Westmeath is located in the Eastern & Midlands Regional Assembly area.

In terms of infrastructure and connectivity, the county is well served by strategic road and rail access. The roads network includes nine regional roads supplemented by a comprehensive system of county roads, with a total of approximately 1,500 kms of roads. The N4 / M4 is the national primary route, extending 198 kms from Dublin (M50) to Sligo, passing through Longford. Longford County Council is working collaboratively with Westmeath County Council to upgrade a 54km section of the N4 between Mullingar and Longford. Longford railway station is located in Longford town and is the terminus of the Dublin Connolly-Longford commuter service, and it is also a stop on the Dublin-Sligo InterCity route. Accessible transport links are also provided by buses connecting Longford with Dublin via routes from both Ballina and Sligo. Abbeyshrule Aerodrome, a small private airport near Abbeyshrule village in southeast Longford, supports leisure flights and several aviation-related businesses.

There are 12 designated European sites, which form part of the Natura 2000 network of European sites, located wholly or partly within County Longford. This network includes eight Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and four Special Protection Areas (SPAs). These sites are considered to be of significant importance at both European and Irish levels. Lough Ree, which forms much of Longford's western boundary, is notable

¹ [CSO, 'Press Statement Census of Population 2022 - Summary Results for Longford' \(May 2023\)](#)

² [CSO, 'New Dwelling Completions', \(March 2026\)](#)

as both a designated SAC and SPA. The European sites also include a number of active raised and degraded bogs. In addition, there are six Natural Heritage Areas (NHAs), which encompass nationally important natural heritage areas, all of which have peatlands as features of interest. There are also a further 17 proposed NHAs which have ecological and biodiversity significance within the County, all of which are legally protected from damage from the date they are formally proposed for designation.

Longford Town is the principal town of the County and is designated as a 'Key Town' in the Eastern & Midlands Regional Assembly's Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy 2019-2033 (RSES). The 2022 Census recorded a population increase in Longford town of some 9.43% from 10,008 in 2016 to 10,952 in 2022, which is slightly above the national average of 8% for the same period.

Organisational Context

The Council has a total staff of approximately 400. The executive of the Council is led by a chief executive who, at the time of this report's finalisation, is supported by four directors of services, taking responsibility for the following functions:

- Physical Development Directorate – responsibility for roads and transportation, environment, climate action, water services, planning, the Physical Development SPC and Granard Municipal District.
- Social Development Directorate – responsibility for housing, community, human resources, integration, the Social Development SPC and Ballymahon Municipal District.
- Finance, Innovation & Information Technology Directorate – responsibility for finance, IT, fire and emergency and the Governance SPC.
- Economic Development Directorate – responsibility for corporate services, regeneration and active travel, Town Centre First, library and cultural services, local enterprise facilities, capital projects, the Economic, Enterprise and Rural Development SPC and Longford Municipal District.

The elected Council is comprised of 18 elected members, representing the electoral areas of Longford, Ballymahon and Granard municipal districts. There are four Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs), comprised of elected members, sectoral and community representatives, operating within Longford County Council. These SPCs assist the elected Council in its policy deliberation. The SPCs are:

- Physical Development
- Social Development
- Economic, Enterprise and Rural Development
- Governance.

The Chairpersons of the SPCs and the Cathaoirleach of the Council then form the Corporate Policy Group, which provides an advisory and consultative role on policy matters, as required.

Strategic Objectives

The Council's Corporate Plan 2024-2029 sets out the Council's vision, mission, values / themes, guiding principles and high-level strategic objectives which are underpinned with specific objectives, supporting strategies and expected outcomes. The overarching mission is "Longford County Council will lead our communities towards sustainable social, economic, environmental and cultural development by fostering collaboration, innovation and inclusivity, ensuring a high quality of life for all citizens". The four high level strategic objectives to facilitate this mission include:

- Our People
- Our Place
- Our Opportunity
- Our Public Services.

All four high level objectives, and associated specific objectives, are relevant to the role and functions of the planning department. The objective Our Place, places a particular focus on planning and states that “Through proper planning and investment, engaging the community and utilising innovative approaches, Longford County Council can create resilient, sustainable communities that protect both their environment and heritage for future generations”.

The Council adopts an annual Service Delivery Plan which sets out the service delivery objectives and performance standards that the Council intends to achieve. The service delivery plan is aligned with the Corporate Plan, including the overall mission as stated above and contains service delivery objectives and performance indicators based on the specific strategic objectives outlined in the Corporate Plan. The service delivery indicators and targets then cascade into the operational plans for the teams within the planning department and to the specific performance objectives and required tasks of individuals.

The annual Service Delivery Plan identifies key objectives, and each one is assigned to a Directorate, along with an intended performance standard to be achieved and, where applicable, a national performance indicator. This Service Delivery Plan sets out how each directorate will work towards achieving their specific strategic and service delivery objectives. As part of the Physical Development Directorate, the Plan lists, under specific sections, strategic and service delivery objectives as well as performance indicators specific to the development management, forward planning and enforcement functions. Monitoring of the implementation of the Service Delivery Plan takes place through a variety of methods, including via National Oversight & Audit Commission (NOAC) reporting, internal monitoring within each directorate, reporting to the Council’s corporate policy group and end-of-year progress reporting.



Longford County Council

Governance

National legislation (sections 147 and 148 of the Act, as well as Part 15 of the Local Government Act 2001) requires that systems are in place for making annual declarations of any interests that relevant employees may have. In this regard, the Council implemented an updated ethics framework with effect from January 2023. The Council has a designated Ethics Registrar, who performs the relevant functions, such as issuing the annual declaration forms. Every employee who performs planning functions, with a maximum salary of at least the maximum for the administrative officer grade or with qualifications that are wholly or in part professional / technical, is required to provide an annual declaration.

In accordance with the Local Government Act 2001 Code of Conduct for Employees (published in 2007), there is an expectation that any staff member in the planning department would declare any potential and/or perceived conflict of interest to their direct line manager in relation to any planning case file assigned to them. Beyond this, as has been the case with other local authorities reviewed by the OPR, there are no specific arrangements or documented procedures within the planning department.

The management of conflicts of interest should be more formalised and transparent across planning departments nationally. Procedures designed specifically for planning departments would provide support to staff in proactively identifying potential conflicts of interest by providing guidance to allow individuals to consider, and be aware of, any matters that could influence their impartiality (or the perception of impartiality) in respect of the duties they perform. Additionally, the formal documentation of such considerations taking place would increase public confidence in the administration of the planning system and its governance.

The Office has made recommendations in relation to this in previous local authority planning reviews. While Longford County Council would also benefit from the development of a planning department-specific conflict of interest management procedure, a formal recommendation is not being issued in this instance. The OPR intends to build on the work carried out in the implementation of previous reviews to develop a template procedure, capable of adaptation, which will be made available to all planning departments to assist in the identification, management and monitoring of conflict-of-interest considerations.

Overview of the Planning Department

The planning department’s budget sits within the ‘Development Management’ heading of the Council’s annual budget. Within this, the planning department’s forward planning, development management and enforcement functions accounted for €2,494,687 in the 2026 budget; see Table 1 below.

The 2026 annual budget estimated that planning application fee income would be €204,000, i.e. a less than 10% cost recovery rate for delivering the Council’s planning service.

Planning department functions	2026 budget	% of 2026 Budget Allocation	% increase from 2025 Budget
Forward planning	565,505	22.7%	12.3%
Development management	1,488,992	59.7%	18.7%
Enforcement	440,190	17.6%	4.7%
Total	2,494,687	100%	14.5%

Table 1 | Planning department budget allocation

The planning department’s senior management team is comprised of two senior planners who report to the Director of Services for Physical Development. Technical and administrative staff support the delivery of each planning function. The planning department is organised into two teams, namely:

- development management
- forward planning/enforcement team.

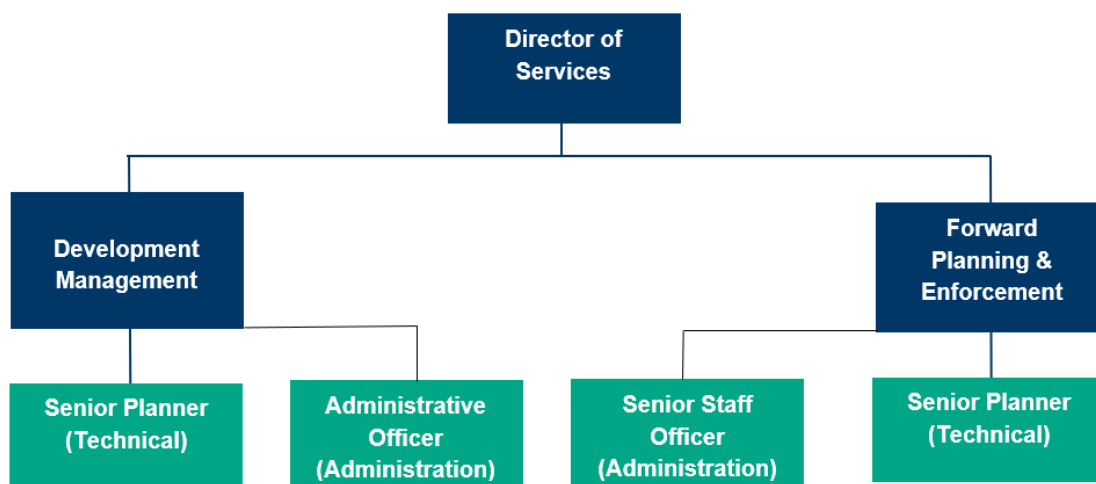


Figure 1 | Planning department structure

Longford County Council's planning department comprises a total of 22 positions (excluding the Director of Services), of which six were not occupied at the time the review was being conducted. Therefore, at the time of this review, the Council's planning responsibilities were being dealt with by 16 members of staff.

Staffing	Full Time Equivalents
Planners	9
Technicians	3
Admin	8
Architects	2
Total	22

Table 2 | Staffing structure

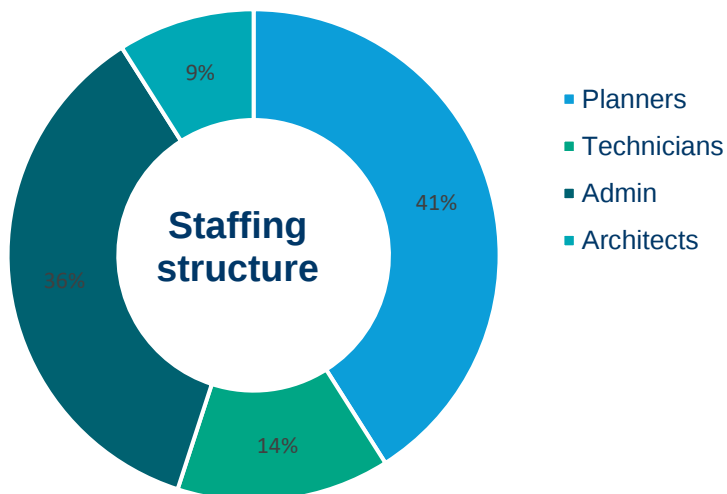


Figure 2 | Staffing structure

The **Development Management** team structure consists of nine technical and six administrative staff. The technical element of the team includes six planners, two architects and a technician (Grade II). The team is supported by six administrative staff, including a lead administrative officer. At the time of the review, four of the planner roles and an architect role were unfilled.

The joint **Forward Planning and Enforcement** team comprises of seven staff, including three planners, two technicians (Grade I), a senior staff officer and a clerical officer. At the time of the review, one of the planner roles was empty.

It is important to note that a number of other planning-related functions, including regeneration, Town Centre First and elements of taking-in-charge, fall under the remit of the Economic Development Directorate.

A strategic workforce plan was completed by Longford County Council in March 2025 and was under consideration by the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage at the time the review was being conducted.

Performance management

It is expected that all Council staff prepare an annual Individual Performance Development Plan (IPDP) under the Performance Management and Development System (PMDS). Short-term and longer-term training needs are also identified as part of the process. The IPDP links to the relevant team plan for the staff member, which in turn links to the Service Delivery Plan and the Corporate Plan. Initial PMDS discussions are intended to take place in January, with mid-year and end-of-year reviews carried out.

At the time information was being gathered from the Council for this review (Q3 2025), less than 50% of planning department staff had completed their 2024 end-of-year IPDP reviews. The planning department subsequently confirmed a pick-up in completion rates. It is recognised that the timely completion of IPDPs can be difficult in the context of a busy work environment, however the process provides the necessary structure to ensure that attention is given to the assignment of responsibilities and that team members are aware of outputs expected of them, as well as providing an opportunity for feedback.

With regard to training and development, the HR department is responsible for co-ordinating and delivering training programmes for all employees and maintains a record of training attended by the planning department staff. Courses attended include essential office management and administration as well as more planning-focused courses, such as Appropriate Assessment, Climate Action, Flood Risk and Enforcement Fundamentals. It was noted that departmental staff availed of other planning-related learning and development opportunities (such as events organised by the OPR and Irish Planning Institute); however, learning and development that is not organised through HR is not detailed in the training log.

Notwithstanding HR's role in relation to training, it would be of benefit to develop a departmental learning and development strategy to inform the IPDP process and support engagement with HR. Such a strategy would identify the qualifications, skill sets, and expertise requirements for optimal performance of the planning department's functions across all administrative and technical roles. It would also identify skills gaps within the department related to key functions, as well as where external resource supports are available, such as consultants or expertise from other areas within the Council. In this regard, the departmental learning and development plan would set priorities for training and upskilling (as well as recruitment) in the short and medium term. Additionally, such a plan could identify previously accessed training resources that would be of benefit to new staff members. Implementation of the plan, including full details of training, education and learning opportunities availed of by staff, should be monitored at director of service level.

In terms of new recruits, a formal induction is carried out by the HR department, and then an informal introduction to their role is overseen by the relevant senior planner. This arrangement could be strengthened through a more formal and consistent onboarding procedure across the department. Ideally, this would include introducing new staff to the overall work of the department, as well as their own roles, in a structured manner with opportunities to be briefed on various functions by key members of the department.

Internal communications

Monthly meetings are scheduled between the Director of Service and the senior planners. Additional meetings may also take place following Management Team Meetings to provide updates on strategic matters. The two teams in the planning department each arrange their own meetings (for example the forward planning and enforcement team may have meetings every two weeks, or monthly as required); however, cross-departmental meetings are not arranged on any regularised basis. It is understood that administrative staff hold informal weekly debriefs during which workload for the coming week is discussed. Despite the limited opportunities for formal information-sharing and strategic planning through scheduled meetings, day-to-day operations involve regular engagement between team members.

In recent times, the operational framework for the planning system has been in a state of continuous update, with new Government strategies, updated legislation and regulations, statutory guidelines and directives and a steady stream of departmental circulars all influencing the context in which planning departments operate. In particular, the implementation of the updated and new requirements of the Planning & Development Act 2024, which is being commenced on a phased basis, will have a significant impact on the day-to-day operations of planning departments. A pattern of infrequent and generally informal meetings that do not involve the entire department, provides limited opportunity for the wider planning team to be updated on significant strategic developments or for staff to raise operational issues.



Longford Town Mall

Considerations and recommendations

The significant vacancy rate in planner positions is noted above and further elaborated throughout the report. From the perspective of Longford County Council's planning department, the challenge in filling vacant positions was outlined, including the example of a recent planner recruitment process, which resulted in all successful candidates declining the offered post following the interview process. It is noted that the planning department's risk register highlights the resourcing issue as the highest-risk item. The department is also very alert to the fact that inadequate resourcing, uncertainty around recruitment and the replacement of key roles, and a mismatch between available competencies and overall responsibilities are risks to successfully meeting the statutory requirements of planning service delivery.

While filling the vacant planner positions is an obvious challenge that must be overcome, Longford County Council, like most local authorities in a buoyant recruitment market, must compete for specialist positions. Accordingly, making the most of, and enhancing, the capacity that is already available will be crucial in sustaining the planning department. In this regard, the Council must consider what additional supports can also be offered to the department from across the wider organisation in terms of technical capability, professional expertise and senior administrative experience.

Subsequent analysis points towards the need, in addition to planner roles, for increased specialist expertise to be made available within the department to facilitate the delivery of key functions. This includes expertise in relation to data analytics and information management systems, business process solutions and architectural conservation. Beyond the issue of planner recruitment, there is potential to significantly strengthen capability and capacity by making additional skillsets available within the department, whether through recruitment, reassignments, making existing expertise within the Council available, or through supported upskilling of departmental staff. Further, and particularly in light of the pressures in the development management area, consideration should also be given towards the feasibility of availing of external planning expertise to support day-to-day planning operations through a 'fee-per-case' type model.

There is also the issue of staff retention, which can be reinforced by upskilling staff, distributing a greater quality and variety of work across the team, expanding team members' ownership and responsibilities and easing overall pressure through the documentation of procedures. The requirement for clear procedures to assist staff in their roles is addressed throughout the report. There are also opportunities, as noted above in the context of a departmental learning and development plan, to encourage existing staff to develop the additional skill sets that are required within the department. Subsequent analysis also signals the role that the planning department should be playing in relation to land activation and regeneration initiatives, which would enhance the strategic quality of work conducted across the department as well as bringing a benefit in terms of delivering key Council objectives,

Further, while the provision of additional supports would clearly assist capacity building in the department, it is also important that the department itself should consider how its internal structures could operate more efficiently. While both teams have significant workloads of their own, consideration should be given towards the scope for greater flexibility between the teams for staff to work across the existing division to assist colleagues at times of heightened pressure. This point is highlighted through the development management team's struggle at the time of the review with an absence of planners, including a senior planner, while some additional expertise was attainable within the wider department. Unquestionably, the planners within the forward planning/enforcement team also had significant volumes of tasks to deliver on at the time, but a more integrated approach to considering the wider operational demands would facilitate the setting of shared departmental priorities.

A more formalised approach to intra-departmental communications, including regular meetings incorporating all staff, would assist in building such integration and a shared understanding of operational pressures and departmental priorities. A stronger focus should be placed on business planning, communications and staff development at an integrated departmental level. Consideration should be given towards the assignment (or designation) of a team member, at an appropriately senior grade, who can take a role at departmental level, operating between the teams, to coordinate business planning, operational priorities, communications, process improvement, performance management, learning and development, etc. The focus of such a role would be on building departmental capacity and resilience by organising business priorities and performance management. The role would also assume responsibility for ensuring the implementation of clear procedures across the teams. Crucially, by assuming key responsibility in relation to the management and organisation of work within the department, this role would also release additional planner capacity with regard to technical output.

Recommendation 1 – Resourcing

Building on the findings of this review, an internal evaluation report should be prepared for presentation to the Council's senior management team within the next six months, setting out the case for additional resourcing support to be provided to the planning department from within the Council. This evaluation should set out the projected workloads for development control, forward planning and enforcement teams over the coming years, as well as identifying the ongoing vacancy, recruitment and staff retention challenges being faced in relation to specialist positions within the department. The purpose of the evaluation is to make the case for the assignment, or making available, of additional specialist and/or senior administrative expertise to sustain and enhance planning department operations.

Recommendation 2 – Business Planning

A renewed emphasis is required in relation to business planning, workload management, internal communications and staff development. To facilitate this, a new role should be established (at an appropriately senior administrative level, reporting to the Director of Service) to coordinate business processes, procedural improvement and performance management across the department. This will include scheduling team and departmental meetings on a regular basis, the development of a departmental learning and development plan and overseeing the implementation of formal procedures across all work streams.

No.	Recommendation	Grading	Responsibility
1	Resourcing	High	Director of Services
2	Business Planning	High	Director of Services



4 Forward Planning



The National Planning Framework First Revision - 2025 (NPF) identifies the need to provide for approximately 50,000 additional households nationally per annum up to 2040. The NPF recognises that Longford, as part of the Midlands Region³ and not immediately adjacent to Dublin, is experiencing the wider influence of the Dublin metropolitan area, which is resulting in significant population growth in some settlements in County Longford. At the same time, other areas are experiencing population decline.

In terms of the regional administrative context, County Longford is located within the Eastern & Midlands Region, as per the Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy 2019-2031 (RSES).⁴ Therein, Longford Town, with a population of approximately 11,000, is designated as a key town within the gateway region and is strategically located, acting as a key employment centre. The RSES has a dedicated section on Longford Town, noting that it is strategically located on the N4 / M4 motorway and the Dublin to Sligo rail line, acting as a portal to the Northern & Western Region. The key priorities for the town include promoting compact growth, the regeneration of the town centre, and expanding Longford's role as a hub for enterprise, employment and tourism.

The RSES also lists five regional policy objectives for the town. Amongst these five policies, Regional Policy Objective 4.60 is to support the plan-led development and regeneration of publicly owned land banks in the town for residential, employment, education, community, cultural and recreational opportunities and the consolidation of the town centre and the enhancement and linking of brownfield and outlying sites to the town centre, with a focus on the regeneration of underused buildings and strategic sites.

As previously indicated in this report, the population of County Longford increased by 14% from 40,873 in 2016 to 46,751 in 2022, which, by county, represented the highest percentage growth in population in the country over this period. Longford Town is designated as the key town in the Longford County Development Plan 2021-2027 with the largest population in the County. Edgeworthstown, which is the second largest town with 2,199 persons recorded in the Census, is designated as a self-sustaining town.

The county development plan aligns planning policy at the county and local levels with regional and national policy. The vision is to set out a framework for the sustainable physical development of the County, ensuring the conservation and protection of the built and natural environment. Urban regeneration and compact growth are key focus areas within the county development plan, supported by a central objective to regenerate the County's towns and villages by making better use of under-utilised land and buildings within the existing built-up urban footprint and to drive the delivery of quality housing.

Forward Planning Team

This team is responsible for all forward planning matters within the Council, including progressing statutory plan-making responsibilities such as the county development plan review and the preparation of area plans. An additional responsibility of the forward planning team is the administrative element of taking-in-charge, which includes registration and mapping. The Residential Zoned Land Tax is temporarily part of the team's workload; however, it is not part of the team plan, wherein it falls under the responsibility of the Town Centre First department.

³ [DHLGH, 'National Planning Framework First Revision', \(April 2025\)](#)

⁴ [EMRA, 'Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy 2019-2031', \(June 2019\)](#)

As noted earlier in the report, a senior planner is designated with responsibility for both the forward planning and enforcement functions as a combined team. The team structure comprises seven sanctioned positions – senior planner, senior executive planner, graduate planner, senior staff officer, clerical officer and two technicians (Grade I). At the time of the review, the senior executive planner position was vacant. One of the two technicians is dedicated to the forward planning function, and one to enforcement, while the other five team members (four given the vacancy) serve both functions as required.

In operational reality, this means that forward planning duties are largely delivered through the senior planner and technician. While the senior planner manages the forward planning work programme, producing draft statutory plan documentation, given the limited and divided resourcing available, the senior planner is also involved in a volume of day-to-day tasks that are less strategic than would be expected of the role, e.g. the administration of the publication of notices, statutory public consultation arrangements, the coordination of internal and external meetings, etc., with limited options available for the delegation of tasks.

Preparation of the County Development Plan

The Longford County Development Plan was adopted by the elected members in October 2021 and came into effect on 30th November 2021. The county development plan is presented in four volumes and includes a written statement, appendices, annexes and an environmental and flood report.

The county development plan outlines the seven steps followed in preparing the new plan, which include:

- A review of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 (which review began in 2019).
- Statutory environmental assessments prepared.
- Extensive consultation process including advertising on the website, social media and hosting of public meetings.
- The views and comments of the relevant bodies, general public and interested groups are fed back to elected members, who then have 10 weeks to contribute their ideas and recommendations.
- The plan was drafted and put on public display for 10 weeks, allowing the public and interested parties to provide feedback.
- Amendments were made and reviewed by the elected members following this second consultation process.
- Final drafting and implementation of the plan.

At the time this review was being conducted, there was no procedures manual in place for the forward planning process. The forward planning team acknowledged the intention to produce such documentation, with competing priorities having hindered the exercise to date. Having documented procedures in place for the core aspects of the plan-making process, such as consultation exercises, communications and data collection, reduces the risk that knowledge might be lost with staff movement over time and can ensure greater efficiency and consistency of approach. This risk of losing such knowledge is particularly important for Longford's planning department, where the knowledge and experience of the process primarily rests with the individual senior planner.

As is the case in many Councils, the planning department does not benefit from having dedicated environmental expertise; accordingly, consultants were engaged to prepare a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), an Appropriate Assessment (AA) and a Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA) as part of the development plan-making process. There is a framework process in place for employing such consultants which incorporates either a cascade or mini competition option.



Newcastle Wood, Ballymahon

Amenity objectives

Part XIII of the Act relates to amenities and specifically, areas of special amenity, landscape conservation areas, tree protection orders, the creation of public rights of way, compulsory purchase orders for rights of way and the repair and tidying of advertisement structures.

Section 202 - 203 Area of special amenity – there are no designated areas of special amenity within the County. However, there are Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Areas and Natural Heritage Areas as well as proposed Natural Heritage Areas (NHAs) within Longford. The six NHAs, designated under the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000, all have peatlands as features of interest. The Council aim to ensure the protection of these sites into the future, and in particular, County Policy Objective 12.5 is to protect and conserve the conservation value of such designated areas and any other sites that may be proposed for designation during the lifetime of the county development plan.

In terms of coordination of natural heritage and landscape development plan objectives with neighbouring local authorities, the planning department has worked in collaboration with Roscommon County Council in relation to the Mid Shannon Wilderness Park, which is a cross-collaborative project. The development of the Mid-Shannon Wilderness Park in County Longford is a project proposed to combine existing natural amenity areas. The county development plan outlines that these important natural heritage amenity areas include Lough Ree, the Rivers Shannon, Inny and Camlin, the Royal Canal, Newcastle Wood and other forests and the future rehabilitated Bord na Móna bogs. The county development plan suggests that the future rehabilitated Bord na Móna bogs can be combined with existing natural areas to create the Mid Shannon Wilderness Park. Such cross-collaborative work is commended; in this regard, it is noted that the Mid-Shannon Wilderness Park County Policy Objective 12.56 outlines the intention to work with partners and stakeholders to progress the development of a wilderness park and biosphere.

Section 204 Landscape conservation areas – although there are no landscape conservation areas within the County, Annex 11 of the county development plan includes the full details of a landscape character assessment of the County. Chapter 14 of the county development plan summarises the landscape types and sensitivities and identifies eight objectives for landscape character, with County Policy Objective 14.4 being to conserve and enhance the high nature conservation value of the landscape character areas to create/protect ecologically resilient and varied landscapes.

Section 205 Tree preservation orders – chapter 12 of the development plan includes a number of policies in relation to trees. The county development plan outlines that the Council will consider the inclusion of additional tree preservation orders over the lifetime of the plan following a detailed survey and analysis of the trees and woodlands, as resources become available. County Policy Objective 12.75 provides for the protection of trees subject to tree preservation orders and for further designations. There is no documented procedure in relation to the management of requests for new tree preservation orders or for conducting assessments during the development management process.

Section 206 - 208 Public rights of way – 12 existing public rights of way are identified in the county development plan in accordance with the mandatory objectives of section 10(2)(o) of the Act. These public rights of way are mapped under Appendix 8. Chapter 13 lists six county policy objectives in relation to public rights of way, including Policy Objective 13.3, which is to review and protect existing public rights of way and trails for the common good and to bring forward proposals for the creation of further rights of way.

Development Plan Monitoring

Reporting on progress with implementing development plan objectives, two years after the adoption of the plan, is required under section 15(2) of the Act. The two-year progress report on the Longford County Development Plan was published in October 2023. In conducting this exercise, the development plan objectives were collated, with the relevant section leads completing a progress evaluation form to assist the report's preparation. The forward planning team confirmed that there is no formally established procedure for the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of progress in relation to development plan objectives. The development of such a formal procedure or monitoring system would align with the requirements of the statutory Development Plan Guidelines, which put an emphasis on the necessity of an ongoing programme of monitoring and strategic data collection and analysis as a permanent function of the planning department.

There is an increasing necessity for local authority planning departments to maintain strategic data on an ongoing basis, particularly in relation to core strategy implementation, as well as vacancy rates and renewable energy objectives. The growing importance attached to monitoring is underscored by the new requirements of the Planning & Development Act 2024. Under Section 56 of the 2024 Act, future development plans will be subject to an interim report on implementation. In addition to the previous requirements, local authorities will be required to provide a detailed statement of the progress made in relation to each of the key strategies and objectives of the plan, with an emphasis firmly placed upon implementation. Accordingly, the utilisation of strategic data should be a permanent function of the planning department - before, during and after the plan-making process – and should extend to the capture of data on residential and economic 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.

The forward planning team outlined that consideration is being given to the development of an annual core strategy monitoring system through engagement with the Council's IT department. While any support or tools that could be offered by the IT department would undoubtedly be of assistance, the development of an effective system for the monitoring of progress on planning objectives should be a strategically focused exercise in the first instance, designed through an understanding of relevant policy and the operational environment, rather than being based on the selection of an off-the-shelf software solution. In this regard, the

onus is on the planning department to establish what the key indicators of progress should be, and to identify what the relevant sources of information to monitor are, before meaningful engagement in relation to technological solutions can be advanced.

Given the current limited capacity within the planning department, there is a clear need to build capability in relation to data monitoring and analysis through training and availing of available technology, as well as considering the case for the assignment of dedicated staffing.

Preparation of Area Plans

Longford town is the only settlement in the County with a population exceeding 5,000. The Longford Town Local Area Plan 2025-2031 came into effect in June 2025. Prior to the adoption of the current county development plan, there had been 12 local area plans, 11 of which were subsumed into the county development plan. The work of the forward planning team in reviewing and preparing the settlement plans as part of the county development plan process is commended.

As part of the preparation of the Longford Town Local Area Plan, various measures were used to encourage public participation in the process, including public meetings, consultation drop-in events, an online webpage and press advertisements. Social media platforms were also used as part of the process. This was the first statutory plan that utilised the Council's new public consultations online portal for both lodging and displaying relevant development plan material.

With regard to the forward planning work programme, the planning department provided an annual work programme for the forward planning team. However, a detailed, longer-term and strategic schedule for the overall delivery of the Council's forward planning workload is not in place. Such a programme would be of benefit to the department, strategically identifying the scheduling of workloads and identifying associated resource requirements.

Performance rating and recommendations

Recognising the ongoing achievement in meeting the Council's statutory plan-making responsibilities, despite limited available capacity, the delivery of the forward planning function is considered **satisfactory**.

While the planning department has been delivering on its responsibilities, the limited specialist capacity available to the forward planning function must be recognised as a risk to continued successful performance. The new statutory expectations in relation to the monitoring of policy objectives underline the case for the assignment of additional skillsets to support the forward planning function. Additionally, it must also be acknowledged that a further risk is posed given that the department's forward planning expertise and experience is primarily invested in an individual senior planner.

To mitigate the risks noted above, in the first instance, documented procedures should be prepared to provide general guidance to staff in performing both the technical and administrative responsibilities of the forward planning function. These procedures would include lists of statutory consultees, timelines for arranging public consultations and notices when preparing, reviewing or varying statutory plans, as well as guidance regarding the delivery of previous successfully implemented communications strategies.

The procedures should also reflect the data collection requirements, analysis, drafting, consultation phases, reporting, environmental assessment, publication and adoption of statutory plans, as well as the variation/amendment and reporting processes. The documentation of such processes would be an invaluable tool for any new staff joining the team, as well as being a contingency resource as staffing arrangements change over time.

Additionally, the department should prepare a longer-term forward planning work programme and, in doing so, should identify the resourcing capacity necessary to deliver the workload through appropriate project management structures, setting out the various management, technical, operational and administrative duties involved.

As noted above, in line with statutory requirements, the programme should include the workload associated with the strategic monitoring of the implementation of development plan policy objectives. This should also detail where external resource support is available, such as planning and environmental consultants, interdepartmental GIS or IT expertise. This work programme should be used to consider the allocation of resources to, and within, the planning department (as discussed in Chapter 3).

Recommendation 3 – Forward Planning

- A forward planning procedures manual should be prepared to guide the work of staff serving the function in the delivery of important cyclical tasks.
- The Council must put robust dedicated systems in place to monitor, analyse and report on the implementation of development plan objectives. This will require building capacity and capability in relation to data analysis expertise. Consideration should be given to the assignment of dedicated responsibility to drive this important area of responsibility.
- A five-year forward planning work programme should be prepared to identify the workload, timelines and prioritisation of the various responsibilities to be delivered under the function, including plan-making, environmental assessment, consultation, implementation, monitoring, reporting, potential variations, etc.
- This work programme should also identify the resourcing capacity and management structures required for delivery. This work programme should be brought to the attention of the Council's senior management team to support a business case for the allocation of resources to and within the planning department.

No.	Recommendation	Grading	Responsibility
3	Forward Planning	High	Senior Planner



5 Land Activation and Projects



Central to delivering on the vision of the NPF is a more public policy-directed approach to the delivery and location of future development, including housing, through targeted investment and enabling the delivery of infrastructure and services. A range of policy tools, including State initiatives such as the Urban Regeneration & Development Fund, the Housing Infrastructure Investment Fund and Town Centre First, are available to local authorities to support the achievement of these objectives, necessitating coordination between central and local government.

Organisational Context

The available mechanisms for land activation and special projects are delivered on a cross-departmental basis with various areas overseeing the initiatives, as illustrated in Table 3 below.

Policy / Regulatory	Department	Delivery / Activation	Department
Planning Policy	Planning	Town Centre First Projects	Town Centre First
Vacant Site Levy	Town Centre First	Urban Regeneration Development Projects	Regeneration
Residential Zoned Land Tax	Town Centre First	Town and Village Regeneration Projects	
Development Contribution Initiatives	Planning	Rural Regeneration Development Projects	
Croí Cónaithe	Town Centre First	Outdoor Recreation Renewal Projects	
Derelict Sites Act	Town Centre First	Just Transition Projects	
		THRIVE Projects	Regeneration & Active Travel
Town Centre First Plans	Town Centre First	Active Travel Projects	

Table 3 | Longford County Council's delivery of land activation mechanisms

Both the regeneration team and the Town Centre First team sit within the Economic Development Directorate. The Town Centre First office is led by the town regeneration officer, a qualified planner operating at senior executive officer grade, who is responsible for the delivery of the Town Centre First programme and the Land Activation programme, including:

- the Vacant Sites Register
- the Residential Zoned Land Tax
- the Derelict Sites Register
- compulsory purchase orders
- the Cónaithe vacant property refurbishment grant scheme

The regeneration team's responsibilities, led by a senior engineer, include:

- Urban Renewal Development Fund
- Rural Renewal Development Fund
- Town and Village Renewal Scheme
- Town Centre First Heritage Revival Scheme (THRIVE)
- Outdoor Recreation Renewal Scheme
- Just Transition

The planning department does not play a direct role in land activation, with its responsibilities limited to the formulation of planning policy, monitoring of policy implementation and engagement during the development management process. The integration of a broader range of land development activities into the department's work could be a mechanism to attract skilled staff to work in a more varied environment.

Land Activation Mechanisms

Vacant sites register

The vacant site levy was introduced as an activation measure to encourage the bringing into beneficial use of vacant or underutilised land in urban areas, while also ensuring a more efficient return on State investment in enabling infrastructure and helping to counter unsustainable urban sprawl. The county development plan includes an objective (CPO Objective 6.49) to maintain and update a vacant sites register in accordance with the provisions of the Urban Regeneration & Housing Act 2015.

The 2015 legislation requires authorities to establish vacant sites registers. The Council has a vacant sites register on its website which lists just five vacant sites, registered between the years of 2017 to 2018. Four of these have sites have now been removed from the register, with three being removed in February 2026. It was outlined that a body of work is required to review the register, which has not yet been actioned. There were no documented procedures in place indicating the systems in place for adding and removing sites. Longford County Council did not recoup any levies in relation to vacant sites. As part of this review, the Council indicated that responsibility for the vacant sites levy had recently been redirected from the regeneration team to the Town Centre First team.

Notwithstanding the definitional criteria relevant to the vacant sites register, a wider indicator of vacancy in the county is provided through the GEO Directory Residential Building Report for Q4 2025⁵, which indicates that there are some 5,659 vacant dwellings across County Longford (7.1% of the 79,703 dwellings vacant nationally). This not only signifies a serious vacancy issue in the face of a housing crisis, it is also a indicates considerable potential.

⁵ [GeoDirectory, 'Residential Buildings Report Q4 2025', \(January 2026\)](#)

Derelict sites register

A copy of the 2024 derelict sites register submitted by the Council listed a total of 61 sites countywide for the 2000-2025 period. It appears that 27 sites were removed from the register during this period, leaving a total of 34 sites on the register. The derelict sites register is not available on the Council's website. Details are provided on the website regarding the process for reporting a derelict site and what happens if an owner's site is added to the derelict sites register.

Analysis of the register indicates that only one site was removed from the register over the years 2020 to 2023, whilst 14 sites have been removed from the register over the period March 2024 to January 2025. Of the more recent sites removed, the Council has indicated that these properties have been brought back into use. The compulsory purchase order process has started on one of the sites on the register, with two other orders due to commence shortly.

The recent progress in relation to the derelict sites register coincides with the Town Centre First Office assuming responsibility for its management. The team outlined a focus on improving how the register can be utilised. A checklist procedure has been prepared for all inspections taking place. This checklist would be usefully supplemented with a procedure for adding new sites, maintaining the register and / or removing sites from the register. The derelict sites levy was first implemented by the Council in 2025 for three sites.

Notwithstanding the figures from the derelict sites register, it is noteworthy that the GEO Directory report for Q4 2025, indicates that Longford County has 2.3% of the national derelict residential address points of 19,348, equating to 408 derelict address points in Longford.



Longford Town

Croí Cónaithe

As noted above, the Town Centre First team manage the Croí Cónaithe vacant property refurbishment grant scheme. The Q4 2025 vacant property refurbishment grant figures published by the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage ⁶ indicate that, at that point, Longford had received 219 applications in total, of which 172 were approved (19 rejected). The figures also indicate that 63 vacant property grants had been issued on completion of works and the total value of grants issued amounted to €3,494,564.

Regeneration

The regeneration team are responsible for the grant applications for significant funding streams such as the Urban Renewal Development Fund (URDF), Rural Renewal Development Fund (RRDF), Town and Village Renewal Scheme, Town Centre First Heritage Revival Scheme and Just Transition. The Longford County Council Annual Budget 2026 indicates that as of November 2025, the Regeneration team is managing projects totalling approximately €45 million, funded through a mix of national and EU programmes, with a range of projects addressing enterprise, amenity and tourism development along with public realm improvements and large scale urban and rural regeneration projects. Some significant projects include:

- Thrive – Connolly Barracks Reimagined
- Pobal le Chéile
- Granard Motte

With regard to progress on the regeneration policy objectives of the county development plan, the two-year review list actions which have been carried out which, amongst others, include the Camlin Quarter project, active travel projects, and amenity projects for 85 km of trails and skateparks. The delivery of these projects is welcomed, but it is apparent from this analysis that the primary focus for regeneration opportunities has been on community, recreational and active travel projects rather than land activation for housing delivery.

Residential Zoned Land Tax

The objective of the Residential Zoned Land Tax (RZLT) is to activate serviced land that is zoned for residential use (including mixed use incorporating residential) with the overall policy objective of increasing housing supply and promoting the development of vacant land in urban locations. There is an urgent need to increase housing supply nationwide, including Longford.

The Town Centre First office is responsible for identifying suitable lands for inclusion on RZLT maps, with assistance from the forward planning team and the Council's GIS officer. It was outlined that the updating of RZLT is a resource-intensive exercise, a point reiterated in the Council's Annual Budget Report; however, there are no standard operating procedures in place in respect of site identification criteria and / or preparing the maps. Given that this work is required to be completed annually, as well as the importance of utilising RZLT to increase housing supply and regenerate vacant urban land, there is merit in preparing such a procedures manual to ensure that efficiencies and continuity can be realised as this function switches between departments and / or staff members.

The Council's website includes details on the RZLT process, including a link to the annual draft map for 2027 and guidance on how to make a submission, with the submission period noted as closing on 1st April 2026.⁷ An analysis of the draft Longford 2027 RZLT map, indicates that lands zoned new residential within Longford Town LAP are not identified as suitable for inclusion within the draft 2027 RZLT map, contrary to the overarching principle of RZLT and the land activation process.

⁶ [DHLGH, 'Vacant Property Grant Statistics - October to December 2025', \(26 January 2026\)](#)

⁷ [LCC, 'Annual Draft RZLT Map,' \(January 2026\)](#)

Development Contributions

The Council's Development Contribution Scheme 2023-2027 provides for full or partial exemptions from the payment of development contributions at its discretion for various stated categories of development.⁸ The scheme also provides for a discretionary 50% reduction on contributions for sites which are on the derelict and vacant sites registers. In addition, the current scheme also identifies incentivised areas with the towns of Granard, Edgeworthstown, Ballymahon, Lanesborough and Drumlish where a 20% reduction is permissible. Included in the contribution scheme is the Council's intention to incentivise commercial and industrial activity through lower development contributions in the designated incentivised areas. However, there is no details provided of how these incentives are being monitored or have been effective in implementing reactivation and / or development of the target sites.



Longford Town Centre

Land Activation Objectives

The county development plan includes a chapter on regeneration, with a number of policies and objectives relevant to regeneration and to promote more active land management through the co-ordination of enabling infrastructure, particularly on publicly owned lands. The county development plan also encompasses the designation of regeneration areas in the Ardnacassa area of Longford Town and in the town of Lanesborough, a section on securing funding streams, as well as identifying regeneration opportunities in the key town of Longford under the various funding sources. Appendix 3 of the county development plan designates indicative regeneration areas in the towns of Longford, Drumlish, Granard, Lanesborough, Ballymahon and Edgeworthstown.

A central objective of the county development plan is to regenerate the towns and villages by making better use of under-used land and buildings within the existing built-up urban footprint and to drive the delivery of quality housing. The county development plan contains twelve county policy objectives relating to compact urban regeneration (housing) with an emphasis on facilitating compact growth, including:

⁸ [Development Contribution Scheme - Longford County Council](#)

- CPO 6.1 - Work with all relevant stakeholders in the promotion of urban 'compact growth' regeneration and establish a database of strategic brownfield and infill sites so that a 'pipeline' of development opportunities can be kept under review through monitoring and reporting.
- CPO 6.2 - Facilitate urban development on infill / brownfield sites through the redevelopment and regeneration of underused, vacant or derelict town centre and urban lands to create more desirable places in which people can live and work.
- CPO 6.6 - Set out measures to reduce vacancy and the underuse of existing building stock and support initiatives that promote the reuse, refurbishment and retrofitting of buildings in urban centres.
- CPO 6.9 - Deliver compact growth and regeneration through active land management.

Fundamentally, through its core strategy, the county development plan establishes housing delivery targets for the county. The target is to deliver 428 residential units annually, between 2021 and 2027, across the county.

Housing Delivery

CSO statistics for new dwelling completions in Longford indicate that annual dwelling completions have been significantly below the targeted 428 units annually⁹. Between 2018 to 2025 annual completions have ranged from a high of 132 to a low of 65. Overall, the county development plan's target, which is based on the county's housing need demand assessment, is for 2,568 units over the six-year period to 2027. However, by way of comparison, Table 4 below illustrates that 889 units have been delivered in Longford in the eight-year period before 2026, considerably below the target.

The reasons for the difference between the target and delivery go beyond the scope of this review in so far as the viability and funding of new market housing is concerned once zoned and serviced land and planning permissions are in place.

Years	Single Houses	Scheme Houses	Apartments	Total of all House Types
2025	78	6	15	99
2024	59	47	20	126
2023	56	43	20	119
2022	73	22	28	123
2021	59	59	6	124
2020	59	33	9	101
2019	47	82	3	132
2018	49	15	1	65
Total (Units)	480	307	102	889
Total (%)	54%	34.5%	11.5%	100%
Annual Average	60	38	12	111

Table 4 | Longford County new residential unit completions by year and type

⁹ CSO, 'New Dwelling Completions,' (January 2026)

Similarly, CSO data on planning permissions granted in the county for residential units also indicate that future progress in delivering on housing targets is unlikely in the short term. Permission for 185 residential units was granted across Longford in 2025, consisting of 170 houses and 15 apartments (of which 44 were one-off dwellings and 126 were multi-development houses). By way of comparison, 94 units were granted permission in 2024, 271 in 2023 and 83 units in 2022. Even if it is the case that all these units are built, the annual volume of permissions granted for residential development is significantly below the target to deliver 428 units annually.

Table 5 illustrates these trends further, with a total of 1,249 dwellings approved in the period from 2018 to 2025, equating to an average of 156 residential units granted each year, again highlighting a worrying trend in terms of housing delivery versus requirements. In terms of dwelling types granted, 40.6% were for single houses, with 48.9% in multi-unit developments.

Years	Single Houses	Multi Development Houses	Apartments	Total of All Residential Types
2025	44	126	15	185
2024	59	28	7	94
2023	43	167	61	271
2022	64	12	7	83
2021	90	15	6	111
2020	74	128	16	218
2019	80	108	2	190
2018	53	27	17	97
Total (Units)	507	611	131	1249
Total (%)	40.6%	48.9%	10.5%	100
Annual Average	63	76	16	156

Table 5 | Planning permissions granted by year for new houses and apartments

Furthermore, the GeoDirectory Residential report also indicates that as of Q4 of 2025, Longford County has the lowest number of buildings under construction, a total of 147 buildings of the 27,931 buildings under construction nationally.

The statistics presented in the two-year review of the county development plan indicate similar scenarios. For example, the two-year review indicates that over the two years from October 2021 (when the plan was adopted) until September 2023, a total of 153 residential units were granted permission in Longford town (1,304 is the plan period housing target). For Ballymahon, which has a target for 147 residential units over the plan period, no residential units were granted up to September 2023.

CSO population data has identified a 14.4% population increase in the county, the highest percentage population growth on a county basis in the country, with a 9.43% increase in Longford Town and a 6.13% increase in Edgeworthstown during the intercensal period. Given the ongoing national housing supply shortage during a period of population growth across the county, it is clear that the Council faces a significant

challenge in supporting the delivery of multi-unit housing activation at scale. The housing demand targets as provided for in national and local policy have not been met year-on-year for a considerable period, and from the information provided as part of the review it would appear that small-scale local authority social housing is the only housing activation projects which are being processed and delivered.

Performance rating and recommendations

The planning department does not play a direct role in land activation within the Council, with its role limited to the formulation of planning policy, monitoring of policy implementation and some engagement during the development management process. Accordingly, no formal rating or recommendation is issuing in the context of improving planning department operations. Nonetheless, the overall low level of housing delivery in County Longford over a sustained period of time will be a matter of some concern.

There are worthy efforts being made within the Council in relation to projects delivered through the Town Centre First and regeneration teams; however, it appears that there is limited coordination with the planning department in relation to these activities. County development plan policies place an emphasis on land activation through making better use of brownfield, vacant and derelict sites within the urban footprint, to drive the delivery of quality housing, which in turn will support renewal and rejuvenation in the towns and villages. A greater integration of the Council's land activation functions with the work of the planning department could be a mechanism to strengthen the connection between policy and implementation, as well as offering a wider range of attractive roles in terms of recruitment.

Clearly, a planning department with appropriate levels of capacity could play a vital lynchpin role in the coordination and prioritisation of actions to address dereliction, vacancy and the promotion of development on appropriate sites to support overall town centre regeneration objectives. In this regard, the previous discussion on resourcing and capacity building within the department is further underscored. Ensuring a meaningful role is played by the planning department in the implementation of measures such as URDF, RRDF, RZLT, vacant and derelict sites, etc., to achieve greater integration with development plan objectives would be valuable for the Council overall.

The importance of monitoring in relation to policy implementation has already been noted in this report, in this regard the availability of an evidence base of strategic data should be used to assess and prioritise proposals that address the Council's land activation challenge. Strengthened coordination arrangements offer worthwhile potential for increased synergies between the various mechanisms that can support land activation and the important linkages between project development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.



6 Architectural Heritage



County Longford has a wealth of architectural heritage, including many historic castle sites, such as the Norman motte-and-bailey castle dominating the town of Granard. There are also important country houses such as Castle Forbes and Carriglass Manor. Longford is particularly associated with St. Mel's Cathedral, an impressive neo-classical building which, when left in ruins by a devastating fire, was rebuilt, renovated and reopened in 2014, receiving numerous awards for the restoration project.

There are 531 protected structures in the County, as per the Record of Protected Structures (RPS), which are listed in the county development plan. County policy objectives are listed in Chapter 11 of the County Development Plan, which require the review and updating of the RPS on an ongoing basis and aim to ensure the protection of all structures included in the RPS. There are two architectural conservation areas designated in the County Development Plan, namely Ardagh town and Battery Road, Longford town. With regard to such areas, county policy objectives are listed in chapter 11 of the plan and place an emphasis on the protection and preservation of the architectural conservation areas, as well as promoting best conservation practice and identifying and designating new architectural conservation areas, as appropriate.

Local authorities also have responsibility for ensuring that owners carry out certain works to ensure the protection of these structures and have other powers to secure protection, including compulsory purchase powers. Section 57 of the Act allows owners to request a declaration as to whether proposed works are exempt. Section 59 and Section 60 notices require works to be undertaken in relation to the endangerment or restoration of protected structures. Responsibilities also extend to the management and administration of the Government-funded built heritage grant schemes as well as public engagement on all elements of the function, including the availability of information on the authority's website.

Management structure

The coordination of these responsibilities, in a manner that maximises the effect of the oversight and promotion elements, is generally best achieved with dedicated specialist expertise in place to ensure consistent assessment and proactive engagement with owners. In this regard, it must be noted that at the time of this review process there was no architectural conservation officer in Longford County Council with the various elements of the Council's overall responsibilities dispersed within and outside the planning department.

Updating of the RPS falls as a responsibility of the forward planning team, under the relevant senior planner. The development management team holds two architect positions; however, at the time the review was being conducted, the senior executive architect position was vacant, leaving the executive architect role with responsibility in relation to all development proposals that might affect protected structures (pre-planning consultation, protected structure-related planning applications, exempted development declaration requests, etc.). Further, the administration of the various architectural heritage grant schemes is overseen by the Council's heritage officer, who is assigned to the library services department within the economic development directorate.

The development management team's executive architect assists in relation to the processing of the various grant schemes, providing assessments and reports. Additionally, the executive architect is involved in relevant regeneration projects and maintains the protected structures material available on the Council's website. Consequently, in the absence of an integrated management structure for the various duties, and given the senior vacancy, the primary level of ongoing attention given to the department's architectural heritage responsibilities falls to the executive architect who also holds other responsibilities.

General Systems and Procedures

The planning department advised that details of the procedures for updating the RPS are contained on the Council website under the protected structures area. On review of the website, it is noted that there is a broad overview for customers on the general procedure of adding/deleting buildings to the RPS which generally details the stages of the process. There is no specific procedural manual or work programme / targets in place regarding review of the RPS on an ongoing basis. Documented procedures would assist in ensuring this work is managed in an ongoing, consistent manner, outlining who conducts the reviews and how survey work should be conducted. A specific procedure outlining how assessments / reports are prepared and the decision-making process involved, including notifications to property owners, should be included.

The last review of the RPS was undertaken as part of the preparation of the Longford County Development Plan 2021-2027, which was adopted on 19th October 2021. Chapter 11 (Built and Cultural Heritage) of the development plan contains the relevant built heritage policies and objectives, whilst Volume 2 Appendix 6 contains the current RPS. A spatial mapping of the County's protected structures is publicly available via the Council's website, through the local government planning portal, which identifies the structures using a symbol on a GIS map. The development plan includes a policy objective (11.14) to review and update the RPS on an ongoing basis and to make additions and deletions as appropriate. It would not appear that any updates to the RPS have been made since 2021.

Architectural conservation areas are also an important statutory tool in conserving the character of places, areas, groups of structures or townscapes which are of special interest or that contribute to the appreciation of protected structures. The 'Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines' indicate that architectural conservation areas can be an appropriate form of protection in lieu of placing structures on the RPS, given that works to a structure's exterior will only be exempt if they do not materially affect its character. The designation of architectural conservation areas is a responsibility of the forward planning team and is carried out during the development plan making process

As noted above, there are two architectural conservation areas included in the county development plan, located in Ardagh town and Battery Road in Longford town. The extent of these architectural conservation areas is mapped and detailed within Volume 2 Appendix 6 and is available online. However, it would be useful if these maps were made more accessible online and / or identified on a publicly available GIS platform, to assist any potential interested parties in being aware of the architectural conservation area designation.

The planning department indicated that five requests were received regarding whether works are exempted or not (section 57 declarations) during the first half of 2025, which were processed by the executive architect using a standard template report. There would not appear to be a documented procedure for the processing of such requests. While it is acknowledged that this is not an overly intensive activity, in terms of guidance for staff and consistency in determinations, it would be of benefit if an assessment procedure was prepared as a resource for the wider planning department.

Under the Act, a local authority may issue section 59 and section 60 notices to owners of properties requiring works to be undertaken in relation to endangerment or restoration of protected structures. There is no formalised process in place for the identification and referral of endangerment / restoration concerns. The planning department advised that such issues would generally arise based on complaints received. Over the past six years, there have been five enforcement cases in relation to protected structures, while a section 59 notice was issued in relation to a site that contains ten protected structures and is of a complex nature with a significant planning history. The ongoing engagement by the Council with the owners of this important site is positive and should continue to be supported.

As noted, the Council's Heritage Officer, with support from the executive architect, is responsible for the management of the various Government-funded built heritage grant schemes. Funding is administered to owners / occupiers under the Built Heritage Investment Scheme, the Historic Structures Fund, the Community Monuments Fund, the Built Heritage Investment Scheme and the Historic Thatched Buildings Stream. No data was made available regarding the volume of architectural conservation-related grant projects that have been funded through these schemes. The monitoring of the effectiveness of these funding streams is important with respect to promoting the protection of historic structures, best conservation practice, adaptive reuse and sustainable development in line with national policy. Given this importance, the Council should consider such monitoring, which would form part of a new set of procedures for the Council's overall architectural heritage function.



Castle Forbes, Co. Longford

Public Engagement

As noted above, the Council website contains an outline of the general procedure of adding / deleting a site or building to the RPS. This section of the website also contains a link to the most recent record of the RPS and concludes with a link to architectural heritage guidelines for planning authorities. It is also noted that in a separate section of the website, under the planning-related documents section, there is an architectural heritage section providing links to an explanatory note on grants for conservation of protected structures, guidelines and a guide to architectural heritage, as well as an information leaflet on conservation grants. There is another section of the website, which is entitled architectural guidance and publications, which contains links to departmental guidance and links to a series of publications for traditionally built buildings. A section 57 request form is located separately on the planning forms / other section of the website. The Council's website also includes details of grant schemes, including application forms and guidance.

This information is important to facilitate public understanding and engagement with the process and reduce resource-intensive phone/email queries to the office; however, consideration should be given towards collating all this information in one area of the website. Consideration could also be given towards updating the content and presentation of the information to improve its accessibility. Additionally, details regarding how to report concerns in relation to the endangerment of protected structures would be of benefit in relation to seeking public assistance to support a proactive approach to the protection of architectural heritage.

Performance rating and recommendations

Given that the planning department has demonstrated capacity to take action in relation to endangered structures, as well as maintaining the basic requirements of administering its statutory responsibilities, the Council's management of its architectural heritage function can be considered **satisfactory**.

However, a number of concerns arise given the lack of a clear management structure to coordinate the overall direction and delivery of the Council's architectural heritage responsibilities. The Council would significantly benefit from the assignment of a dedicated architectural conservation officer / manager who could coordinate the range of tasks associated with the function and integrate the monitoring, enforcement, public engagement and funding aspects to achieve best results.

The creation of a dedicated role should be used to drive a proactive approach to the management of the Council's architectural heritage responsibilities, including ensuring that structures of relevance are monitored and assessed on an ongoing basis for inclusion in the record of protected structures (or removal as the case may be). Similarly, the case for the designation of additional architectural conservation areas should be given appropriate consideration and progressed as considered necessary. Additionally, the planning department's engagement with owners through the development management process should be overseen in a more structured manner to integrate with the Council's overall approach to monitoring.

Further, there is significant scope for the Council to improve its approach towards engaging with the public, whether this be in relation to assisting the public to raise concerns regarding any risks to structures or the promotion of grant funding streams. In this regard, improving the presentation of information on the Council's website would be useful, and consideration should be given towards the creation of a single point where all relevant information is available, from facilitating the reporting of issues of concern to guidance regarding accessing funding in relation to buildings of heritage value. Furthermore, the person in such a dedicated role should be empowered to take a leadership role in engaging with owners in relation to endangerment and enforcement issues as well as to promote and prioritise the incentives that are available.

Additionally, the absence of formalised procedures across the various architectural heritage duties is a matter that should be addressed, notwithstanding any such appointment. Procedures that should be documented include (but are not limited to):

- The ongoing updating of the record of protected structures.
- Identifying, reviewing, designating and mapping architectural conservation areas.
- Processing and assessing section 57 applications in relation to exempted works.
- Coordination of conservation input in relation to planning applications and other Council projects.
- Surveying buildings at risk, the use of section 59 and 60 notices as required, and the integration of monitoring of protected structures with enforcement activity.
- Monitoring the administration and evaluating the effectiveness of the built heritage grant schemes.

It is significant that funding for the recruitment of new heritage professionals within local authorities was announced in 2025. The initiative is being implemented by the Heritage Council in collaboration with the County & City Management Association and with the support of the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage.

Recommendation 4 – Architectural Heritage Management

A role should be created within the planning department for a dedicated architectural conservation officer / manager. This individual should be assigned responsibility and given a leadership role to proactively drive the coordination of the Council’s various architectural conservation duties, including the designation of sites, assessing and monitoring development proposals, investigating potential enforcement issues, engaging with the public and owners and overseeing the administrative framework for the approval of grant funding. Notwithstanding the timeframe in which such a role can be established, the planning department should give attention to the documentation of procedures for the various ongoing tasks associated with the protection of architectural heritage.

No.	Recommendation	Grading	Responsibility
4	Architectural Heritage Management	High	Director of Services



7 Development Management



The range of tasks assigned to development management teams across local authorities are generally standardised. These include the obligations to ensure all steps in the process are managed, recorded and registered in accordance with specific legislative requirements set out by the Act and the Regulations. Accordingly, the development management team in Longford County Council have responsibility for:

- pre-planning (section 247) consultations;
- planning applications;
- preparing screening reports for AA and EIA;
- observations in relation to decisions appealed to An Coimisiún Pleanála;
- planning compliance submissions;
- exempted development (Section 5) declarations;
- (section 57) declarations in relation to proposed works to protected structures;
- (section 96) certification of exemption, in relation to (Part V) social and affordable housing obligations;
- (section 254) licences in relation to street furniture and other appliances, etc. on public roads; and
- event licensing and the control of funfairs.

Development Management Team

As noted earlier in the report, the development management team is structured around an approved staffing complement of nine technical and six administrative staff. The technical element of the team comprises a senior planner, a senior executive planner, three executive planners, an assistant planner, a technician (Grade II), a senior executive architect and an executive architect. The administrative element comprises six team members: an administrative officer, a staff officer, an assistant staff officer and three clerical officers.

While this would be a reasonable structure for the delivery of current functions, at the time the review was being conducted there were four vacancies within the technical element of the team – the senior executive planner, an executive planner, the assistant planner, and the senior executive architect roles. Additionally, the team's senior planner was on a period of temporary but extended leave. Consequently, the development management function was being delivered with a technical team of four, rather than nine, of which only two were planners. Necessarily, the two available executive planners were both operating in an acting-up capacity to ensure an element of management structure across the operational area.

The burden of duties placed on just two planners in carrying out all the necessary technical responsibilities of the development management function is high, leaving little scope for reallocating work if one of the planners is not available. While this workload includes assessing all planning applications (involving site inspections and preparing detailed reports), it also includes, at a minimum, preparing submissions to An Coimisiún Pleanála in relation to appeals, facilitating a significant number of pre-planning consultations, overseeing planning compliance submissions, exempted development declarations, and providing input into other sections in respect of Part 8 projects.

It must be acknowledged that these planners have dedicated significant amounts of time to working out of hours to deliver on the volume of necessary tasks, which, while commendable, is not a satisfactory position

to be in having regard to the need to sustain staff wellbeing over the long-term. Neither is it sustainable, posing a significant risk to the Council's ability to continue meeting its statutory development management obligations.

The pressures associated with the overallocation of responsibilities unsurprisingly leave little time for appropriate attention to be given to building operational resilience, including the documentation and ongoing strengthening of procedures, the consideration of wider policy developments, opportunities for continued learning and development, and wider team integration activities, including structured team meetings. Limited planner capacity and the acting-up arrangements also weaken the decision-making pathway, reducing opportunities for delegation, collaboration, support, and oversight.

Clearly, filling the unoccupied positions is a priority, and it is noted that there is an open recruitment competition ongoing. However, in a challenging market for local authority employers, recruitment, staff retention and grade inflation are challenges that will persist for some time across the sector and, in this regard, contingency planning is necessary in the short-term to build greater resilience into the planning department's operating structures to ensure the various duties associated with the development management function continue to be delivered effectively. In the longer term, developing a strategy around recruitment and retention based on an attractive and purposeful range of planning and planning-adjacent work is worthy of consideration.

Standard Operating Procedures

The planning department uses the iPlan system to manage the processing of planning applications and compliance submissions. The planning department provided copies of the following documented standard operating procedures:

- Large-scale Residential Developments
- Validation procedure - technical
- Validation procedures - admin
- Planning Admin Procedure Manual
- Planning application validation checklist
- Section 5 Declaration procedure
- Pre-planning procedure/procedure on adherence to the guiding principles set out in OPR CSP04 (Pre-Application Consultation Services, and
- Part 8 procedure document (Draft)

While acknowledging the suite of procedural documents in place, it is noted that there are elements included in the table of contents of the Planning Admin Procedure Manual which do not appear in the document itself and may be available separately. It would be beneficial for staff to have all the various procedures consolidated in a single document. An opportunity in this regard is presented by the imminent requirement to update administrative procedures in line with the commencement of the Planning & Development Act 2024. The additional documentation of procedures such as the allocation of files and preparation of planning reports would also be welcome.

Development management output

Planning data published by DHLGH provides details on all local authorities' outputs and allows comparison between authorities and national trends.¹⁰

¹⁰ Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, '[Annual Planning Statistics](#) 2017-2023', (June 2024).

The total number of valid applications received by Longford County Council has remained relatively consistent at fewer than 300 annually, except in 2021 when 335 valid applications were received. As illustrated in Figure 3, this is significantly below the national average for a planning department, with only Leitrim County Council receiving fewer valid applications during 2023. While this is indicative of the low level of development activity in the county, it is also reflective of the county's lower-than-average population.

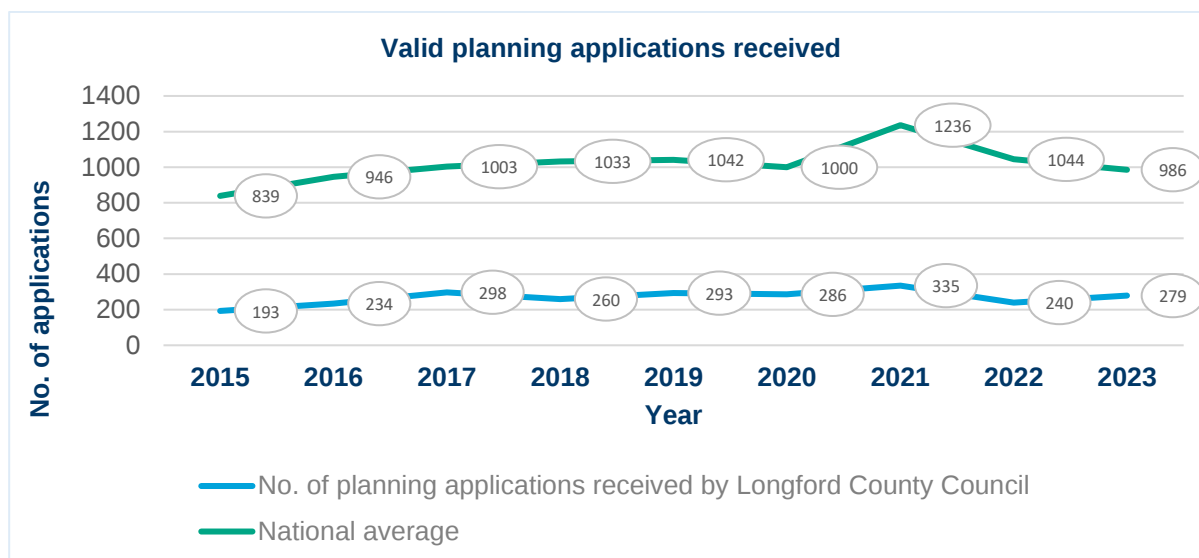


Figure 3 | Valid applications received¹¹

Longford had the second-lowest number of houses granted permission in 2024, with 87 (55 in Leitrim). Of the 87 units granted, 59 were one-off/single dwellings, while 28 units were approved across four multi-unit developments. In addition, approval was issued for seven apartments, resulting in a total of 94 residential units approved in 2024¹².

The total residential units permitted in Longford in 2024 represent 0.29% of the total residential units approved in the State in 2024. While the low levels of activity are in some way reflective of population, it is worth noting that the county's population was recorded at 46,751 in Census 2022¹³ which equates to 0.91% of the national population. Accordingly, the level of residential approvals granted during 2024, relative to population, is particularly low, particularly in the context of the housing supply shortage nationally and a fast-growing population locally.

Invalidation of planning applications

The team's technician is responsible for managing the planning application validation process and checking site notices. Procedures are in place to assist with this process, including both technical and administrative procedures and a validation checklist.

The Council's invalidation rate remained relatively consistent with the national average between the years of 2015 to 2019. In 2020 and 2021, the percentage of invalid applications fell to 6%, significantly below the national averages of 17% and 15% for those years. However, during 2023, the rate of invalid applications increased significantly to 27% (7% higher than the national average). Although official figures were not yet finalised while the review was being conducted, it was indicated that the invalidation rate had increased further during 2024.

¹¹ ibid

¹² CSO, '[Planning Permissions](#)', (March 2025)

¹³ CSO, '[Census 2022](#)', (May 2023)

The e-Planning system was implemented in Longford County Council in March 2023, allowing for the electronic submission of applications. Over 90% of applications are now received electronically. It is noted that the increasing invalidation rate in Longford corresponds with the implementation of the e-Planning system. The planning department's development management team noted that minor errors by planning agents, such as the omission of red site boundaries and blue ownership boundaries on submitted planning applications, are a recurring factor in invalidations. It was indicated that a zero-tolerance approach is taken to such omissions. Given the drain on the planning department's own limited resources that invalidations represent, it would be important that detailed consideration be given to analysing the key reasons for the high invalidation rate and also towards initiatives, such as information briefings with relevant agents, that would encourage higher quality in applications in terms of the standard regulatory requirements.

Decisions granted

On a national basis, in or around 90% of planning applications were granted permission annually between the years 2015 and 2023. Aside from 2017, Longford's grant rate has been above the national average during this period, ranging from 2% higher on one occasion to 7% higher on two occasions. In 2023, decisions to grant were 95% compared with the national average of 89%. Additionally, aside from 2016, Longford's rate of making a decision within eight weeks has been above the national average.

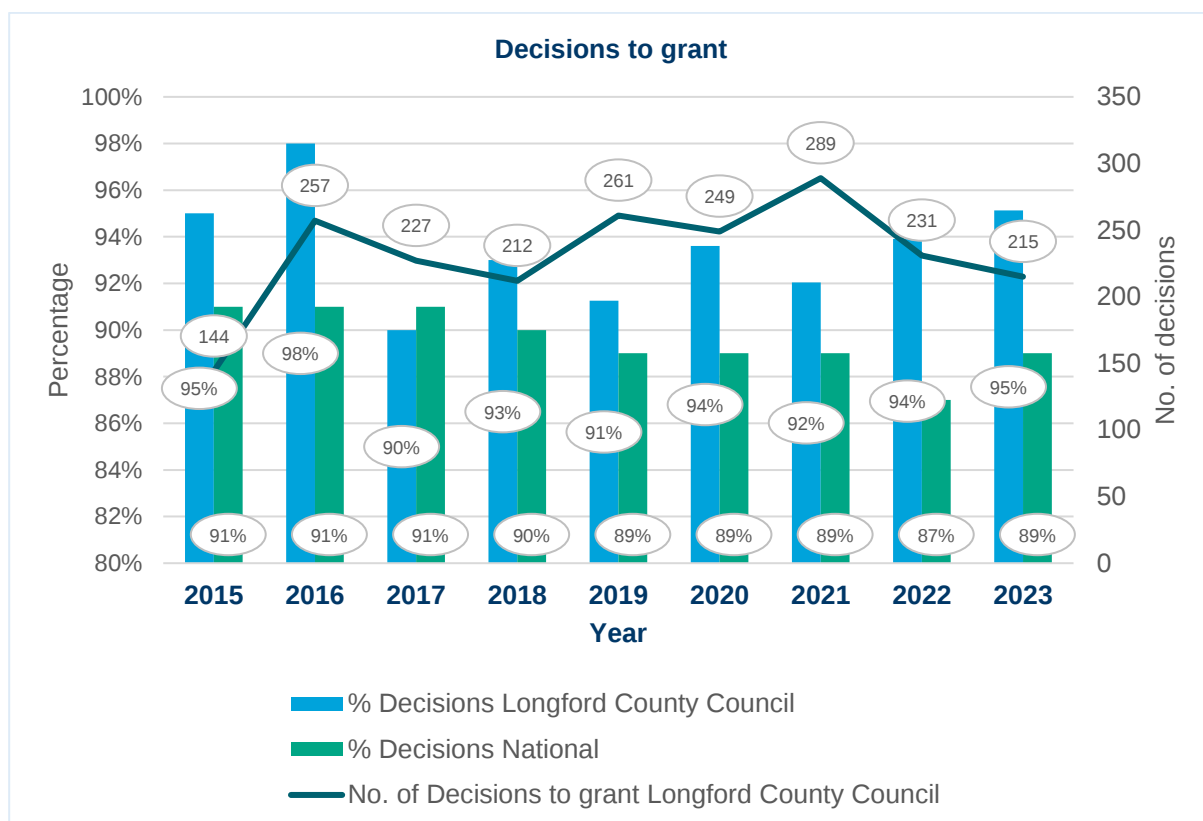


Figure 4 | Decisions to grant¹⁴

Appeals to An Coimisiún Pleanála

Since 2015, the average national rate for planning applications appealed to An Coimisiún Pleanála has been approximately 7% (it was 6% in 2020 and 2024). Generally, the appeal rate in Longford has been quite low.

¹⁴ Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, ['Annual Planning Statistics 2015-2023'](#), (June 2024).

The appeal rate has only exceeded the national average in the years 2023 and 2024, hitting a high of 8% of decisions being appealed.

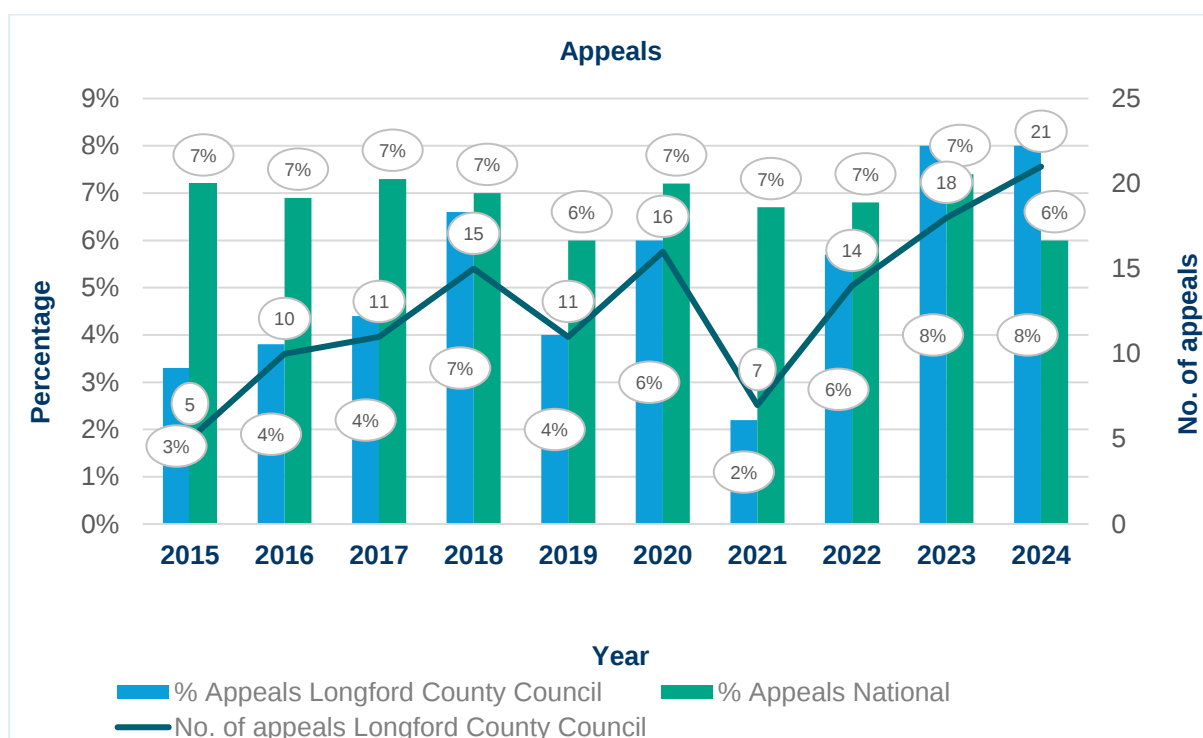


Figure 5 | Appeals to An Coimisiún Pleanála

Reversal rates on appeal

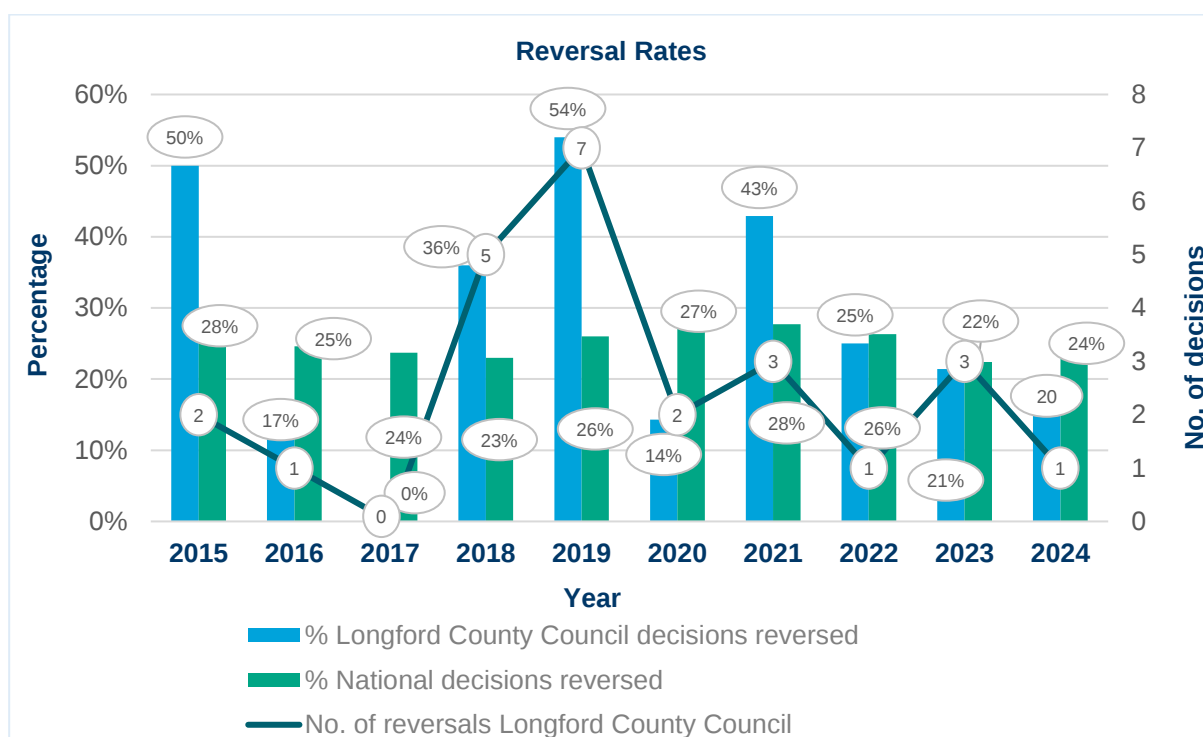


Figure 6 | Reversal rates

The percentage of Longford County Council decisions reversed by An Coimisiún Pleanála has varied over time from 0% in 2017 to a high of 54% in 2019. In considering these trends, the limited volume of decisions appealed must be acknowledged. It is of note that of the 18 appeals made in 2023, the highest number over the period, just three were reversed. The development management team outlined that a register of reversed decisions is kept, assisting the team as a learning resource.

Planning conditions

The development management team does not maintain its own book of standard planning conditions but indicated that it uses 'OPR Practice Note PN03 – Planning Conditions', which includes a planning conditions compendium. This OPR resource is intended to support authorities in devising their own manual of conditions, and the team should consider preparing its own set of standard planning conditions, tailored to the local operational environment, in consultation with other Council departments.

When compliance submissions are submitted to the Council, the planner is notified through an automated system. From a randomised sample of the Council's online planning files, it would appear that compliance submissions are available on file along with the decision letters issued to applicants.

A compliance submissions spreadsheet is used to track and manage the processing of requests. A review of this spreadsheet indicates that 144 out of 146 compliance requests have been processed within the statutory 8-week determination timeframe. There is no written procedure for the processing of planning compliance, and a sample compliance report has not been submitted as part of this review. A procedure should be developed to include the various steps for managing the processing of compliance submissions between the planning department and the wider Council, as well as establishing an agreed template report for considering compliance submissions.

Exempted development declarations

The planning section of the Council's website sets out the exempted development declaration ('Section 5') process and includes a declaration request form and a register listing declarations issued since 2018. However, documentation associated with the requests/declarations is not made available, as expected under section 5(7B) of the Act.

A Section 5 Declaration procedure is used by the administrative staff within the team to manage and process requests. However, there is no documented guidance to assist planners in assessing requests for exempted development declarations. When assessing an exempted development declaration, screening for AA and EIA must be undertaken. Under section 4(4) of the Act, any development that cannot be screened out for AA and/or EIA cannot be exempt from the requirement for planning permission. This requirement is further highlighted under section 5(7A) of the Act, which requires authorities to specify, in relation to certain categories of development, in their declaration/decision whether the development would be likely to have significant effects on the environment by virtue of the nature, size or location of such development and require an EIA.

A sample Section 5 planning report was provided for the review which did not include a screening report for EIA / AA. Further, the report in question assessed the proposed development against the county development plan's policy objectives, but not against the relevant statutory provisions, which would have been the correct test. A guidance manual for technical staff is therefore critical to ensure that all the expected procedures are correctly applied. These matters, including the display of the required documentation on the website, should be addressed to ensure that adherence to the statutory requirements is robust.

Pre-planning consultations

Pre-planning consultations, under section 247 of the Act, are a useful mechanism within the planning process, allowing a local authority to highlight any relevant considerations to an applicant in relation to a proposed development. A request form is available on the Council's website through which prospective applicants may seek a consultation. Generally, consultations are conducted by phone or online meeting, with limited occurrence of in-person meetings. The administrative team coordinate pre-planning requests, arranging the consultations in cooperation with the relevant planner and other Council officials as necessary.

While recognising the significant demand on limited resources, it is notable that the development management team continues to provide this function effectively, with 107 consultations facilitated during 2024 and 46 in the first six months of 2025. Waiting times from receipt of the request to the meeting date were noted as being between one and three weeks. The team conveyed that the preparation work carried out in advance of a consultation is often conducted outside of standard working hours.

The development management team acknowledged the usefulness of the OPR's case study paper¹⁵, confirming that the principles of a good quality consultation system, as set out in the paper, are applied. Regarding the overall value of pre-planning consultations, the team noted an observable difference in quality and outcomes between applications that engaged with the pre-planning service and those that did not.

Section 254 licences

The Council grants licences in respect of applications under section 254 of the Act for temporary signage, scaffolding and hoarding, street furniture, CCTV systems, broadband poles to a height of 20m, etc. All such licences are submitted through the planning department. A total of 34 licence applications were processed over the previous three years, with the majority relating to scaffolding / hoarding.

There is an administrative procedure in place for Section 254 licences. There is a planner's template report for each type of licence, as well as a draft policy document for assessing signage, which is a useful resource. An application form in respect of a Section 254 licence is available on the Council's website. A small number of the Section 254 licences are identified symbolically on the online planning portal, but none are geographically mapped by site area on this online platform.

Online planning services

The Council's website is the principal means by which members of the public, planning agents, applicants and other interested parties can engage with the development management process. The Council's website has a dedicated planning page, which provides access to planning services by theme. All planning applications submitted since 2000 are available to view online via the Council's planning portal. Planning applications can also be found online via the planning maps function.

As noted above, the Council implemented the e-Planning system in March 2023 and the Council Budget Report for 2025 notes that over 90% of applications are received electronically. There is a dedicated email account to receive submissions, and submissions can be submitted online via the website with the creation of a login. Aside from initial teething issues, the planning department has noted no negative operational or user experience issues related to e-Planning.

Under the Regulations, authorities are required to upload all planning application documents onto their websites not later than five working days after receipt. The Council noted no challenge with meeting the

¹⁵ Office of the Planning Regulator, '[OPR Case Study Paper CSP04: Pre-Application \(S247\) Consultation Services](#)', (2021)

statutory deadlines for uploading documents online, confirming that over the last three years, the average time for planning applications to be made available online is three working days.

Event Licencing

No applications for event licences or funfairs have been received over the last few years. Indeed, the Council have commented that they have never received an events licence application. There is no relevant information contained on the planning pages of the Council's website, although it is noted that regulatory information regarding event licences is linked on the Fire Service page of the Council. There are no procedures in place in relation to event licensing.

Environmental Assessment

EIA screening must be undertaken by local authorities in carrying out their statutory functions under the Act. The 'OPR Practice Note PN02 – Environmental Impact Assessment Screening'¹⁶ provides a step-by-step guide to the screening process. A random sample of recent planning application reports shows that EIA screening determinations are being made, as required under Section 176B(1) of the Act, with the OPR template form being used. There are no written procedures for environmental assessment; the planning department should address this matter in the short term. There is no specific environmental / ecological expertise available to the planning department from within the Council. External consultants are not procured to assist with environmental reports, which are produced internally.

Screening for AA is intended to be an initial examination, which is carried out by the Council as the designated 'competent authority'. If significant effects cannot be excluded based on objective information, without extensive investigation or the application of mitigation, a project should be considered to have a likely significant effect, and an AA should be carried out. A sample of recent planning application reports indicates that OPR Practice Note PN 01 – Appropriate Assessment Screening for Development Management¹⁷, including the template screening form, is being used by the development management team.

In accordance with the 'Planning System and Flood Risk Management Guidelines', flood risk policies and objectives as set out in statutory development plans are the basis for considering planning applications. The Council has no documented procedure in relation to assessing flood risk. Applications for which a site-specific flood risk assessment has been submitted are referred to various sections within the Council, such as the relevant area engineer and the environment and roads sections. The Council has no section directly responsible for flood-related issues. The referral reports, as well as the assessment of the planner, are then used to form the overall assessment and recommendation / decision.

The Council confirmed that staff have attended training on environmental assessment matters, such as appropriate assessment and flood risk management. Given the complex and evolving scope of these areas of planning practice, it is important that staff continue to be supported to undertake training on an ongoing basis to ensure the planning department has an appropriate level of technical expertise available to manage complex planning applications.

Performance rating and recommendations

Given the team's wider performance outputs, i.e. planning decisions made within the statutory timeframe, the low level of appealed decisions upheld, pre-planning consultation obligations being met, etc., the Council's delivery of its core development management responsibilities is **satisfactory**.

¹⁶ Office of the Planning Regulator, '[OPR Practice Note PN02 – Environmental Impact Assessment Screening](#)', (2021)

¹⁷ Office of the Planning Regulator, '[Appropriate Assessment Screening for Development Management](#)', (2021)

However, the limited capacity within the development management team, because of unfilled positions, poses a critical risk to the ongoing effective performance of the Council's development management responsibilities. While low rates of development activity in County Longford are of concern in other regards, the relatively low level of planning cases requiring attention (and their generally uncomplicated nature) appears to have been a key factor in sustaining the team's functionality across its various duties heretofore.

If the Council as a whole is to achieve its broader strategic objectives for social and economic development, including housing and infrastructure provision, it is crucial that its development management function has adequate capacity to respond to, and guide, these delivery needs. Notwithstanding the Council's ambitions, the burden currently placed on the team, particularly its limited planner cohort, is unsustainable and, if not addressed, will likely lead to a breakdown in service delivery and quality. It is of great credit to the relevant staff members that they have managed the many responsibilities assigned to them to this point.

Given the emphasis of Recommendation 1, a new recommendation in relation to resourcing and capacity is not being made specifically in relation to the development management team. However, it is clear that priority must be given towards maintaining, and strengthening, the team's ability to deliver on the Council's ongoing core statutory responsibilities.

Given the pressure that the team have been under, it is not surprising that there are areas that require attention in terms of strengthened procedures. The development of a comprehensive suite of technical and administrative procedure manuals, including templates, would be of great benefit to the team, building greater assurance in relation to consistency in process and outcomes. Clear procedures will be particularly important given the expectation for the ongoing onboarding of new staff members. While procedures should be documented across the various operational responsibilities, establishing a standard operating procedure (including a template) for the processing of exempted development (Section 5) declarations should be a priority, so as to ensure accurate assessment regarding statutory environmental planning standards and compliance with publication obligations.

Separately, while no formal recommendation is issued, given the resource implications of repeat processing, the department should analyse the factors associated with the high planning application invalidation rate and give consideration towards initiatives to encourage higher quality in applications. This could include identifying whether invalid applications originate from common sources or relate to particular recurring issues. Based on this analysis, actions such as engaging with particular agents, providing wider briefing sessions, or making other public guidance available might be considered.

Recommendation 5 – Development Management Procedures

Over the next 12 months, the development management team's procedural documentation should be updated (including standard templates). Where relevant, additional documented procedures should be put in place for both technical and administrative tasks, including (but not limited to): the processing of exempted development declarations (including a template for environmental screening), file allocation, planning report preparation, the processing of compliance submissions, a tailored set of planning conditions, etc.

No.	Recommendation	Grading	Responsibility
5	Development Management Procedures	High	Senior Planner

8 Enforcement



As noted already, the planning enforcement function is managed through a team, overseen by a senior planner, which also coordinates the Council's forward planning function. As established earlier in the report, the senior planner is largely consumed with the delivery of the forward planning responsibilities; however, one of the team's two technicians (Grade I) is dedicated to enforcement operations (with the other focused on forward planning). A senior staff officer and a clerical officer are available to the enforcement function, although they may be required for other team duties also. The team's senior executive planner position was vacant at the time the review was being conducted, presumably leaving the team's graduate planner, who will also have forward-planning responsibilities, as the primary source of planning expertise available for enforcement.

The team has a draft planning enforcement procedures manual (dated April 2025) available. The manual sets out the legislative basis for the enforcement function, enforcement timelines, case registration, the various steps that are taken on receipt of a complaint from file set-up to enforcement action or closure, the breakdown of roles between the enforcement officer/administration team and incorporates standard letter templates as well as a template Chief Executive's Order and an enforcement report template.

Presently, the Council records the details of all open and closed enforcement cases on a Word document entitled 'enforcement register current'. It is stored internally by the Council on the SharePoint system and is not publicly available. The Council have stated that enforcement cases are mapped when a warning letter is issued; however, such GIS mapping is not available to members of the public, with only some of the enforcement cases identified as a symbol on a GIS map on the Local Government Ireland Planning portal, which is hosted on the Council website. However, this mapping procedure is not included in the manual, and it is important that the process of digitally mapping enforcement sites is detailed, outlining how and when it should be completed.

In terms of tracking and monitoring enforcement complaints, this is done through an in-house Excel spreadsheet populated by the technician. Whilst acknowledging that this spreadsheet represents a procedure of sorts in terms of case management, there is no overarching enforcement case management system. It is noted that the enforcement team are endeavouring to set up such a system with the Council IT section and this, in combination with establishing a publicly available mapping system via GIS or otherwise, would be a valuable addition for managing the function.

Enforcement activity

Enforcement output from 2015 to 2024 is illustrated in the graph below, which shows that the number of enforcement cases closed year-on-year is significantly less than the number of cases on hand. The graph illustrates that the on-hand caseload has almost doubled over a ten-year period, from 44 in 2015 to 85 at year-end in 2024. The total number of cases investigated has increased from 23 in 2015 to 40 in 2024. Notwithstanding the increasing volume of on-hand caseload, it is recognised that the overall the volume of cases being managed by the team is relatively low.

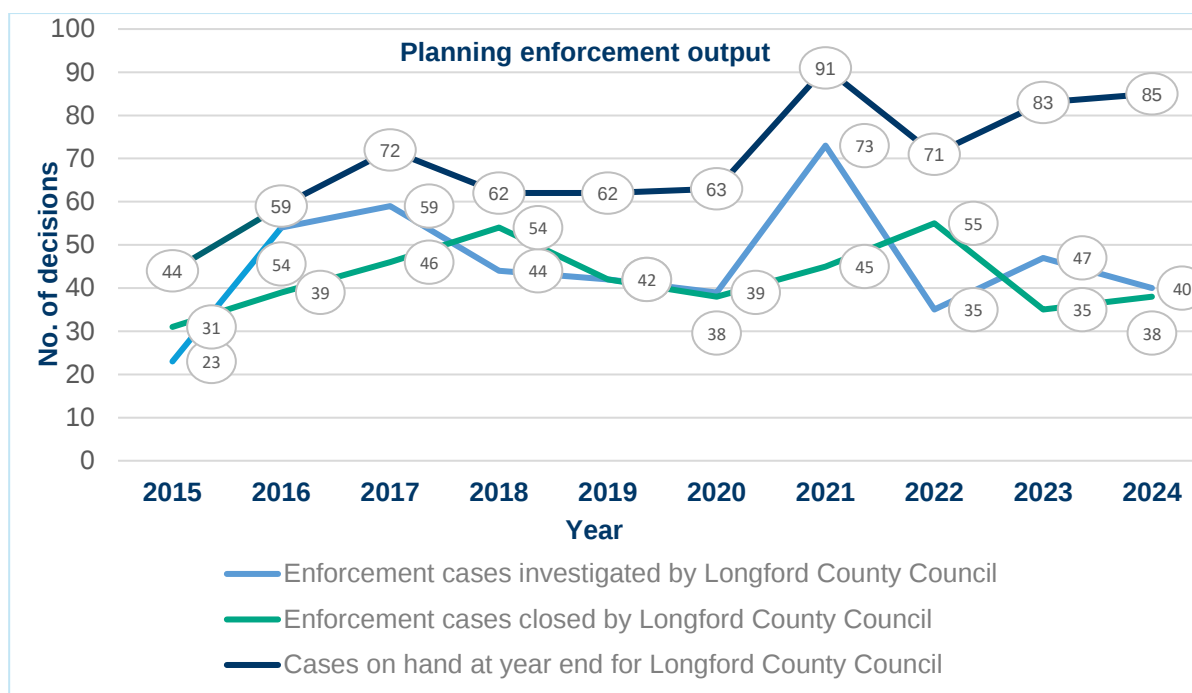


Figure 7 | Planning Enforcement output¹⁸

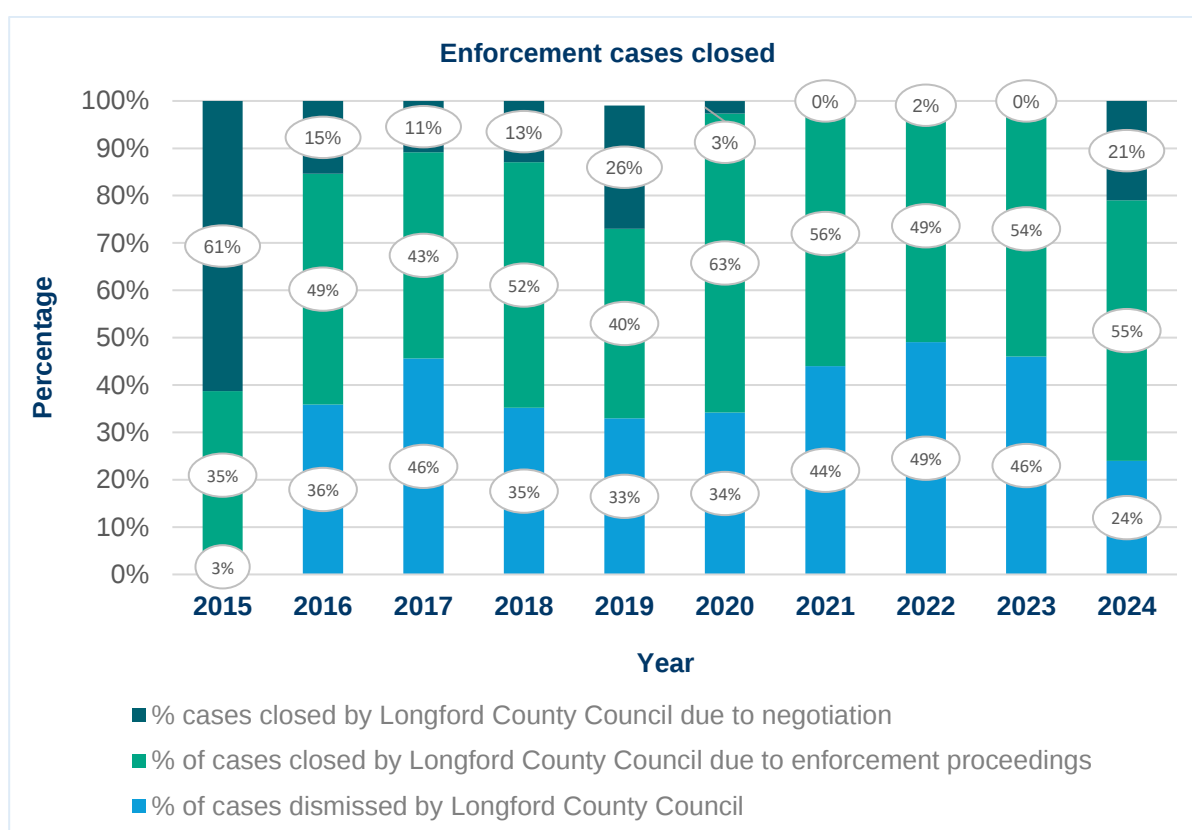


Figure 8 | Enforcement cases closed¹⁹

¹⁸ NOAC, 'Publications - National Oversight & Audit Commission' (2025)

¹⁹ ibid

Figure 8 above, based on NOAC statistics, illustrates the variation in how cases were closed over the period between 2015 and 2024 (the applicable definitions are cases closed by dismissal as trivial / minor or without foundation, by negotiation, or following enforcement proceedings). At the general level, these figures show that enforcement proceedings are often necessary to ensure a successful outcome (55% in 2024), with negotiation proving to be a less successful pathway over time (decreasing from a high of 61% in 2015 to 0% in 2023, with an increase to 21% in 2024). The percentage of cases dismissed as trivial increased significantly from 3% in 2015 to 46% in 2023, then decreased to 24% in 2024. The Council provided no notable reason why the number of trivial cases increased so much over the period; however, this may be attributable to the initial desktop assessment carried out by the enforcement officer to confirm that the complaint is not frivolous or vexatious, as documented in the enforcement manual.

Enforcement activity over recent years (2022 to 2024) is illustrated in Figure 9 below. Over this period, the number of warning letters issued has fallen from 57 to 24, and the number of enforcement notices served also decreased. The declining number of warning letters issued may be linked to a new practice to issue pre-warning letters, with 14 such letters being issued over the period 2023 to July 2025. Seven legal proceedings were initiated by the Council in 2022; however, no further legal proceedings have been initiated since 2022.

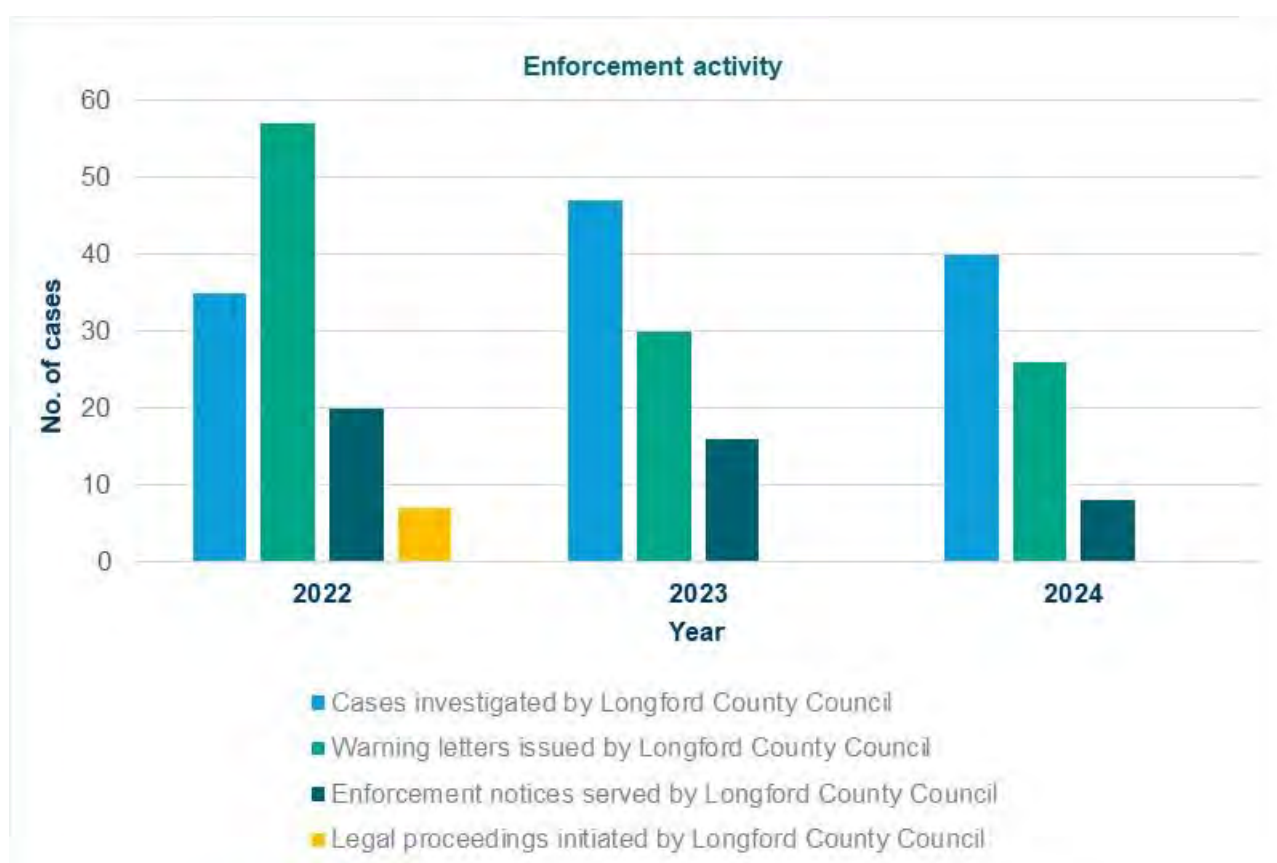


Figure 9 | Enforcement activity 2022-2024 ²⁰

The Council's website is the primary communication channel for members of the public raising planning enforcement complaints. The website provides adequate information in relation to the definition of unauthorised development, complaints procedures and what can and cannot be investigated as well as detailing the statutory timeframes for taking enforcement action. The Council accepts enforcement complaints in writing and by email, with a complaint form and a dedicated email address provided on the website. The website also provides a telephone number and the advisory that complaints cannot be logged

²⁰ Data provided by Longford County Council upon OPR s.31AV request (2025)

until a complaint form has been completed. There is no provision to make an enforcement complaint online. It is noted that the planning department is currently liaising with the IT section in relation to creating an online complaints submission facility. Most enforcement complaints come from external sources.

Peat extraction

In June 2025, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) published its report on large-scale illegal peat extraction in Ireland,²¹ including four sites in Longford, where large-scale commercial peat extraction is happening. None of the four sites are mapped as enforcement cases on the local government Ireland online planning portal GIS map.

Under Section 63 of the Environmental Protection Agency Act, the EPA has directed the local authority to take appropriate regulatory actions against illegal commercial peat extraction, and to date, Section 63(1) notices have been issued by the EPA requiring country-wide and site-specific enforcement plans for large-scale peat extraction. Regarding the four sites identified in Longford, the Council are engaging with the EPA in respect of this matter and a summary update on this enforcement action for unauthorised peat extraction was provided, as well as an outline of the challenges in monitoring such seasonal activities.

The county development plan has several policies specifically to ensure the protection, conservation, management and restoration of the peatlands. Furthermore, under landscape character climate change actions (A14.4) the county development plan contains a commitment to prepare a peatland strategy encouraging the rewilding, restoration and protection of peat bogs after turf cutting and/or peat extraction has ceased.

Quarries

Section 261 of the Act requires that quarries be registered with the local authority. The Council have stated that a public quarry register is available; however, a copy of the register was not provided and is not available on the Council website, which does contain links to legislative provisions and departmental guidance in relation to quarries. The Council should address this issue, making the quarry register publicly available via its website.

In terms of assessing development proposals, the development plan (under DMS 16.175) requires that all extractive industry development complies with the requirements of Section 261 and Section 261A of the Act, the Quarries and Ancillary Activities Guidelines 2004 (or any updates thereof), EPA Guidelines for Environmental Management in the Extractive Industry 2006 (or any updates thereof) and Geological Heritage Guidelines for the Extractive Industry.

It is noted that the county development plan does not list the number of quarries in tabular form or include a map identifying their locations. The development plan indicates that there are 15 geological sites in the area, whilst the most recent data from the EPA extractive industries register indicates that there are 13 sites on the register. From the information provided as part of the review process, it is unclear how actively this register is monitored and updated.

Section 261A of the Act required local authorities to complete a survey of every quarry within their functional area to identify quarries that should have been subject to EIA or AA and whether this had been carried out. Accordingly, relevant notices of determinations were to be published in a newspaper and on local authorities' websites. The planning department did not make the details of this process available. Further, there does not

²¹ [EPA, 'Large Scale Illegal Peat Extraction Report 2025', \(June 2025\)](#)

appear to be any documented procedures in place for operating the regulatory framework for the control of quarries, including routine monitoring.

Short-term lettings

As of June 2025, the entire country has been designated as a rent pressure zone. Prior to this, there were no rent pressure zones located in County Longford, and consequently the planning department did not have an established procedure (in response to the requirements of Circular Letter PL 4/ 2019).

The enforcement team indicated that it had not received any complaints regarding short-term letting. In light of the recent rent pressure zone update, and the ongoing housing need in the county, the planning department should ensure that the monitoring of short-term lets is part of an updated procedures manual for planning enforcement.

Performance rating and recommendations

In acknowledging the relatively limited number of planning enforcement cases on hand, as well as the resource constraints within the planning department, it is considered that the Council's delivery of its planning enforcement function is **satisfactory**. However, as the volume of cases on hand continues to increase, process improvements should be implemented to strengthen the team's management of its caseload.

It is welcome that the Council has drafted enforcement procedures; however, this manual should be completed and adopted as a clear procedure providing guidance to all staff in the team. There is scope for the final procedures manual to include additional detail regarding the assessment of complaints / cases, how to conduct site visits, the preparation and serving of warning letters and enforcement notices, procedures for instigating court action, as well as detailing the steps for mapping enforcement sites. The procedures document would also usefully contain template reports for the most common and/or minor types of cases, as well as relevant and up-to-date enforcement case law examples. Templates for forms, reports, letters and notices should be reviewed and updated within the team, for example, following changes in legislation. The OPR Practice Note on Enforcement provides useful guidance in this regard, including in relation to screening for EIA and AA when necessary. This procedure should also incorporate the newly applicable requirements for the Council in relation to the compliance of short-term lettings.

In order to ensure the effective and timely coordination of the various steps involved in the processing of enforcement cases, the Council should develop an integrated case management system for use across the entire enforcement team. Such a system should be capable of generating the workflow for cases, including target timelines for each step in the process and the assignment of responsibility, to ensure that cases are not unactioned throughout the lifecycle of the case handling process. Further benefits from the system could include integration with file management, including correspondence, reports, manager's decisions, representations made under section 152 of the Act, warning letters, enforcement notices, notes on site visits, etc., as well as scope for the identification of trends. Additionally, a case management system should be used to create a formal enforcement register, containing key details, which should be made available publicly.

Finally, the planning department should take appropriate steps in the short-term to ensure and demonstrate that they are controlling quarries within their functional area in accordance with regulatory requirements. Such steps should involve clarifying the location and process for viewing the quarries register by the public, as well as clarifying the overall monitoring process requirements with regard to these quarries. Consideration should also be given to updating the Council website with regard to information on quarries and the control of quarries, including the publication of the register on the website.

Recommendation 6 – Planning Enforcement

- The department's draft procedures manual should be finalised, to include guidance on all aspects of the enforcement function (file management, correspondence, investigation and site inspection, the preparation and issuing of warning letters and enforcement notices, engagement with developers, mapping, initiating legal action, etc.), and formally adopted.
- The manual should include appropriate procedures for the compliance of short-term lettings.
- The planning department should develop an integrated case management system that is capable of coordinating the various enforcement activities across the entire team.
- The Council's quarry register should be updated and made available for inspection by the public. The planning department's procedure for the routine monitoring of quarries should be set out in the abovementioned procedures manual.

No.	Recommendation	Grading	Responsibility
6	Planning Enforcement	Medium	Senior Planner



9 Other Planning Related Functions



9.1 - Part 8 / Local Authority Own Development

General Systems and Procedures

There is no adopted procedure across the Council, or internal to the planning department, for the preparation and delivery of Part 8 projects. It appears that generally the proposing department is responsible for the preparation of the relevant plans and particulars, taking the Part 8 proposal through the pre-planning consultation stage, including notifying the Area Committee, formally submitting the plans and arranging for the publication of the newspaper notice and arranging for site notices to be erected, etc.

The planning department outlined that a draft procedure, which had been prepared in 2023, is still being finalised interdepartmentally. Notwithstanding its draft status, it appears that the intended procedure is being followed across the relevant areas of the Council. The draft procedure outlines that the proposing department initiates the proposal and is responsible for its completion as well as being responsible for carrying out the Part 8 procedures in accordance with the regulations. The planning department are responsible for the application once it goes on public display including making it available for viewing by the public for the duration of the statutory period at the planning counter and online through the Council's website as well as managing any observations/submissions received and referring the application to the relevant prescribed bodies.

A planning report is prepared by the planning department for the proposing department, taking into consideration issues raised in observations / submissions. The draft procedures then outline that the planning department prepares the Chief Executive's Report and forwards it, along with all necessary documentation, to the Chief Executive's Office, which then schedules it for attention at the relevant Municipal District / Council Meeting. The Chief Executive's department then notifies the planning department of the decision, and the planning department, in turn, notifies the proposing department and any parties that made formal observations regarding the Part 8 proposal.



Richmond Harbour, Clondara



Royal Canal Greenway

In terms of the implementation, it is the responsibility of the proposing department to submit details of compliance in relation to any conditions imposed to the planning department at the appropriate time. The draft procedure was prepared by the planning department and sets out what works require a Part 8, the pre-planning procedure, the formal submission stage, public notice requirements, the report to the Council as well as general information, templates (site and newspaper notices), an outline of what must be contained in the Chief Executive's report, etc. The document concludes with the procedures in a step-by-step form together with a statement of responsibility for each step.

A review of the Council website indicates that the Council processed 14 Part 8 proposals during 2023, nine in 2024, while 10 were submitted in 2025. Part 8 projects are not geographically mapped on a publicly available platform, but some are identified as a symbol on the Local Government Ireland planning portal. The most common project types are related to active travel, regeneration and social housing. From 2018 to the time of this review, the Council has registered a total of 93 Part 8 applications. The applications since 2018 are available to view online via the Council's planning portal, whilst those made since 2023 can be viewed on the Local Government Ireland planning portal. An analysis of the 93 Part 8 schemes indicates that 19 of these applications relate to housing, with the remainder being active travel type projects and regeneration projects.

Environmental Assessment

Article 120 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as amended, requires the Council to undertake an EIA screening of sub-threshold development as part of any Part 8 procedure. The draft Part 8 procedure outlines the requirement for an EIA screening determination as part of the Chief Executive's Report. Article 250 of the regulations requires the undertaking of an AA screening for any local authority own development. On reviewing a sample of the Part 8 applications, it is apparent that the environmental screening reports are being prepared and are available for online viewing in respect of these projects. However, it is noted that the public notices do not include the requirement of Circular letter PL 10/2018, which indicates that Part 8 public notices should indicate that any person may refer the matter to An Bord Pleanála for a screening determination as to whether the development would be likely to have such effects. Further, the template public notices within the draft Part 8 procedure do not include the above requirements for EIA and AA and these requirements are not referred to in any other sections of the draft procedure.

Accordingly, the procedures for publishing public notices for Part 8 projects require attention to ensure that the statutory requirements in respect of EIA are adhered to as part of the process. This should include updated templates for public notices, reports and the requirements for screening reports to be prepared. Further, and critically, the standard operating procedure should be formally adopted across the Council.

Performance rating and recommendations

The operating process for the delivery of the Council's Part 8 schemes appears adequate; accordingly, the delivery of this function is considered **satisfactory**. Nevertheless, the process could be significantly strengthened by the formal adoption of a robust procedural manual across the Council. The manual should confirm the standard operating procedures to be adhered to interdepartmentally in relation to Part 8 schemes, including legislative requirements, responsibilities of promoting sections and the necessary steps to ensure compliance with the statutory code. Additionally, the manual should detail the requirements set out in the Regulations regarding EIA, including in relation to site notices.

Recommendation 7 – Part 8 Procedures

The Council should update and adopt a formal Part 8 procedures manual for use across all Council departments. The manual should include updated templates to assist the various departments in complying with all aspects of the statutory code for planning.

No.	Recommendation	Grading	Responsibility
7	Part 8 Procedures	High	Director of Service

9.2 - Taking-in-Charge

The Council's technical taking-in-charge function sits within the economic development directorate, as part of the unfinished estates / taking-in-charge team. The administrative element of taking-in-charge is overseen by the senior planner within the forward planning team, which is within the physical planning directorate. An executive engineer oversees the taking-in-charge process.

Under the DHLGH National Taking-in-Charge Initiative, a survey was carried out in 2015 to collate data regarding the taking-in-charge of estates across the country²². The survey identified 49 estates in County Longford to be taken in charge, with 13 of those going through the taking-in-charge process. By the time of the 2018 update, the number awaiting taking-in-charge had reduced to 26, with seven undergoing the taking-in-charge process. In relation to unfinished housing developments, there was one unfinished housing estate in County Longford on the DHLGH database for 2020, an 86% reduction since 2017²³.

At the time of this review, there were nine housing estates remaining to be taken in charge by the Council. Out of a total of 107 housing estates within the Council area, 98 have been taken in charge, of these, 23 have been taken in charge since 2015. The Council did not provide more recent data for the years 2022-2024, but the indicators suggest that the number of multi-unit residential developments being developed is low and so no new applications for taking-in-charge have been received. Consequently, the taking-in-charge function does not require an intensive focus. The Council have noted that the average length of time, from the receipt of the request, to conduct the taking-in-charge process varies, but in cases in which the works have been carried out to a satisfactory standard, the process usually takes circa four months. The Council also confirmed that a register is maintained of all multi-unit housing developments and housing estates across its functional area and it classifies and maps them by status. This register is not publicly available.

The Council has a set procedure for taking-in-charge requests, which sets out the various steps and actions required as well as how the process is managed internally across the various departments. A taking-in-charge checklist is also used to procedurally manage the process. The Council's taking-in-charge policy for private housing development, adopted in June 2008, sets out what elements will be considered for taking-in-charge, the conditions to be complied with, how the application will be assessed, the timeframes and the legislative basis for the process.

The Council's website includes general information and details on the taking-in-charge process, including a definition of taking-in-charge and the fee for a letter confirming whether an estate has been taken in charge. Bonds and securities are required to ensure the satisfactory completion of necessary services (including roads, footpaths, lighting and open space) in the event of a default by the developer.

²² DHLGH '[National Taking in Charge Initiative Report](#)' (2018)

²³ DHLGH '[Unfinished Housing Developments: Progress Update from 2017 to 2020 by Local Authority](#)' (2021)

The Council have confirmed that the total current value of live securities held by the Council for the satisfactory completion of residential estates is €103,000, and an additional €21,000 security on an estate where works are currently being carried out to have it taken over. No securities have been called in over the last three years. The Council monitors all live planning files for housing developments to ensure that the bond expiry date does not fall before the Council can call in the bond if deemed necessary. If a developer is not complying, a reminder letter is issued, and then a final letter is sent before commencing legal proceedings.

Performance rating and recommendations

The dedicated unfinished estates / taking-in-charge team has clear procedures in place which ensure that the delivery of the Council's taking-in-charge function is **satisfactory**.

However, in order to improve the functioning of the process, it is advised that given the passage of time since the adoption of the taking-in-charge policy in 2008, the Council should seek to review this policy and update, if necessary, to reflect any changes in procedures with regard to the operation of the taking-in-charge process and to have regard to legislative and regulatory updates in the interim period.

For example, since the policy was adopted in June 2008, Section 180 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 has been amended, and the DHLGH has issued a range of circulars such as PL 5/2014²⁴ and L(DPI)01-2020²⁵.

Recommendation 8 – Review Taking-in-Charge Policy

The Council should review and update its taking-in-charge policy for private housing developments to reflect the Council's current processes and procedures and to ensure the policy is consistent with current legislation, regulations, and departmental guidance and circulars.

No.	Recommendation	Grading	Responsibility
8	Review Taking-in-Charge Policy	Advisory	Director of Services (Co-ordination at Director level given that the technical function is not within the planning department's remit)

²⁴ DHLGH 'Circular Letter PL 5/2014 Re: Matters related to the Taking in Charge of Residential Developments', (November 2014).

²⁵ DHLGH 'Circular L(DPI)01-2020 - Approval of projects (residential estates) under the Developer Provided Water Services Infrastructure under the Multi-annual Developer Provided Water Services Infrastructure Resolution Programme 2019-2021

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 on 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
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Organisation of Planning Department

1	Resourcing	Building on the findings of this review, an internal evaluation report should be prepared for presentation to the Council's senior management team within the next six months, setting out the case for additional resourcing support to be provided to the planning department from within the Council. This evaluation should set out the projected workloads for development control, forward planning and enforcement teams over the coming years, as well as identifying the ongoing vacancy, recruitment and staff retention challenges being faced in relation to specialist positions within the department. The purpose of the evaluation is to make the case for the assignment, or making available, of additional specialist and / or senior administrative expertise to sustain and enhance planning department operations.	High	Director of Services
2	Business Planning	A renewed emphasis is required in relation to business planning, workload management, internal communications and staff development. To facilitate this a new role should be established (at an appropriately senior administrative level, reporting to the Director of Service) to coordinate business processes, procedural improvement and performance management across the department. This will include scheduling team and departmental meetings on a regular basis, the development of a departmental learning and development plan and overseeing the implementation of formal procedures across all work streams.	High	Director of Services

Forward Planning

3	Forward Planning	• A forward planning procedures manual should be prepared to guide the work of staff serving the function in the delivery of important cyclical tasks. • The Council must put robust dedicated systems in place to monitor, analyse and report on the implementation of development plan objectives. This will require building capacity and capability in relation to data analysis expertise. Consideration should be given to the assignment of dedicated responsibility to drive this important area of responsibility. • A five-year forward-planning work programme should be prepared to identify the workload, timelines and prioritisation of the various responsibilities to be delivered under the function, including plan-making, environmental assessment, consultation, implementation, monitoring, reporting, potential variations, etc. • This work programme should also identify the resourcing capacity and management structures required for delivery. This work programme should be brought to the attention of the Council's senior management team to support a business case for the allocation of resources to and within the planning department.	High	Senior Planner
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Architectural Heritage

4	Architectural Heritage Management	A role should be created within the planning department for a dedicated architectural conservation officer / manager. This individual should be assigned responsibility and given a leadership role to proactively drive the coordination of the Council's various architectural conservation duties, including the designation of sites, assessing and monitoring development proposals, investigating potential enforcement issues, engaging with the public and owners and overseeing the administrative framework for the approval of grant funding. Notwithstanding the timeframe in which such a role can be established, the planning department should give attention to the documentation of procedures for the various ongoing tasks associated with the protection of architectural heritage.	High	Director of Services
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Development Management

5	Development Management Procedure	Over the next 12 months, the development management team's procedural documentation should be updated (including standard templates). Where relevant, additional documented procedures should be put in place for both technical and administrative tasks, including (but not limited to): the processing of exempted development declarations (including a template for environmental screening), file allocation, planning report preparation, the processing of compliance submissions, a tailored set of planning conditions, etc.	High	Senior Planner
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Enforcement				
6	Planning Enforcement	- The department's draft procedures manual should be finalised to include guidance on all aspects of the enforcement function (file management, correspondence, investigation and site inspection, the preparation and issuing of warning letters and enforcement notices, engagement with developers, mapping, initiating legal action, etc.), and formally adopted. - The manual should include appropriate procedures for the compliance of short-term lettings. - The planning department should develop an integrated case management system that is capable of coordinating the various enforcement activities across the entire team. - The Council's quarry register should be updated and made available for inspection by the public. The planning department's procedure for the routine monitoring of quarries should be set out in the abovementioned procedures manual.	Medium	Senior Planner
Other Planning Related Functions				
7	Part 8 Procedures	The Council should update and adopt a formal Part 8 procedures manual for use across all Council departments. The manual should include updated templates to assist the various departments in complying with all aspects of the statutory code for planning.	High	Director of Service
8	Taking-in-Charge Policy	The Council should review and update its taking-in-charge policy for private housing developments to reflect the Council's current processes and procedures and to ensure the policy is consistent with current legislation, regulations, and departmental guidance and circulars.	Advisory	Director of Services



Oifig an Rialaitheora Pleanála
Office of the
Planning Regulator

Office of the Planning Regulator

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

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