Oifig an Rialaitheora Pleanála
Office of the Planning Regulator

Annual Overview of the Planning System 2021

Contents

1 Introduction **6**

2 Forward Planning **8**

2.1 Statutory Plans 8

2.2 Local Area Plans (LAPs) 14

2.3 Strategic Development Zones (SDZs) 16

3 Development Management **17**

3.1 Number of Planning Applications 17

3.2 Validation of Planning Applications 18

3.3 Planning Permissions Granted 20

3.4 Applications Granted: Regional Distribution 23

3.5 Applications Granted: Use-type 24

3.6 Residential Development 25

3.6.1 Housing Unit Type Mix *25*

3.6.2 Location of Residential Units *28*

3.6.3 Strategic Housing Development *30*

3.6.4 Residential Completions *31*

3.7 Non-Residential Development 33

3.7.1 Renewable Energy Sector *35*

3.7.2 Strategic Infrastructure Development *36*

3.8 Urban and Rural Regeneration 36

3.8.1 Urban Regeneration and Development Fund *37*

3.8.2 Rural Regeneration and Development Fund *38*

3.8.3 Town Centre First *39*

4 Planning Appeals **41**

4.1 Planning Appeals 41

4.2 Reversal of Decision on Appeal 42

5 Enforcement, Land Activation and Legal Challenges **44**

5.1 Planning Enforcement 44

5.2 Land Activation 44

5.3 Legal Challenges 45

6 Other relevant data **49**

6.1 Finance: cost recovery 49

6.2 Staffing and Resources 50

Summary and Concluding Comments **51**

Acronym List

ABP:	An Bord Pleanála
CSO:	Central Statistics Office
DHLGH:	Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage
EMRA:	Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly
JR:	Judicial Review
LAP:	Local Area Plan
LGMA:	Local Government Management Agency
NPF:	National Planning Framework
NWRA:	Northern and Western Regional Assembly
OPR:	Office of the Planning Regulator
RRDF:	Rural Regeneration and Development Fund
RSESs:	Regional Spatial Economic Strategies
RZLT:	Residential Zoned Land Tax
SDZ:	Strategic Development Zone
SHD:	Strategic Housing Development
SID:	Strategic Infrastructure Development
SRA:	Southern Regional Assembly
TCF:	Town Centre First
The Act:	The Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended
The Minister:	Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage
URDF:	Urban Regeneration and Development Fund
VSL:	Vacant Site Levy

Planning in Ireland

200+

Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies

Statutory Development Plans

Local Area Plans

Strategic Development Zones

31 Planning Authorities

1 An Bord Pleanála

3 Regional Assemblies

2021 in Numbers

30,774
Applications Granted

2,331
Appeals to An Bord Pleanála

23.3%
ABP Decisions confirmed

27.7%
ABP Decisions reversed

49%
ABP Decisions varied

34,341
Planning Decisions Made

3,995
Applications Refused

101
Strategic Housing Development applications received

74
Applications granted

25
Applications refused

42
Public consultation on statutory plans initiated

12
Statutory plans adopted

1 Introduction

The Annual Overview of the Planning System 2021 provides a strategic review of key trends and outputs over the year in the wider planning system in Ireland. It includes a comparison with patterns in previous years and is the only analysis of its kind of the Irish planning system.

In 2019 and 2020, the Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR) Annual Report included a section entitled "Part II: Planning in Context" which provided a wider review of the planning system.

For 2021, we decided to publish two documents. Our Annual Report[1], which records the OPR's activities during the year and a separate review of the wider planning system, documented in this publication, Annual Overview of the Planning System 2021.

Statistics in relation to the planning process are published each year by the Central Statistics Office (CSO)[2], the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC)[3], the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH)[4] and An Bord Pleanála (ABP)[5].

The OPR has analysed a sample of this data to provide an overview of how the Irish planning system functioned in 2021. We have also looked at the key trends and datasets over previous years at relevant interval points. Analysis of trends on an ongoing basis will facilitate monitoring of planning in the years ahead.

The OPR works with the DHLGH, the local government sector and wider stakeholders to improve the range of information sources that can be used to track how the planning process works and the quality of the outcomes it secures. This takes into account the broader functions of local government oversight bodies, such as NOAC, which publishes three planning-related indicators.

1 https://publications.opr.ie/view-file/103
2 https://data.cso.ie/
3 https://noac.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/NOAC-Local-Authority-Performance-Indicator-Report-2020.pdf
4 https://www.gov.ie/en/service/9e4ee-get-planning-statistics/
5 https://www.pleanala.ie/en-ie/publications?category=AnnualReports

We have examined the available statistics under five key headings. The first four reflect the core functions of local authorities and ABP and the fifth relates to resourcing of the planning system:

1. **Forward Planning;**
2. **Development Management;**
3. **Planning appeals;**
4. **Enforcement, land activation and legal challenges; and**
5. **Resourcing.**

In the context of this wider analysis, the Annual Overview of the Planning System 2021 also offers an opportunity to examine particular planning topics. In 2020, analysis was undertaken on the retail sector in view of the significant challenges it faces arising from changes in consumer habits and the impacts of the Covid pandemic. This year, the review looks at urban and rural regeneration in the context of Project Ireland 2040[6].

Analysis of the data available regarding the overall working of Ireland's planning process continues to indicate that the demands placed on the planning system have increased significantly in recent years and that this trend has continued in 2021. It shows that local authorities have performed their statutory duties against a backdrop of increasing workloads.

Data gathered on development plans prepared, planning applications, appeals processed and enforcement cases, only reflect part of the work of local authorities. Local authorities also undertake a very significant volume of additional planning-related work in areas such as development promotion, urban and village renewal, rural development and land activation.

However, to establish the main workload pressures and outputs from the planning system, our analysis focuses on key indicators related directly to functions such as forward planning, development management and planning appeals.

[6] https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/09022006-project-ireland-2040/

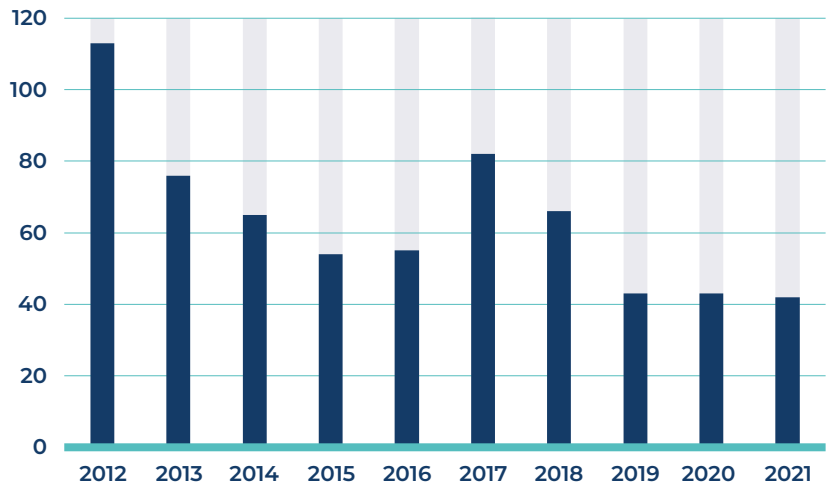
2 Forward Planning

2.1 Statutory Plans

In addition to the National Planning Framework (NPF) at Government level, statutory plans include regional and spatial strategies economic strategies (RSESs), development plans and local area plans (LAPs). In 2021, 12 statutory plans[7] and / or variations / amendments to existing plans were adopted, compared to 35[8] in 2020.

Figure 1 indicates the number of statutory plan review stages that have been subject to consultation, annually, for the ten-year period to 2021.

Figure 1 Plan-Making Stages Notified for Consultation Per Annum 2012-2021 (DHLGH, 2022 & OPR, 2022)



7 5 of which were variations/amendments.

8 32 of which were variations/amendments.

The data shows the number of notifications made to the DHLGH up until April 2019, and from then on to the OPR in relation to statutory plan-making consultations, where the DHLGH or the OPR would make a submission. The notifications include:

- Issues papers for development plan reviews, draft development plans, and material alterations of draft development plans;
- Issues papers for LAPs, draft LAPs, and material alterations of draft LAPs;
- Variations and amendments to development plans / LAPs, and material alterations of same; and
- Pre-draft RSESs, and draft RSESs[9].

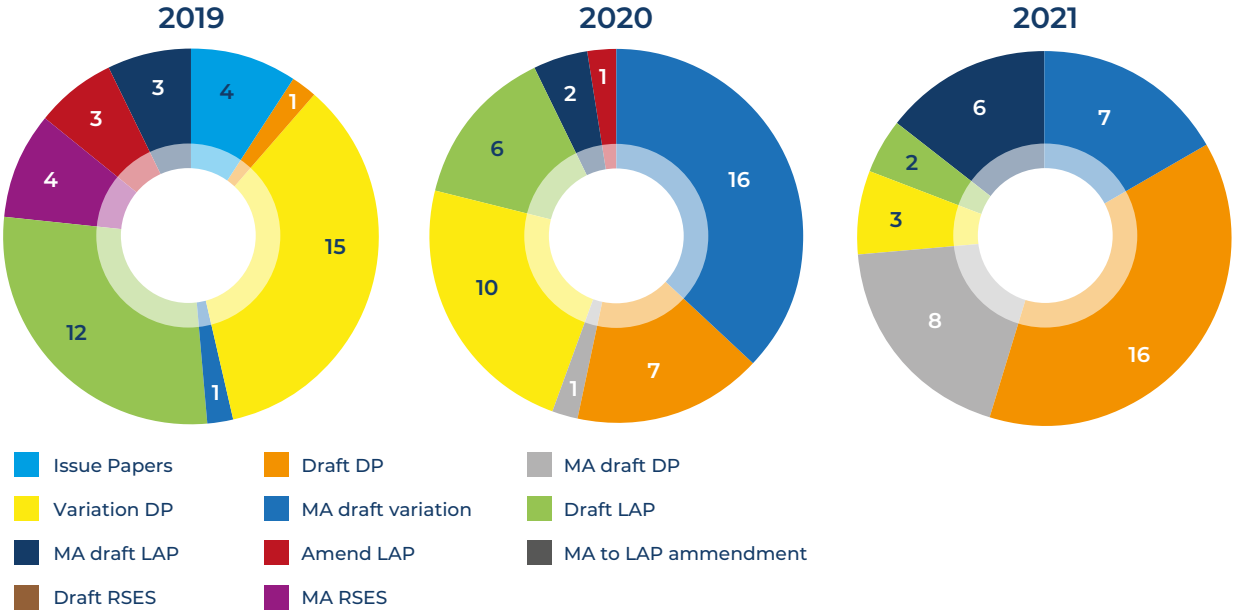
The data indicates that over this period, the number of statutory plan stages notified for public consultation, particularly for LAPs, was higher in the earlier part of the decade, reaching 113 notifications in 2012.

This represents a peak in plan-making notifications over the longer term. Since then, plan-making has declined to a low of 42 notifications in 2021[10]. The likely reasons for this pattern over the decade were considered in detail in the 2019 Annual Report.

The number of notifications issued in 2021 continues to be relatively low, compared to earlier in the decade, declining further from 2019 and 2020. It is anticipated that due to the current stage of the six-year development plan making cycle, which includes a two-year plan preparation period, that the forward planning resources of the 31 local authorities are primarily focused on preparing county or city development plans. In addition, as LAPs are required to be consistent with the development plan, the preparation of LAPs tends to follow the adoption of the development plan.

Figure 2 illustrates the number and proportion of different plan types for which notices were issued by local authorities in 2021, 2020 and 2019.

Figure 2 Number of Plan-making Stages Notified for Consultation 2019, 2020 and 2021[11] (DHLGH, 2022, OPR, 2022)



[9] There is no formal requirement under s.24 of the Act to issue notification of material amendments to the RSES.

[10] https://publications.opr.ie/view-file/103

[11] Excluding notification of consultations on Planning Schemes for Strategic Development Zones.

The development plan preparation process recommenced in 2019 in the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) area and in 2020 in the Northern and Western Regional Assembly (NWRA) and the Southern Regional Assembly (SRA) areas following the making of the RSESs by the regional assemblies. The statutory process had been put on hold pending the making of the RSESs.

The resurgence in development plan preparation continued in 2021 - seven issues papers and 16 draft development plans were published. Likewise, material alterations to draft development plans increased in 2021 to eight.

Over the three years from 2019 to 2021, the number of notifications of draft variations has fallen to three in 2021 compared with 10 in 2020 and 15 in 2019.

The number of notifications of draft LAPs has also declined over the previous two years from 12 in 2019 to six in 2020 and to two in 2021. These statistics confirm that local authorities are continuing to concentrate their forward planning resources on preparing or completing their development plan reviews.

The RSES for the EMRA area was adopted in June 2019, the RSESs for the SRA and NWRA areas were both adopted in January 2020, initiating the review/variation of the relevant county, and city development plans to incorporate alignment. As at 31 December 2021, 23 local authorities had commenced and seven completed their review process.

One local authority, Donegal County Council, did not give notice of a variation to their development to align with the RSES as of 31 December 2021. This is not in accordance with the Act which requires notice of a development plan variation within a timeframe of 26 weeks of adoption of the RSES.

Over the three years from 2019 to 2021, the number of notifications of draft variations has fallen to three in 2021 compared with 10 in 2020 and 15 in 2019.

Table 1 **Plans Adopted, Varied and under Review (incorporating alignment with the RSES) as at 31 December 2021 (DP= Development Plan, MA= Material Alterations to Draft Plan)**

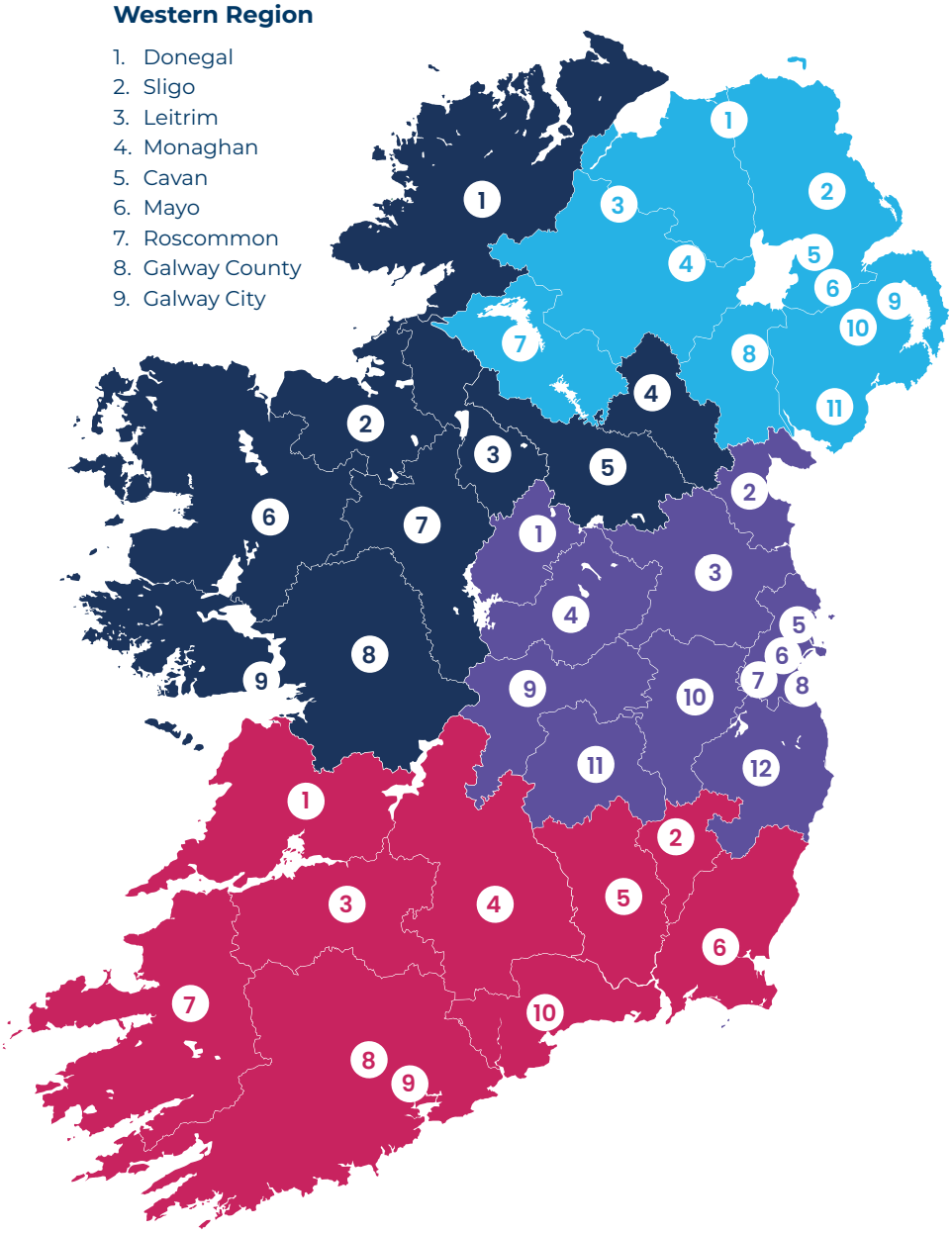
No.	Planning Authority	Category	Title	Date Adopted/ Current stage (December 2021)
1	Monaghan County Council	DP (Variation)	Variation No. 2 of the Monaghan County Development Plan 2019-2025	07/12/2020
2	Westmeath County Council	DP	Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027	22/03/2021
3	Kilkenny County Council	DP	Kilkenny County Development Plan 2021-2027	03/09/2021
4	Offaly County Council	DP	Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027	10/09/2021
5	Meath County Council	DP	Meath County Development Plan 2021-2027	22/09/2021
6	Louth County Council	DP	Louth County Development Plan 2021-2027	30/09/2021
7	Longford County Council	DP	Longford County Development Plan 2021-2027	19/10/2021
8	Laois County Council	DP	Laois County Development Plan 2022-2028	MA Consultation Closed
9	Roscommon County Council	DP	Roscommon County Development Plan 2022-2028	MA Consultation Open
10	Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	DP	Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Development Plan 2022-2028	MA Consultation Open
11	Wexford County Council	DP	Wexford County Development Plan 2022-2028	Draft Plan Consultation Closed
12	Mayo County Council	DP	Mayo County Development Plan 2022-2028	Draft Plan Consultation Closed
13	Cork County Council	DP	Cork County Development Plan 2022-2028	Draft Plan Consultation Closed
14	Galway County Council	DP	Galway County Development Plan 2022-2028	Draft Plan Consultation Closed
15	Cavan County Council	DP	Cavan County Development Plan 2022-2028	Draft Plan Consultation Closed
16	Wicklow County Council	DP	Wicklow County Development Plan 2022-2028	Draft Plan Consultation Closed

No.	Planning Authority	Category	Title	Date Adopted/ Current stage (December 2021)
17	Waterford City & County Council	DP	Waterford City & County Development Plan 2022-2028	Draft Plan Consultation Closed
18	Limerick City & County Council	DP	Limerick City & County Development Plan 2022-2028	Draft Plan Consultation Closed
19	South Dublin County Council	DP	South Dublin County Development Plan 2022-2028	Draft Plan Consultation Closed
20	Carlow County Council	DP	Carlow County Development Plan 2022-2028	Draft Plan Consultation Closed
21	Cork City Council	DP	Cork City Development Plan 2022-2028	Draft Plan Consultation Closed
22	Tipperary County Council	DP	Tipperary County Development Plan 2022-2028	Draft Plan Consultation Closed
23	Clare County Council	DP	Clare County Development Plan 2022-2028	Draft Plan Consultation Open
24	Kerry County Council	DP	Kerry County Development Plan 2022-2028	Draft Plan Consultation Open
25	Dublin City Council	DP	Dublin City Development Plan 2022-2028	Draft Plan Consultation Open
26	Kildare County Council	DP	Kildare County Development Plan 2023-2029	Issues Paper Consultation Closed
27	Galway City Council	DP	Galway City Development Plan 2022-2028	Issues Paper Consultation Closed
28	Fingal County Council	DP	Fingal County Development Plan 2023-2029	Issues Paper Consultation Closed
29	Leitrim County Council	DP	Leitrim County Development Plan 2023-2029	Issues Paper Consultation Closed
30	Sligo County Council	DP	Sligo County Development Plan 2023-2029	Issues Paper Consultation Closed
31	Donegal County Council	DP	Donegal County Development Plan 2018-2024	Review not Initiated

Figure 3 **Local Authorities by Regional Assembly Areas**

Northern and Western Region

1. Donegal
2. Sligo
3. Leitrim
4. Monaghan
5. Cavan
6. Mayo
7. Roscommon
8. Galway County
9. Galway City



Local Authority Areas in Northern Ireland

1. Causeway Coast and Glens
2. Mid and East Antrim
3. Derry and Strabane
4. Mid Ulster
5. Antrim and Newtownabbey
6. Belfast
7. Fermanagh and Omagh
8. Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon
9. North Down and Ards
10. Lisburn and Castlereagh
11. Newry Mourne and Down

Eastern and Midland Region

1. Longford
2. Louth
3. Meath
4. Westmeath
5. Fingal
6. Dublin City
7. South Dublin
8. Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown
9. Offaly
10. Kildare
11. Laois
12. Wicklow

Southern Region

1. Clare
2. Carlow
3. Limerick City & County
4. Tipperary
5. Kilkenny
6. Wexford
7. Kerry
8. Cork County
9. Cork City
10. Waterford City & County

2.2 Local Area Plans (LAPs)

Under the Act (Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended), LAPs are required for all towns[12] with populations over 5,000 in the last census. LAPs are also required for towns with populations between 1,500 and 5,000, unless the local authority opts to include objectives for these towns in the relevant development plan.

In addition, a local authority can prepare an LAP for any area it considers suitable and, in particular, for areas likely to be subject to largescale development within the lifetime of the plan.

Anecdotally, it appears that many local authorities are including objectives for smaller towns in the development plan rather than preparing separate LAPs.

Table 2 Schedule of Larger Census Towns (>20,000) and Publication Date of their Statutory Plans (Up to date LAPs Highlighted)

Settlement	Population (CSO 2016)	Statutory Plan	Year adopted
Drogheda	40,956	Drogheda Borough Council Development Plan 2011-2017	2011
Swords[13]	39,248	No LAP or town development plan	none
Dundalk	39,004	Dundalk & Environs Development Plan 2009-2015	2009
Bray	**32,600**	**Bray Municipal District Local Area Plan 2018 - 2024**	**2018**
Navan	30,173	Navan Development Plan 2009-2015	2009
Kilkenny	26,512	Kilkenny City and Environs Development Plan 2014-2020	2014
Ennis	25,276	Ennis & Environs Development Plan 2008-2014	2008
Carlow	24,272	Carlow Town Environs Local Area Plan 2012-2018 Carlow Town Development Plan 2012-2018	2012 2012
Tralee	**23,691**	**Tralee Municipal District Local Area Plan 2018-2024**	**2018**
Newbridge	22,742	Newbridge Local Area Plan 2013 - 2019 - extended to December 2021	2013 (extended in 2018)
Portlaoise	**22,050**	**Portlaoise Local Area Plan 2018 – 2024**	**2018**

[12] Designated as a town in the most recent census.

[13] The non-statutory Swords Masterplans were adopted in May 2019.

Settlement	Population (CSO 2016)	Statutory Plan	Year adopted
Balbriggan	21,722	Balbriggan Stephenstown Local Area Plan	2007
Naas	**21,393**	**Naas Local Area Plan 2021-2027**	**2021**
Athlone	21,349	Athlone Town Development Plan	2014
Mullingar	20,928	Mullingar Town Development Plan	2014
Celbridge	**20,288**	**Celbridge Local Area Plan 2017-2023**	**2017**
Wexford	20,188	Wexford Town and Environs Development Plan	2009

Generally, LAPs have an operative period of six years, although this may be extended by resolution by the local authority in certain circumstances[14].

Table 2 indicates a list of larger census towns (>20,000 population) in order of population from the 2016[15] and the years in which the most recent statutory plan was prepared for those towns by the relevant local authority. The table is unchanged since last year's report apart from the adoption of the Naas Local Area Plan 2021-2027 on 21 October 2021.

The table indicates that the existing LAPs (or development plan for the former town councils and county borough councils[16]) for the majority (12 out of 17) of the country's largest towns were adopted more than six years ago, including those for some of the largest towns in the State. This pattern appears to be replicated across the country for smaller towns >5,000 population for which LAPs are mandatory.

LAPs play a vital role in ensuring that the parent development plan and national and regional policy at local level are implemented, and they are essential for addressing ongoing planning issues. Therefore, it is important that the preparation of mandatory LAPs is prioritised by local authorities.

We continue to engage with local authorities in the context of our plan assessment and reviews function in pressing for the timely preparation of LAPs in line with statutory obligations.

Generally, LAPs have an operative period of six years, although this may be extended by resolution by the local authority in certain circumstances.

[14] The resolution shall be passed no later than 5 years after the first making of the LAP.

[15] Population data from the 2022 census is not yet available at this level.

[16] In the case of former town councils and county borough councils abolished in 2014, the existing development plans for those settlements continues to have effect until the adoption of the new development plan.

2.3 Strategic Development Zones (SDZs)

An SDZ is a planning scheme made by a local authority on foot of an order of Government designating a site or sites for the establishment of zones to facilitate specified development of economic or social importance[17]. These generally cover extensive, strategically located sites.

Eleven schemes have been approved since 2003, with the majority (seven) since 2012 and three since 2018[18].

As expected, the majority of SDZs have been made in Dublin, with four made elsewhere – Clonmaggadden (Meath), Monard (Cork), Ireland West Airport Knock (Mayo) and Waterford North Quays.

Table 3 Designated Strategic Development Zones

SDZ Scheme	Local Authority	Year Designated
Adamstown	South Dublin	2001
Clonmagadden	Meath	2001
Hansfield	Fingal	2001
Clonburris-Balgaddy	South Dublin	2006 & 2015
Cherrywood	Dun Laoghaire Rathdown	2010
Monard	Cork County	2010
Grangegorman	Dublin City	2010
Dublin Docklands	Dublin City	2012
North Quays	Waterford City and County	2016
Poolbeg West	Dublin City	2016
Ireland West Airport Knock	Mayo	2017

SDZs tend to be more prescriptive in terms of the nature, form and layout of development and infrastructure requirements. Once a scheme has been approved, the local authority must grant permission where a development proposal is consistent with the scheme and must refuse permission for a development that is inconsistent. SDZs therefore provide a significant element of certainty for developers.

Eleven schemes have been approved since 2003, with the majority (seven) since 2012 and three since 2018.

17 Under section 166 of the Planning and Development Act, 2000.

18 All but one Planning Scheme has been through the Board's approvals procedure which results from an appeal against the scheme.

3 Development Management[19]

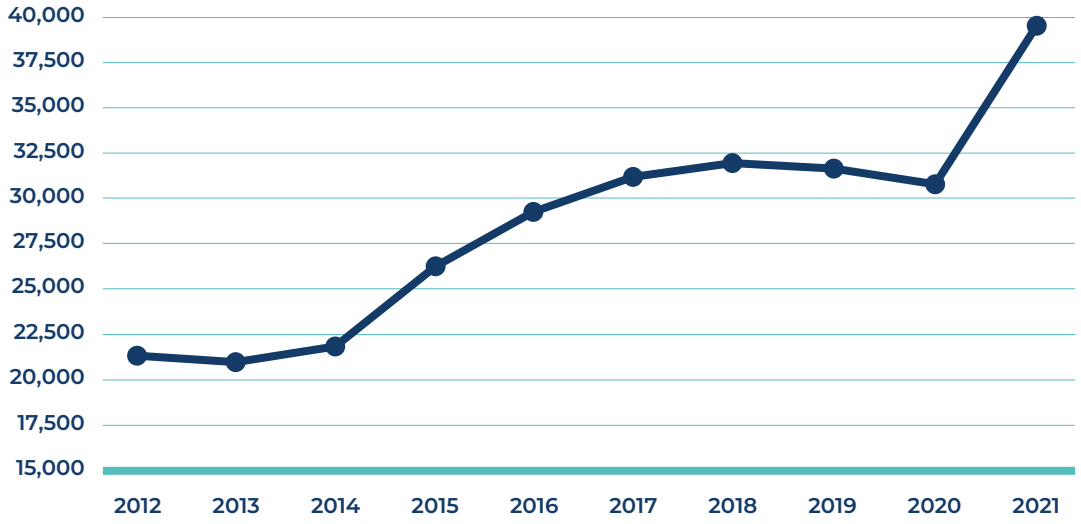
3.1 Number of Planning Applications

The level of planning applications made each year to local authorities tends to mirror wider economic trends. As can be seen from Figure 4, the number of planning applications submitted in 2021 increased significantly from previous years with almost 40,000 applications made (39,934).

This represents an increase of around 29% over the number of valid applications submitted in 2020 (31,008) and 24% above that in 2019 (32,314). It also represents the highest number of applications since 2008.

This may reflect the increased economic activity following the removal of restrictions introduced during the Covid pandemic and a release of pent-up demand. Nonetheless, it is indicative of significant potential development activity.

Figure 4 **Number of Valid Planning Applications 2012-2021 (DHLGH, 2022)**



[19] There is a long standing divergence between the CSO and DHLGH datasets for grants of permissions. Both sets of data essentially rely on the same core datasets, however the DHLGH and CSO make different decisions on including / excluding data in their datasets. Primarily as the DHLGH data relates to the planning application process rather than outcomes.

3.2 Validation of Planning Applications

Planning applications are the basis for planning decisions. They are complex, legal documents that require careful preparation to comply with legislation to inform the public and to enable the local authority to carry out a thorough assessment of the proposed development.

Accordingly, a planning application that does not meet the preliminary requirements for assessment (i.e. it is not accompanied by legislative-compliant documentation[20]) may be declared invalid and returned to the applicant before its technical and policy merits are considered.

The percentage of invalidated applications as a proportion of all applications made is referred to as the "invalidation rate". Although the national average invalidation rate has been relatively stable over the last decade, it had been marginally increasing each year, from 13.9% (4,197 invalid applications) in 2015 to 17.1% (6,378 invalid applications) in 2020. Then, in 2021 the invalidation rate dropped to 15% of applications.

However, the total number of invalid applications increased to 6,745, reflecting the large increase in applications overall.

As can be seen from Table 4, the invalidation rate varied widely between individual local authorities in 2021. For example, the rate was 29.5% for Tipperary compared to 3.1% for Mayo. In urban areas, disparities are also evident with invalidation rates ranging from 8.9% in Fingal to 26.2% in Dublin City.

The invalidation rate varied widely between individual local authorities in 2021. For example, the rate was 29.5% for Tipperary compared to 3.1% for Mayo.

[20] The documentation to be submitted with a planning application, as specified under Part 4 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as amended.

Table 4 Invalid Applications as a Percentage of Valid Applications (DHLGH, 2021)

Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
national rate	15.3%	15.5%	16.4%	17.1%	15.0%
standard deviation	6.9%	7.3%	6.9%	6.8%	7.2%
Carlow	20.4%	28.9%	25.3%	18.5%	22.0%
Cavan	7.0%	7.2%	10.3%	11.1%	5.1%
Clare	3.9%	5.0%	5.7%	5.4%	3.7%
Cork	25.2%	22.6%	22.0%	23.9%	22.8%
Donegal	18.9%	16.7%	20.2%	20.1%	17.5%
DLRCC	14.2%	18.8%	14.6%	17.9%	19.3%
Fingal	14.8%	14.5%	14.0%	19.5%	8.9%
Galway	6.5%	5.0%	10.5%	10.1%	7.0%
Kerry	7.6%	9.6%	10.0%	13.7%	6.5%
Kildare	15.2%	14.0%	12.8%	24.5%	18.0%
Kilkenny	6.9%	9.9%	10.2%	8.5%	6.3%
Laois	21.2%	19.0%	18.1%	17.6%	17.4%
Leitrim	27.8%	34.4%	28.2%	18.0%	13.1%
Limerick City & Co	11.2%	8.5%	9.0%	14.8%	16.9%
Longford	13.1%	11.6%	10.9%	5.9%	5.6%
Louth	11.5%	15.6%	17.5%	18.3%	15.9%
Mayo	4.8%	5.5%	5.6%	5.7%	3.1%
Meath	13.8%	17.6%	20.8%	17.1%	15.7%
Monaghan	2.3%	4.3%	4.1%	2.2%	4.0%
Offaly	16.2%	13.7%	16.7%	24.9%	17.1%
Roscommon	19.2%	19.6%	23.9%	22.5%	26.2%
Sligo	15.1%	15.8%	20.2%	16.4%	9.0%
South Dublin	9.9%	7.9%	7.2%	4.9%	4.9%
Tipperary	28.9%	25.3%	29.2%	31.2%	29.5%
Waterford City & Co	10.4%	10.4%	13.3%	13.8%	9.4%
Westmeath	10.8%	11.0%	10.0%	8.0%	5.8%
Wexford	22.6%	23.6%	20.5%	15.5%	11.4%
Wicklow	17.9%	21.3%	20.0%	16.9%	14.1%
Cork city	4.0%	9.9%	16.8%	16.1%	11.2%
Dublin city	16.8%	16.9%	21.3%	21.5%	26.2%
Galway city	7.6%	6.7%	4.3%	7.4%	12.2%
rate plus STDEVP	22.2%	22.8%	23.3%	23.9%	22.2%
rate less STDEVP	8.4%	8.2%	9.5%	10.2%	7.7%

The planning authority's rate is lower than the national rate by in excess of the standard deviation

The planning authority's rate is higher than the national rate by in excess of the standard deviation

The data for 2021 indicates that the invalidation rate for six local authorities decreased by at least 5% compared to 2020. The most significant of these were Fingal, dropping from 19.5% to 8.9%, Sligo from 16.4% to 3.9%, and Offaly from 24.9% to 17.1% (bringing it into line with the national average). The invalidation rates for Sligo and Kerry also fell appreciably.

While many local authorities may diverge significantly from the national rate in any one year, an examination of rates over the last five years indicates that certain local authorities have invalidation rates that are consistently[21] and significantly divergent[22] from the national rate over that period.

Although more authorities (ten) exhibited markedly lower invalidation rates than higher (four) in 2021, there are no immediately obvious factors to explain the differences. The rate at which planning applications are deemed invalid by a local authority will largely depend on the quality of the documentation submitted by applicants and their agents. However, internal procedures and processes implemented by the local authority can also play a determining role.

The OPR published research entitled Planning Application Processing – An Analysis of Planning Authority Validation Processes (OPR Case Study Paper CSPO6) in 2021[23]. This followed a review of validation statistics, engagement with eight local authorities and consultation with the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) and other stakeholders.

The report identifies common invalidation issues experienced by local authorities. It identified the varying quality of planning application documentation and the differing management approaches adopted by local authorities in tackling patterns of poor submission documentation as some of the main reasons for the varying levels of invalidations.

The research also indicates that effective staff management, regular training, learning supports and dedicated validations staff / teams play key roles in reducing higher rates of invalidations. The report identifies good practice and contains a list of practical steps that local authorities can adopt to improve their systems and procedures in order to assist agents / applicants. Applying these research findings will assist local authorities in reducing invalidation rates.

3.3 Planning Permissions Granted

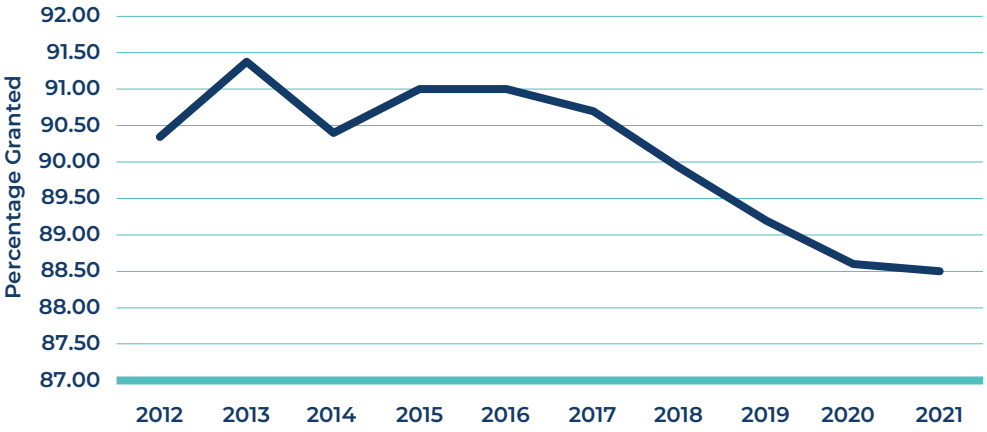
Figure 5 shows a continual decline in approval rates for planning permissions granted since 2016. This may be reflective of the overall increase in applications over the year and also the increasing complexity of planning decision making. Overall approval rates have dropped by 2.5% since 2016, with the approval rate in 2021 being the lowest since 2011. However, between 2020 and 2021, the rate declined only very slightly from 88.6% to 88.5% which may indicate it is stabilising. Furthermore, in national terms, over 88% of planning applications were granted permission in 2021 which represents a positive outcome.

[21] At least three out of the five years.

[22] Where the deviation of the local authority's invalidation rate from the mean rate is greater than the standard deviation of all local authorities.

[23] https://publications.opr.ie/view-pp-file/NDc=

Figure 5 Planning Application Grant Rates 2012-2021 (DHLGH, 2022)



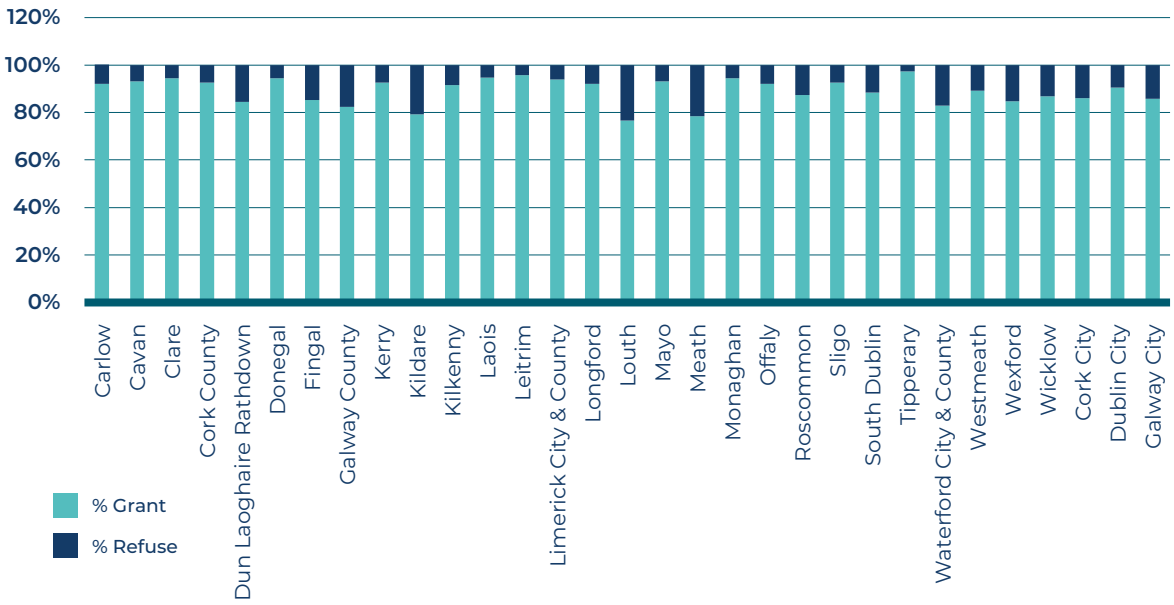
It is possible that this approval rate may increase in the future as development plans and LAPs are aligned more closely with national and regional policy.

Figure 6 shows the grant/refusal rates by local authority and indicates that planning application grant rates in 2021 across all the 31 local authorities were generally high.

The rate at which permissions were granted ranged from 77% (Louth) to almost 97% (Tipperary).

The lowest rates of approval are recorded in three counties in the EMRA area, bordering Dublin (Louth at 77%, Meath at 78% and Kildare at 79%), possibly reflecting the higher development pressure in these counties. All other counties recorded rates between 80-90%.

Figure 6 Percentage of Decisions to Grant or Refuse Permission by Local Authority, 2021 (DHLGH, 2022)

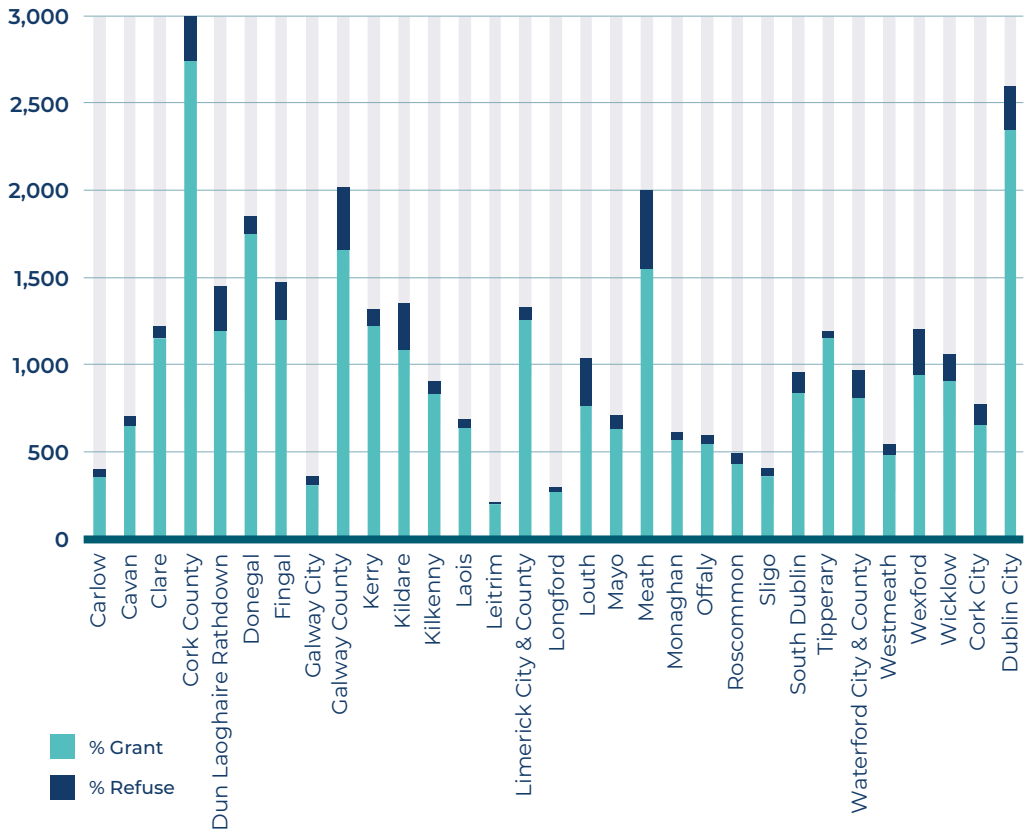


For urban planning authorities, while the approval rates are generally quite high, they vary from 84% in Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown to 91% in Dublin City Council. The differences are more pronounced between rural planning authorities, ranging from 77% in Louth to 97% in Tipperary.

For urban planning authorities, while the approval rates are generally quite high, they vary from 84% in Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown to 91% in Dublin City Council. The differences are more pronounced between rural planning authorities, ranging from 77% in Louth to 97% in Tipperary.

These rates should also be seen within the context of absolute numbers of approvals and refusals, as detailed in Figure 7. Although there appears to be no obvious correlation between the total number of applications considered by a local authority and its rate of approval/refusal, a longer term review would be informative in this regard.

Figure 7 Number of Decisions to Grant and Refuse Permission by Local Authority, 2021 (DHLGH, 2022)



Actual number of decisions to grant permission increased nationally from 24,217 in 2020 to 30,774 in 2021

3.4 Applications Granted: Regional Distribution

The number of planning applications approved or granted on an annual basis is indicative of development demand or development pressure. According to DHLGH data, the actual number of decisions to grant permission increased nationally from 24,217 in 2020 to 30,774 in 2021.

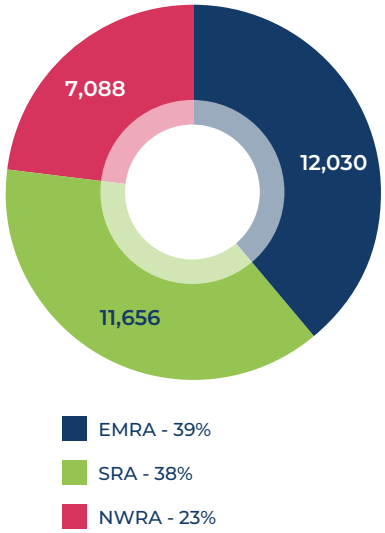
It can be seen from Figure 8 that the share of approved planning applications between the three regional assemblies generally continue to reflect their populations - EMRA 2.5 million or 49%; SRA 1.7 million or 33%, and NWRA 0.90 million or 18%. However, it is apparent that this correlation has continued to weaken.

In 2021, the greatest number of approvals were within the EMRA area, driven by Dublin. While this region accounted for approximately 39% of all applications approved, its share declined from 43% in 2020, notwithstanding an increase of c.1,000 approvals.

The SRA area, with three cities (Cork, Limerick and Waterford) accounted for approximately 38% of all applications, effectively unchanged from 2020, although approvals increased by c.2,000.

However, the NWRA area, which includes Galway City and Sligo and Letterkenny regional growth centres, increased its share from 19% in 2020 to approximately 23% in 2021, with c.2, 200 additional approvals.

Figure 8 Planning Applications Granted by Regional Assembly Area 2021 (DHLGH, 2022)



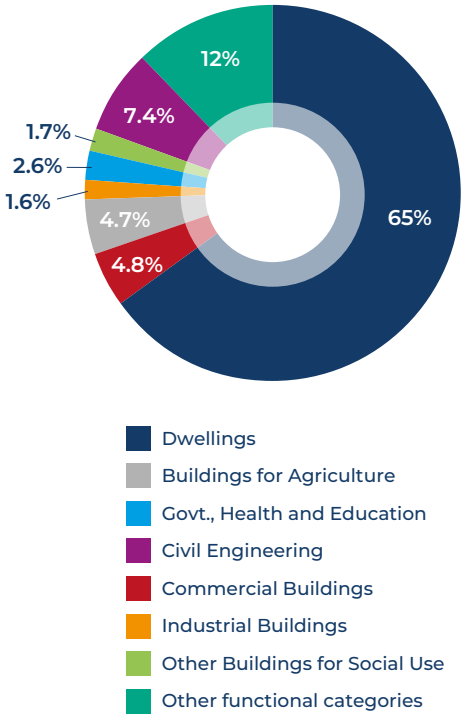
The reasons for the apparent deceleration of the growth rate in the EMRA area and the continued acceleration of growth in the NWRA area, in particular, is uncertain. There will be an element of playing catch-up in the regions, with the SRA and then NWRA normally following the development trends in the more populous EMRA area. Capacity constraints, such as the capacity of the private and public sector to process applications, for example, may also take effect as development pressure builds within each respective region.

3.5 Applications Granted: Use-type

Applications for permission are made for all types of development. But, for statistical gathering purposes, the CSO categorises them into a limited number of development or use types. In 2021, a total of 32,609 applications were granted permission[24]. As can be seen from Figure 9, residential development (categorised as dwellings by the CSO) constitutes by far the largest share of applications granted permission in 2021 at 65% (21,081 grants[25]), compared to 60% share in 2020 (15,356 grants).

Apart from the catch-all 'other functional categories', accounting for over 12% of grants (c. 4,099), the next highest distinct categories of planning applications granted relate to civil engineering (7.4%, 2,420), commercial buildings (4.8%, 1,593) and agriculture (4.7%, 1,492). While the percentage share for each of these categories has decreased since 2020, the absolute numbers for each category was higher in 2021. This, again, appears to be indicative of pent-up demand following removal of Covid restrictions.

Figure 9 **Percentage of Planning Applications Granted Permission (32,609) by Development Type 2021 (CSO, 2022)**



Not only is residential the most productive sector (in terms of numbers of applications and permissions granted), it has also grown more rapidly than any of the other use type categories (refer also to Annual Report 2019 for further discussion). Given the importance of the residential sector to wider society and the economy, planning applications for residential development are discussed in detail in the following section.

[24] CSO table BHQ13.

[25] The divergence between the CSO and DHLGH datasets means that this figure differs from that referred to in Section 3.

In 2021, 42,991 residential units were granted planning permission, a marginal decrease (3.5%) on the 44,538 units granted in 2020, and the first annual decline since the recession. Nevertheless, the number of residential units securing planning permission remains at a high level.

3.6 Residential Development

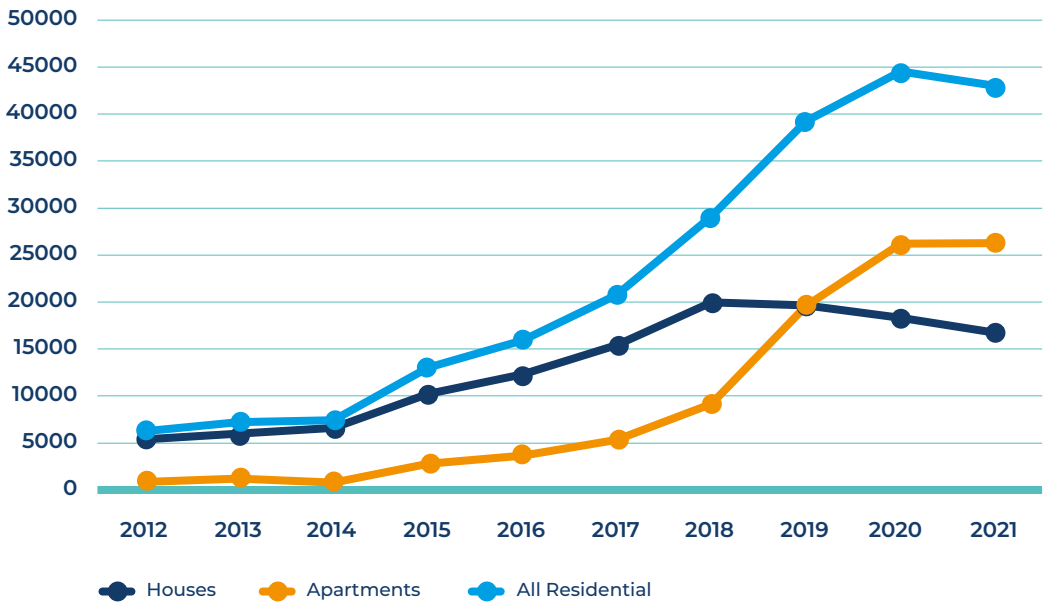
3.6.1 Housing Unit Type Mix

Demand for residential development and the nature of residential units proposed are key indicators of the health of the economy, albeit with a time lag due to the time taken to prepare an application and for it to progress through the planning system.

This can be clearly seen in the demand for housing over the last 10 years, as detailed in Figure 10, as the economy went through recession and recovery following the so-called Celtic tiger years.

In 2021, 42,991 residential units[26] were granted planning permission, a marginal decrease (3.5%) on the 44,538 units granted in 2020, and the first annual decline since the recession.

Figure 10 Residential Units Granted Permission 2012-2021 (CSO, 2022)



[26] Comprising houses and apartments only. Student accommodation is categorised separately as communal living by the CSO.

The number of house units permitted decreased c.8.7% on 2020, while the number of apartments permitted remained level.

Nevertheless, the number of residential units securing planning permission remains at a high level.

It is notable, however, that this decrease occurred at the same time as the overall number of applications granted permission for residential development has increased significantly, by c.37% over 2020 (c.5,750). It is evident, therefore that a greater number of decisions to grant planning permission for residential development were in respect of development proposals for smaller housing developments (scheme housing / multi-development houses), or perhaps for one-off housing / single house units[27].

In 2021, the trend evident in 2019 and 2020 of increasing rates of apartments permitted and decreasing rates of house units permitted, continued - 26,272 apartment units (61%) and 16,719 house units (39%). This compares with 26,224 apartments (58.9%) and 18,314 house units (41.1%) in 2020. The number of house units permitted decreased c.8.7% on 2020, while the number of apartments permitted remained level.

This signals the continuing shift towards a wider mix of housing types and potentially, more compact forms of development in line with Government policies. The reasons for these trends were explored in the 2019 Annual Report. These included the introduction of section 28 guidelines and legislation for fast track applications to ABP for larger residential development schemes (>100 units), known as a Strategic Housing Development (SHD), in place of standard applications for permission to the local authorities under section 34 of the Act. SHD is addressed in further detail under section 3.6.3.

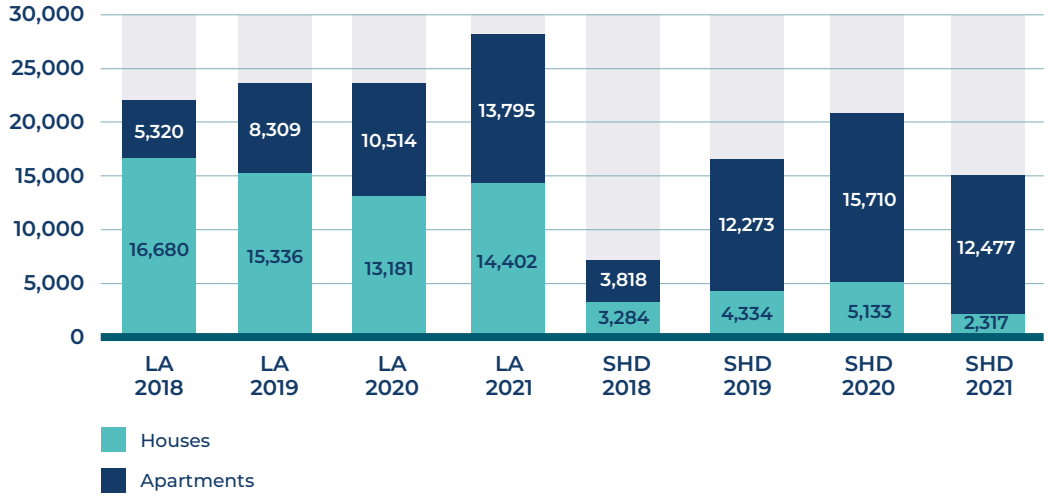
Figure 11 highlights the role that the SHD process has played in relation to the number and type of new homes permitted through the planning system[28]. The total number of new homes permitted through the SHD process rose each year to 2020. Last year saw a steep drop off (c.30%) in units permitted through SHD, which accounted for 14,794 units, compared to almost 21,000 units in 2020.

The breakdown of residential units granted permission reflects the policy initiatives to encourage compact growth and higher densities. Similar to 2020, the majority (84%) of units permitted under SHD were apartment units.

[27] As outlined later in this report, the proportion of one-off home type applications increased markedly in 2021.

[28] This section uses two different data sets (CSO and ABP) and for that reason general conclusions only are drawn.

Figure 11 Number of Residential Units Granted Permission 2018-2021 (CSO, 2019-2022, ABP, 2018-2021)



The number of apartment units granted permission by local authorities has also increased year on year. In total, c. 50% of all apartments were permitted through the local authority route in 2021.

However, the planning data on the house units (greater number of residential development applications granted permission, but fewer houses permitted overall) points to a decrease in the number of houses proposed in housing schemes[29] and an increase in the number of one-off houses[30] permitted.

In 2021, one-off houses accounted for 45% of all houses permitted in the State at 7,499 units. This compares to 27%, 29% and 30% in 2018, 2019 and 2020, respectively, and represents an increase of 42% over the 5,292 one-off houses permitted in 2020[31].

One-off house development is frequently, but not always, located outside of settlements. The CSO data does not differentiate between one-off house development permitted in urban settlements, such as a suburban corner site or side garden development, and rural one-offs.

Further research would be necessary to determine what proportion of such development is located outside of settlements.

An increase in urban generated one-off house development outside of serviced urban settlements would conflict national and regional policy objectives for compact growth.

[29] 'Multi development houses' as per CSO data table BHQ12.

[30] As referred to in CSO data table BHQ12.

[31] CSO table BHQ12.

An increase in urban generated one-off house development outside of serviced urban settlements would conflict national and regional policy objectives for compact growth and integrated land use transport.

Such development has environmental implications for land and soil in particular, but also for water and climate change. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), in Ireland's Environment An Integrated Assessment 2020 (EPA, 2021), raised concern with the level of one-off housing, noting that such housing depends on onsite wastewater systems and the use of private cars for travel for commuting and other trips. It advised that implementation of robust policies in relation to rural settlements is necessary to secure positive environmental outcomes.

Assuming that most one-off houses are self-build projects, the data suggests that more people are deciding to build their own homes. The reasons for this are likely to be complex and varied, but cannot be determined without direct survey of a sample of those applicants.

Anecdotally, there is also some evidence that applications for one-off houses in rural areas increased during the development plan review process which was underway for most counties during 2021.

The OPR will consider conducting research on the drivers for one-off house development.

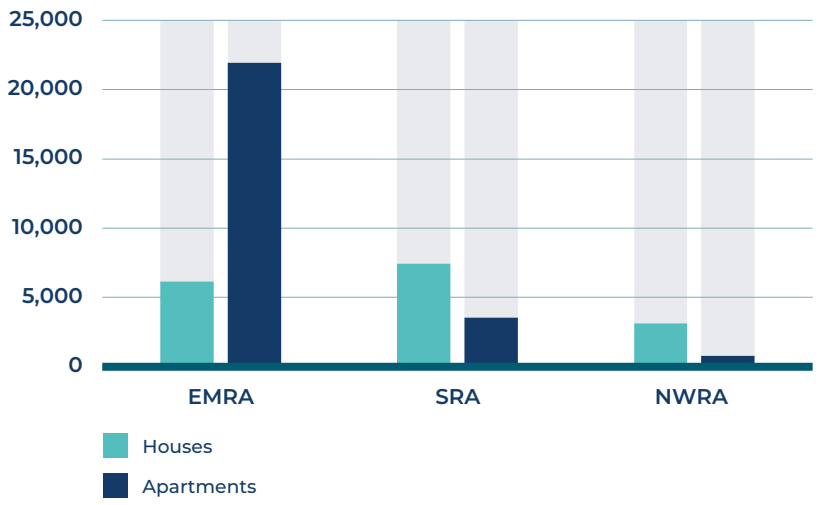
The rise in one-off applications coupled with the initial signs of a potential shift in the overall pattern of planning applications for housing development away from large scale proposals to smaller proposals and one-off proposals will need to be carefully monitored in 2022 and beyond.

This is because if such trends were to continue or escalate, they would potentially be in conflict with the objectives of the NPF in terms of securing a more compact and sustainable pattern of overall development.

3.6.2 Location of Residential Units

Figure 12 shows that there is a notable difference between the three regional assembly areas in terms of the number of residential units permitted.

Figure 12 Number of Houses and Apartments Permitted by Regional Assembly 2021 (CSO, 2022)



The EMRA area continued to dominate in 2021, accounting for 65% (28,088) of all units permitted nationally. This is a decrease from 74% in 2020, and is similar to the 64% recorded for 2019.

The number of new homes permitted in the EMRA area declined from the 32,867 homes permitted in 2020 (-4,779, or -14.5%), but was still significantly in excess of the 25,673 homes permitted in 2019. Whereas the number increased marginally in the Dublin area, it decreased throughout the rest of the EMRA area.

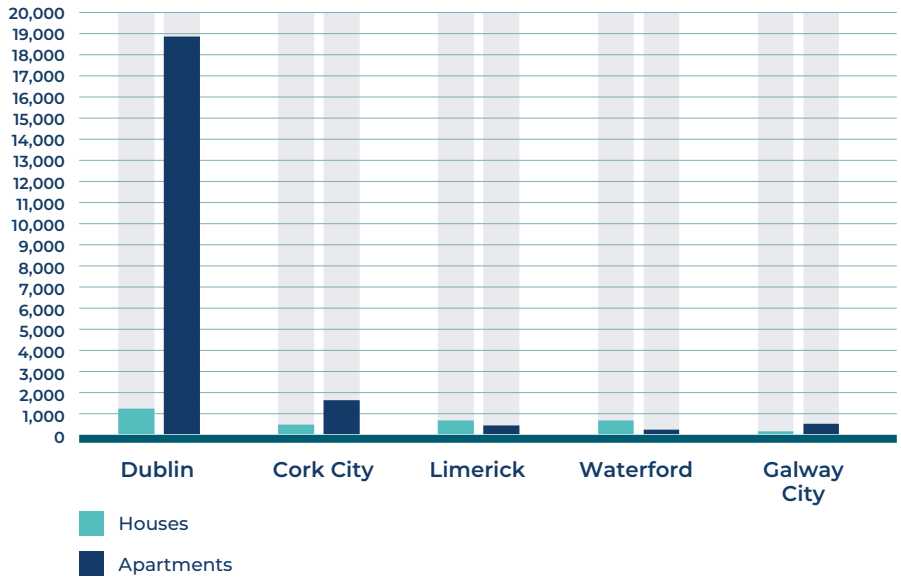
The share for the SRA area was 25% and for the NWRA 9%, compared to 19% and 7%, respectively in 2020. This represents a year-on-year increase of 2,323 units (27%) in the SRA area and of 909 units (30%) in the NWRA area. The increased share of permitted residential development in the SRA and NWRA areas is a positive trend and is consistent with the objectives of the Project Ireland 2040 NPF.

The Dublin local authorities continue to dominate the EMRA area in terms of the location of permitted residential development, increasing their share to almost 72% (c. 20,100), from c.64% in both 2020 and 2019. They accounted for 47% of all units permitted in the State.

The nature of residential development (apartments or houses) permitted within the three regional assembly areas also differ. Apartments accounted for 78% (21,923.) of units permitted within the EMRA area, compared to 32% (3,551 units) in the SRA area and 20% (798 units) in the NWRA area approximately. This compares to 71%, 27% and 16.6% for the three regional assemblies, respectively, in 2020, which demonstrates the continuing trend towards more compact growth in new developments right across the country.

Notwithstanding this, as can be seen from Figure 13, apartment development is still highly concentrated geographically within the State, focused in particular on Dublin, but also on the other cities. While 83% of all apartment units permitted nationally in 2021 were located in the EMRA area, the vast majority of those (86%) were within the four Dublin authorities. In total, 94% of all residential units permitted within the Dublin authorities were apartments.

Figure 13 Houses and Apartments Permitted by City Region 2021 (CSO, 2022)



Comparisons between the Dublin area and Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford are difficult given their sizes and differing administrative boundary arrangements, and comparisons with Limerick and Waterford are not feasible as the data is only available on a county basis. However, the data for Cork and Galway demonstrate that apartment development is also dominating in those cities - 78% of permitted units in Cork City and 77% in Galway City and - it is a reasonable assumption that similar trends are taking place in the other regional cities[32].

The trends detailed above signal the implementation of compact and sustainable patterns of urban development consistent with Government policy.

3.6.3 Strategic Housing Development

Section 3.6.1 reviewed the number and type of residential units permitted through both Section 34 applications and SHD applications for the years 2018-2021. The following section considers the overall output of SHD applications in 2021 in more detail, including shared accommodation units and student bed spaces. It also entails an analysis of SHD pre-application requests in 2021 which are indicative of future development trends.

The statutory provisions, which required SHD applications[33] to be made directly to ABP, became operative in July 2017, with the first applications received in 2018. While these statutory provisions have since been discontinued, the SHD process remained in operation for 2021[34].

ABP received 118 valid SHD applications during 2021, an increase on 110 SHD applications in 2020 and similar to the 119 SHD applications in 2019.

A total of 101 SHD applications were decided during 2021, compared with 126 in 2020 and 82 in 2019. Of the 101 decided applications, 74 were granted planning permission, two were split decisions[35] and 25 applications were refused permission.

The number of units permitted from the SHD applications granted permission in 2021 was:

- 2,317 houses;
- 12,477 apartments;
- 939 shared accommodation units; and
- 1,837 student bed spaces.

It is mandatory to undertake pre-application consultations with ABP on SHD cases and the amount of pre-application requests is a useful indicator of potential development trends and location of new residential development.

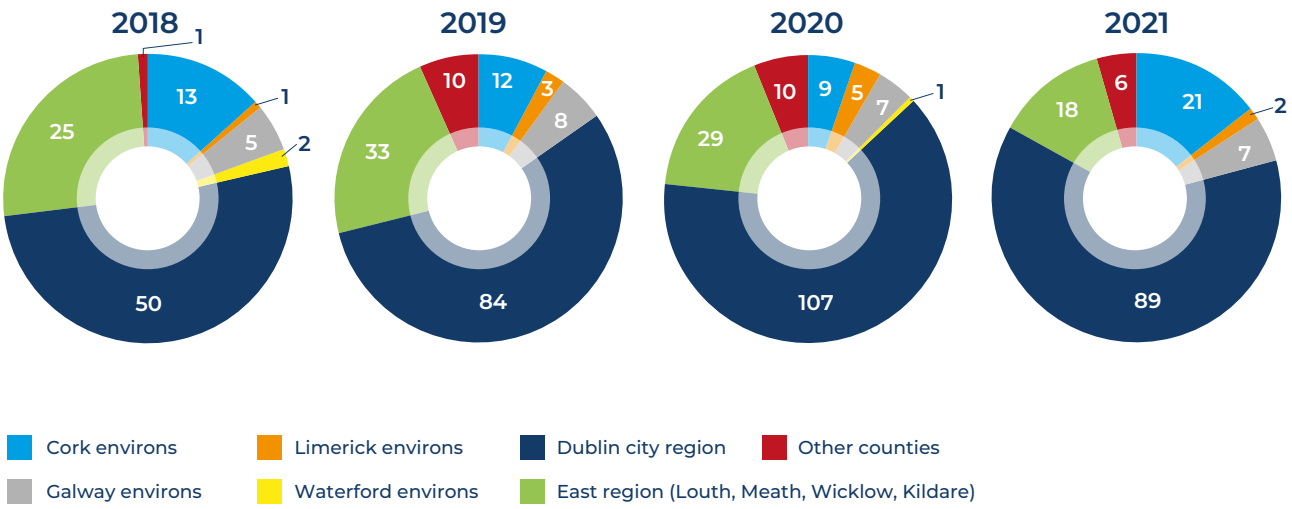
[32] The corresponding percentages are 38% in Limerick City and County and 26% in Waterford City and County.

[33] Comprising proposals of 100 or more houses, 200 or more bed spaces for student accommodation or 200 or more bed spaces for shared accommodation units. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (the Minister) issued Section 28 guidance which stood down any new applications for shared accommodation/ co-living units in 2020.

[34] Although these provisions came to an end in February 2022, there is a 16 week grace period for making an SHD application where the SHD applicants already have an SHD opinion, or have commenced consultation and are awaiting on an SHD opinion. The Large-scale Residential Development Act and Regulations Act 2021 was signed into law on 14 December 2021. Large scale residential development will now be determined by the local authority in the first instance, with an appeal available to ABP.

[35] A split decision is where ABP decides to grant permission for part of the development and to refuse permission for another part of the development.

Figure 14 Number of Strategic Housing Consultation Requests Lodged Per Annum 2018-2021 (ABP, 2019-2022)



There was a decline in SHD valid pre-planning applications submitted in 2021, with 143 applications made, compared to 168 in 2020, a drop of almost 15%.

In terms of geographical distribution (see Figure 14), the Dublin city region maintained its dominance, with 62% of all pre-application requests (compared to 64% in 2020), although the number of requests dropped by 18 (almost 17%).

The other notable geographical area of demand for SHD is the Cork area, with Cork City Council and Cork County Council accounting for a combined total of 21 requests, a figure comparable with the individual Dublin local authorities. This is an increase of 133% on 2020 and is significantly above that of any of the previous years.

Galway City and County continued to show consistent demand for SHD, with seven requests, as per 2020, and eight in 2019.

It is also noteworthy that in some of the other regional cities identified for growth in the NPF, there were no requests (Waterford) or very few (Limerick, two requests).

3.6.4 Residential Completions

Enabling appropriately located and levels of housing supply is one of the primary objectives of the planning process. Figure 15 shows that up to and including 2019, the construction sector continued to expand, increasing the number of dwelling units completed from 10,000 to 21,147 units.

In 2020, the total number of new dwelling completions declined, if only marginally, by 2.6%, to 20,593 units[36]. In 2021, the rate of dwelling unit completions effectively remained static at 20,570 units[37].

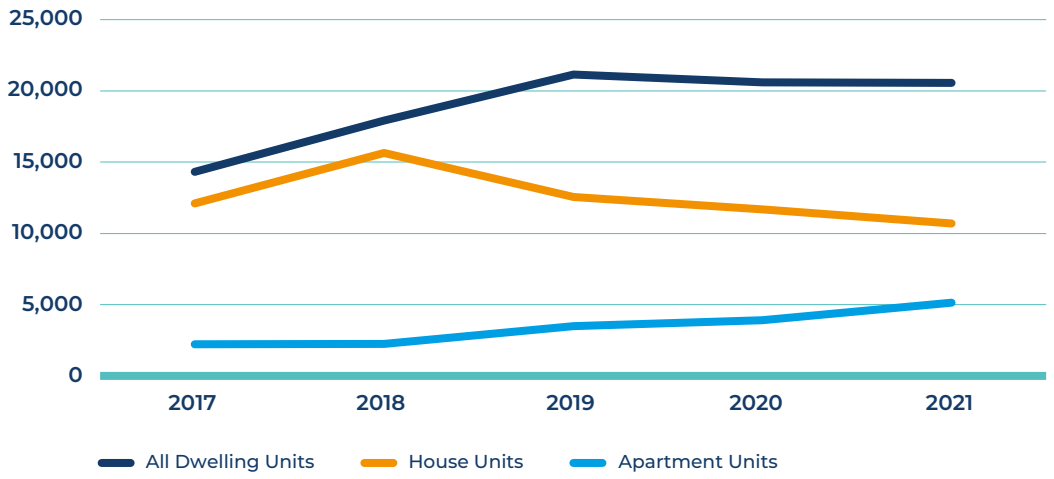
Although the slowdown evident in the past two years is relatively minor, in absolute terms, it is significant when seen in the context of the momentum that had been building up with the construction sector over the previous years.

[36] The figures have been revised from the 2020 Annual Report based on updated CSO data.

[37] CSO Table NDA02.

In 2021, the rate of dwelling unit completions effectively remained static at 20,570 units.

Figure 15 Total Dwellings, Houses and Apartments Completed Per Annum, 2017 – 2021 (CSO, 2022)



Between 2015 and 2019[38] completions increased annually, on average, by more than 31%[39], or c.3, 500 units.

The reasons for this slowdown are multiple, complex and interlinked but the Covid pandemic restrictions, skilled labour shortages and the disruption of supply lines, some attributable to Brexit are all likely to have played a part.

However, a review of CSO quarterly statistics on the residential completions[40] indicates that the construction industry expanded rapidly over 2021 - from Q1, which recorded 3,967 completions, to Q4 with 6,968 completions. This suggests that the industry has been rapidly readjusting to the constraints of the last few years and that residential completions are on course to increase during 2022. Although it is possible that this may be disrupted by rising energy costs.

38 See Figure 14, Annual Report Part II 2019, and Figure 15, Annual Report Part II 2020, for figures.

39 By between 18%-45%.

40 CSO Table NDQ01.

The construction industry expanded rapidly over 2021 - from Q1, which recorded 3,967 completions, to Q4 with 6,968 completions.

In terms of residential unit types, 5,137 apartment units were completed in 2021, an increase of over 30% over the 3,914 units in 2020, continuing the trend of increasing apartment construction in recent years. In contrast to house scheme units completions which declined by 8.6% (1,002 units), continuing the trend first evident in 2020.

Some emerging trends in the geographical distribution and the average size of residential units completed in 2021 are also worth noting:

- 3,971 apartment units were completed in Dublin, representing over three-quarters (77.8%) of apartments completed in the country. In total, 64% of all units completed in Dublin were apartments[41]; and
- The average size of the dwelling units completed continues to fall year on year, to 79 sq.m. in 2021, from 82 sq.m. in 2020, and 86 sq.m. from 2019. This trend is consistent with shift from house units to apartment units in the construction industry and a move towards more compact growth patterns of development.

3.7 Non-Residential Development

As illustrated in Figure 9, planning applications approved for non-residential development constitute a significant proportion of all planning approvals. This is also confirmed in Figure 16, which sets out the total floor area of approved developments by use type[42].

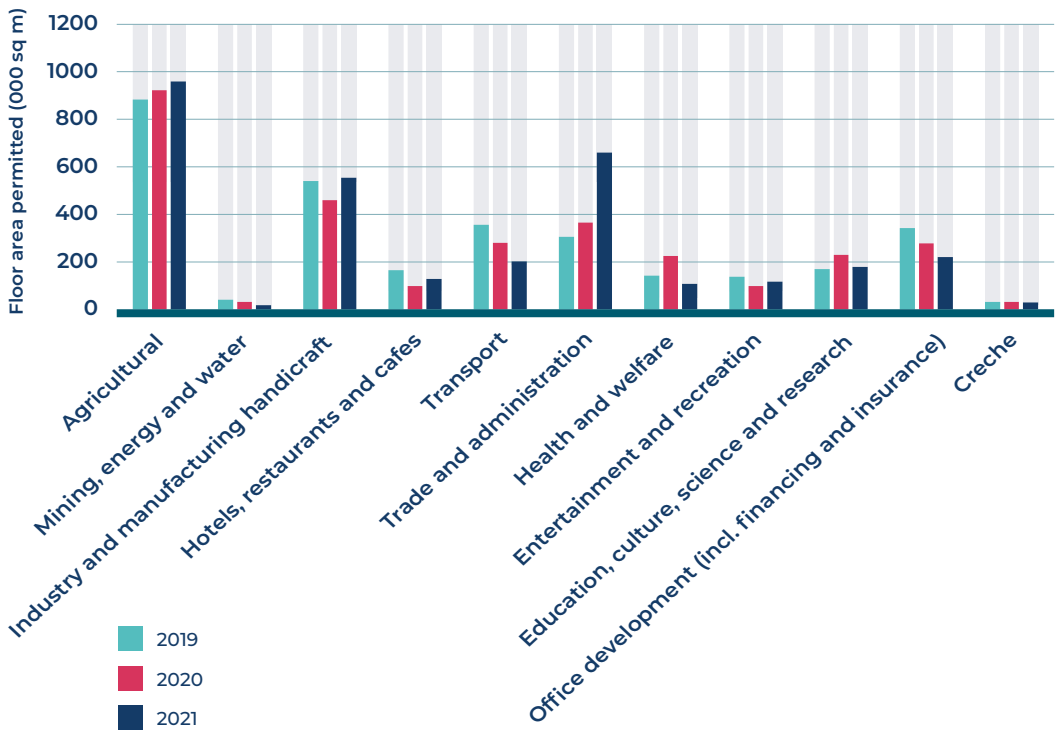
Agricultural-related approvals comprise the largest category of non-residential, development by floor area, at 959,000 sq.m in 2021. This would appear to arise from a combination of the significance of agriculture to the Irish economy[43] and the large floor area of agricultural buildings. The floor area approved in 2021 was up 36,000 sq.m on 2020, compared to an increase of 76,000 sq.m in 2020 on 2019. This trend would suggest a growing and modernising agricultural sector.

[41] https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/ndc/newdwellingcompletionsq42021/

[42] CSO Table BHA07.

[43] In 2020 the sector accounted for over 6% of Gross National Income and 9% of exports in value terms, and for 38% of total indigenous exports and over 60% of indigenous manufactured exports (Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine, 9 February 2022).

Figure 16 **Total non-Residential Floor Area Permitted Per Use Type 2019-2021 (CSO, 2022)**



The total area of industrial and manufacturing floor space approved (554,000 sq.m) increased by 94,000 sq.m compared to 2020. This is broadly similar to the floor space approved in 2019, but is markedly higher than the 426,000 sq.m for 2018. The figure remains much greater than for the middle of the decade, which only reached 78,000 sq.m in 2014.

The most significant growth was in the trade and administration sector, which was particularly robust in 2021. Approved floor space totalled 660,000 sq.m, an increase of c.80%, when compared to 2020 and more than double the figure for 2019.

It remains to be seen how much of permitted floor space in the trade and administration sector will be actualised, but it nonetheless represents a very positive indicator of the economy in 2021.

In contrast, the total quantity of office floor space granted permission continued to fall, decreasing by c.26% and c.35% over floor space approved in 2020 and 2019, respectively. This may reflect changed working patterns that have emerged during the Covid pandemic.

The total quantity of office floor space granted permission continued to fall, decreasing by c.26% and c.35% over floor space approved in 2020 and 2019.

The permitted health floor space approved in 2021 was 107,000 sq.m. This represents the lowest floor space permitted since 2019. Whereas approved education floor space, at 178,000 sq.m, was down c.23% on 2020, this level is broadly similar to that for 2019.

3.7.1 Renewable Energy Sector

As noted in previous annual reports, the renewable energy sector has become a major area of work for the planning system and this report aims to keep abreast of significant developments in this area on an annual basis.

It is a major priority of Government policy, including through the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 and the Climate Action Plan 2021[44], to greatly expand renewable energy resources in order to meet national targets to reduce CO2 emissions for 2030 and 2050. The data below indicates that the planning system continues to make progress in implementing this policy, even if the progress in terms of expanding the level of installed capacity is slow. The OPR will continue to undertake its statutory duty in its assessment and evaluation of development plans to ensure implementation of government policy.

Although renewable energy covers a wide range of project types, the most prominent and highest producing sector is wind energy. Useful annual statistics are available from Wind Energy Ireland and from ABP's decisions on Strategic Infrastructure Development (SID) (see section 2.7.2) and on planning appeals[45].

Wind Energy Ireland report that the capacity for wind energy in the state continued to expand over 2021, increasing to over 300 operational wind farms and an installed capacity of 4,332.5MW (a marginal increase on 4,235MW in 2020)[46]. The development of wind farms has been facilitated to a large extent by the SID provisions.

Applications for largescale wind farms (more than 25 turbines or a total output greater than 50 megawatts) are made directly to ABP. In addition, many applications for subthreshold wind farm development are appealed to ABP[47]. ABP's data details activity in this area.

In 2021, two wind energy developments were approved through the SID process (see section 3.7.2 below for further information on the SID process). These were:

- 21 wind turbine (82MW capacity output) development at Derrinlough, Co. Offaly; and
- 13 wind turbine (75MW capacity output) repowering project at the Barnesmore Windfarm, Co. Donegal.

Determinations by ABP on mandatory SID pre-applications indicate future wind energy projects that will come before ABP as SID projects. In 2021, two wind farm projects, with up to 33 wind turbines and a combined estimated total output of 160-180MW, were determined to constitute SID through ABP's SID pre-application consultations procedure.

[44] The Climate Action Plan 2021 sets an indicative onshore wind capacity key performance indicator of approximately 8GW for 2030.

[45] Although solar power is a growing sector, it is difficult to obtain useful statistics for permitted solar energy developments in terms of the intended MW output or capacity of those development and therefore it is not feasible to compile statistics for such development as part of this report.

[46] https://windenergyireland.com/about-wind/facts-stats (16/08/22)

[47] Each of the four wind energy developments decided by the Board in 2021, as normal appeals, was refused permission.

A further project to increase the size of the turbines in the authorised Upperchurch Windfarm, Co. Tipperary, increasing the overall capacity up to 88MW, was also determined to be strategic infrastructure. The issuing of a SID pre-application determination by ABP allows a project to progress to application stage.

3.7.2 Strategic Infrastructure Development (SID)

Applications for public and private SID are made directly to ABP. These include a range of major energy infrastructure, transport infrastructure, environmental infrastructure or health infrastructure projects designated under the Seventh Schedule of the Act. They also include certain electricity transmission projects, defined under section 182(1A) of the Act. A SID application may be made by a private entity, by statutory undertakers[48] or by local authorities on public projects. A total of 338 SID applications have been made to ABP since the statutory provisions were introduced in 2007.

According to ABP's Annual Report 2021, 30 SID applications were received in 2021, quite a significant increase on the number of SID application cases received in recent years – 24 in 2020, 26 in 2019 and 20 in 2018[49]. In total, 19 cases were decided in 2021, the same as for 2020 and compared with 21 cases in 2019 and 14 in 2018.

It is mandatory to undertake pre-planning consultation with ABP on SID cases, except for local authority applications. The number of requests can again indicate the level of confidence in the economy, although as the numbers are relatively small, fluctuations should not be given too much weight.

In total, 68 pre-application consultation requests were received in 2021, compared with 50 in 2020, 38 in 2019 and 58 in 2018. In addition, ABP's determinations on pre-SID consultations was virtually unchanged at 40, compared to 41 each in 2020 and 2019 and 39 in 2018.

The SID data reflects the strong rebound in economic growth.

3.8 Urban and Rural Regeneration

Urban and rural regeneration are key policy objectives of the NPF, closely linked to the achievement of the national strategic outcomes of compact growth and strengthened rural communities. The NDP 2030 supports the achievement of these national strategic outcomes through a range of targeted funding initiatives and policy approaches, in a carefully tailored approach of government supports.

In particular, the initiatives seek to regenerate and rejuvenate towns and cities, to identify solutions for ongoing obstructions to such development, to promote more residential and mixed-use development within the existing built-up footprints of urban areas, and to ensure that cities and towns are attractive and vibrant places.

Funding is allocated to individual projects based on the proposed implementation of relevant strategies prepared by the local authorities. There is significant workload in the preparation of bids and in the executing of successful projects.

[48] A person authorised by or under an enactment or instrument to undertake specified functions including, inter alia, to carry out work or construction (section 2 of the Act).

[49] Note, based on informal sources of data, it is possible that the figures for SIDs in the Annual Report exclude some cases.

In parallel, rural regeneration initiatives seek to support rural renewal by strengthening and building resilience in rural towns, villages and communities, thereby delivering on the objectives of Project Ireland 2040.

The key initiatives introduced by Government are the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF), the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) and the Town and Village Renewal Scheme[50].

Funding under these initiatives has, and is being, allocated as follows:

- URDF Call 1 (2018)[51] - 312m
- URDF Call 2 (2021)[52] - 1.3b
- RRDF[53] - 315m
- Town and Village Renewal Scheme[54] - 113m

3.8.1 Urban Regeneration and Development Fund

The URDF was launched in 2018 and aims to support more compact and sustainable development in urban areas by providing part-funding for applicant-led projects, which regenerate and rejuvenate towns and cities. The selected projects seek to deliver a greater proportion of residential and mixed-use development within the existing built-up footprints of cities and large towns.

To date, there have been two calls for proposals under the URDF[55], and almost €312 million for 87 projects was allocated under Call 1. In March 2021, URDF funding of €1.3 billion was announced to support a further 45 proposals approved under Call 2. Table 5 provides a sample of successful Call 2 projects. A complete list of projects is on the DHLGH website.

Table 5 Examples of URDF Funded Projects, Call 2

Project Lead	Project	Funding €
EMRA Area		
South Dublin	Clonburris	186m
Dublin City	North Inner City Concept Area 1 North Inner City Concept Area 2	121.3 m 53 m
Kildare Co. Co.	Celbridge to. Hazelhatch Link Road	10.23 m
SRA Area		
Waterford City & County	Waterford City Centre Regeneration	27.66m
Wexford Co. Co.	Trinity Wharf	18.49m
Kilkenny Co. Co.	City Centre Enhanced Liveability Project	6.64m
NWRA Area		
Galway City Council	Transport Connectivity Project	40.3m
Cavan Co. Co.	Abbeylands Regeneration	14.49m
Mayo Co. Co.	Castlebar Historic Core Reactivation Initiative	8.53m

50 In addition, the Town Centre First policy was launched in 2022 and will be covered in the 2022 Report.

51 https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/56ef8-urban-regeneration-and-development-fund-urdf/#:~:text=The%20URDF%20is%20one%20of,euro%20is%20available%20for%202021.

52 https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/56ef8-urban-regeneration-and-development-fund-urdf/#:~:text=The%20URDF%20is%20one%20of,euro%20is%20available%20for%202021.

53 https://www.gov.ie/en/service/05bfe-rural-regeneration-and-development-fund/

54 https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/0012f5-town-and-village-renewal-scheme/

55 https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/56ef8-urban-regeneration-and-development-fund-urdf/#

3.8.2 Rural Regeneration and Development Fund

The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF), also launched in 2018 provides investment to support rural renewal and strengthen and build resilience in rural towns, villages and communities.

Four schemes are funded through the RRDF:

- RRDF Scheme Category 1 for large scale capital projects;
- RRDF Scheme Category 2 for project proposals suitable for future Category 1 applications; and
- Town and Village Renewal Scheme.

3.8.2.1 RRDF Category 1 and Category 2

The RRDF Category 1 and Category 2 funding is targeted towards revitalising rural towns, villages and outlying areas with populations of less than 10,000. Funding is targeted to address dereliction, the re-use of heritage and other buildings and to provide facilities and infrastructure, such as remote working and digital hubs.

In April 2021, the third call for Category 1 applications was concluded[56]. Funding of €84.5 million was approved for 25 Category 1 projects with a total value of €102.5 million. A third call for Category 2 applications was announced in May 2021 with 53 applications submitted. A sample of successful projects approved in 2020 and 2021 are set out in Table 6. A complete list of projects is on the DHLGH website.

Table 6 Examples of RRDF Funded Projects, Category 1 and 2, 2020 and 2021

Project Lead	Project	Funding €
EMRA Area		
Laois Co. Co.	Portarlington Market House refurbishment and reuse	1m
Westmeath Co. Co.	Kinnegad Regeneration	7.6m
Kildare Co. Co.	Kildare Town Renewal	1.75m
SRA Area		
Cork Co. Co.	Youghal Public Library project, by the renovation and extension of a collection of derelict buildings on Youghal's North Main Street.	4m
Údarás na Gaeltachta	Gteic Uíbh Ráthaigh	2m
Limerick Co. Co.	Foynes Flying Boat and Maritime Museum	1.5m
NWRA Area		
Donegal Co. Co.	Carndonagh Tus NUA Regeneration Project providing a digital fabrication laboratory and co-working hub.	8.2m
Waterways Ireland	The Ulster Canal Restoration Phase 2 project	5.5m
Sligo Co. Co.	Public Realm Enhancement Strandhill and Rosses Point	202,000

[56] https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7be140-test/

3.8.2.2 Town and Village Renewal Scheme

The Town and Village Renewal Scheme, introduced in 2016, provides funding for medium and small scale projects that aim to make rural towns and villages more attractive and sustainable. Funding can be provided for 15 wide-ranging interventions including public-realm, town centre enhancements, and economic development projects. The Scheme has an annual budget of €15 million, with funding of up to €500,000 available on a project.

The 2021 Scheme prioritised the renovation of derelict and vacant buildings in town centres and bringing buildings back into use. Successful projects funded in 2021 include the sample in Table 7.[57]

3.8.3 Town Centre First

The Town Centre First (TCF) initiative[58] aims to provide a co-ordinated, policy framework to address the decline in the health of towns across Ireland and support measures to regenerate and revitalise them.

A key feature is the preparation of a non-statutory TCF Plan[59] for the town concerned to be driven by the local community and supported by the local authority, with the aim to identify specific interventions to address the challenges facing that town.

Table 7 Examples of Town and Village Renewal Scheme Funded Projects 2020 and 2021

Project Lead	Project	Funding €
EMRA Area		
Wicklow Co. Co.	Reconnection of Wicklow Town Centre to the port	221,339
Fingal Co. Co.	Oldtown Village Health Check	22,500
Louth Co. Co.	Community Garden Enhancement, Baltray	46,148
SRA Area		
Carlow Co. Co.	Tullow Town Park Redevelopment	450,000
Cork City Council	Development of Inch Park	204,120
Clare Co. Co.	Clonlara Village Centre Regeneration	454,050
NWRA Area		
Cavan Co. Co.	Con Smith Park, Cavan Town Enhancement	499,249
Galway Co. Co.	Leenane Outdoor Recreational Facility	250,000
Leitrim Co. Co.	Mohill Station House Redevelopment	500,000

[57] https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/0012f5-town-and-village-renewal-scheme/

[58] https://merrionstreet.ie/en/news-room/news/government_launches_first_ever_town_centre_first_policy.173059.shortcut.html

[59] Such non-statutory plans can be useful for the practical implementation of the objectives of statutory development plan or local area plans, which often include objectives for town centre improvements.

In 2021, 26 towns were selected under the scheme, with each local authority provided with €100,000 to support the development of a TCF plan for the town.

Table 8 Towns Selected for Funding under the Town Centre First Initiative 2021

County	Town	Population
Carlow	Tullow	4,673
Cavan	Bailieborough	2,683
Clare	Sixmilebridge	2,669
Cork	Skibbereen	2,778
Donegal	Milford	1,037
Fingal	Lusk	7,022
Galway	Gort	2,994
Kerry	Milltown	2,142
Kildare	Clane	7,280
Kilkenny	Urlingford	1,038
Laois	Rathdowney	1,271
Leitrim	Carrick On Shannon	4,062
Limerick	Abbeyfeale	2,023
Longford	Longford Town	10,008
Louth	Dunleer	1,822
Mayo	Killala	562
Meath	Enfield	3,239
Monaghan	Carrickmacross	5,032
Offaly	Clara	3,336
Roscommon	Strokestown	825
Sligo	Tubbercurry	1,986
Tipperary	Roscrea	5,446
Waterford	Portlaw	1,742
Westmeath	Moate	2,763
Wexford	New Ross	8,040
Wicklow	Blessington	5,520

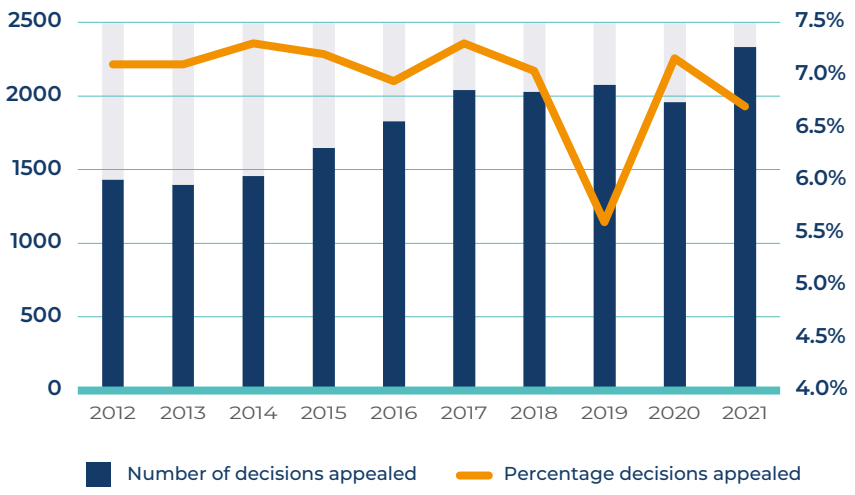
4 Planning Appeals

4.1 Planning Appeals

ABP is the appellate body for planning decisions made by local authorities. It is the authority for direct applications for certain cases deemed strategic by government, including SID and SHD[60]. SID and SHD are addressed under the development management section. This section only considers appeals to ABP.

Figure 17 illustrates the number of appeals to ABP overlaid with the percentage of all local authority decisions appealed to ABP on an annual basis from 2012-2021. The OPR Annual Report 2019 discussed the trends evident over the ten-year period to 2019, noting in particular the increase in appeals as momentum increased in the economic recovery from the middle of the period.

Figure 17 Number and Percentage of all Decisions Appealed per Year (ABP, 2022)



[60] SHD provisions applied throughout 2021. Although these provisions came to an end in February 2022, there is a 16 week grace period for making an SHD application where the SHD applicants already have an SHD opinion, or have commenced consultation and are awaiting on an SHD opinion. Large scale residential development will now be determined by the local authority in the first instance, with an appeal available to ABP.

The number of appeals in 2021, at 2,331, shows an increase over previous years, representing the highest number of appeals received by ABP since 2012. The figure represents an additional 375 and 255 appeals over those received in 2020 and 2019 respectively.

The trend in the percentage of all decisions appealed, which generally hovers at around 7%, dropped between 2018 and 2019 (down from 7% to 5.6%). It returned to a rate of 7.2% in 2020 and steadied at 6.7% in 2021. This is consistent with annual percentage rate over the rest of the decade

4.2 Reversal of Decision on Appeal

As noted in the 2019 and 2020 reports, the reversal rate of local authority decisions by ABP had been following a generally declining trend over recent years until 2019 when it increased for the first time in a decade. Figure 18 shows that the moderate increasing trend has continued through 2020 and 2021, reaching 27.3% in 2020 and 27.7% in 2021. However, these figures are well within the average range for the period.

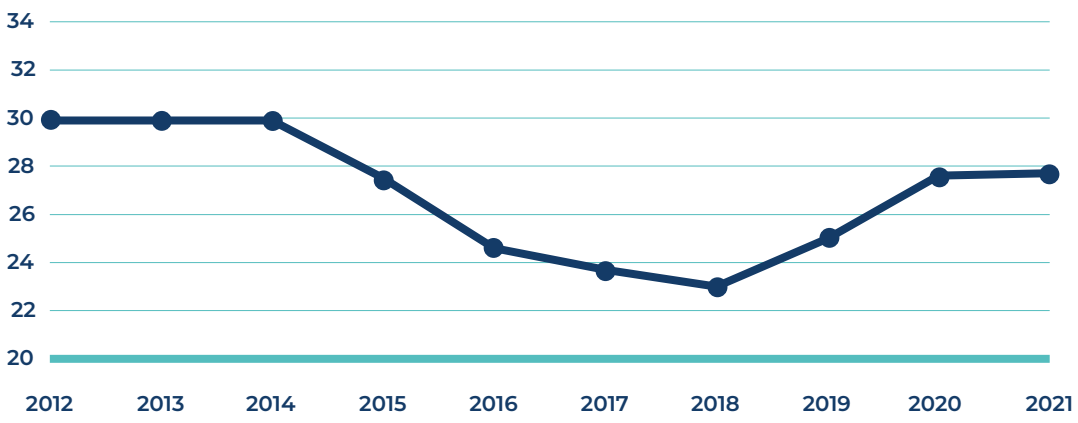
In addition, Figure 19 provides data for 2021 on reversal rates for the 31 local authorities.

The rate of appeal tends to be higher in the more urban local authorities, including the Dublin authorities and Cork and Galway city authority areas. It exceeded 10% of all decisions in all urban authorities, except Cork City at 9.1%. Dublin City experienced the highest rate of appeal, as in 2020, at 16% (416 decisions appealed).

In contrast, for many rural authorities, the appeal rate was 5% or less, dropping as low as 2.2% in Longford.

Very significant differences can be seen between the overturn rates for different local authorities. However, a high degree of caution should be applied in interpreting these figures, as the absolute numbers for many rural authorities may be very low. For example, only seven planning decisions were appealed in Longford in 2020, 13 decisions in Carlow and 21 in Laois, compared to 416 for Dublin City.

Figure 18 National Average Reversal Rates (%) (ABP, 2022)



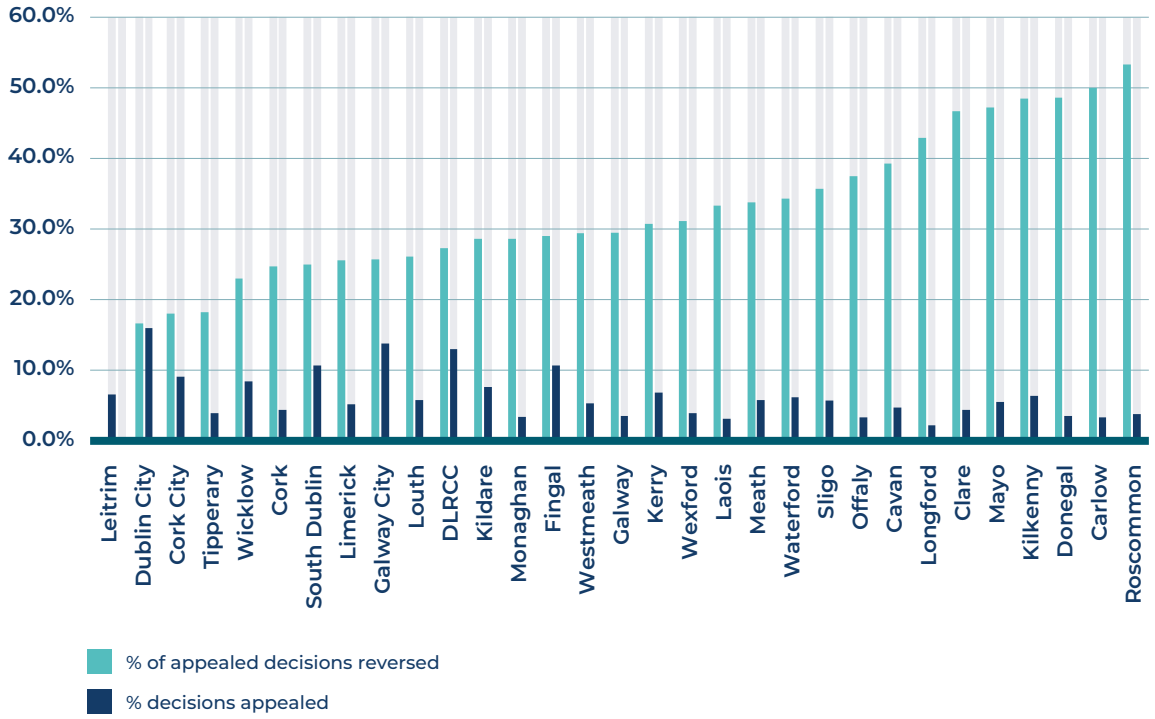
Nevertheless, of the 15 decisions by Roscommon County Council determined on appeal by ABP in 2021, 8 or 53% were overturned. A similar rate (50%) was evident for Carlow (6 of 12 decisions overturned), Donegal 48% (18 of 37 decisions overturned) and Kilkenny 48% (16 of 33 decisions overturned).

As these statistics are based on very small numbers, the annual reversal rate may fluctuate widely, especially for smaller, rural counties. For example, the corresponding rates for Roscommon, Carlow, Donegal and Kilkenny in 2020 were 19%, 29%, 39% and 15%[61].

Reversal rates for urban authorities tended to be lower than the national average in 2021, e.g. 16.6% in Dublin City and 18% in Cork City, with all urban authorities under 30%. In total, the overturn rate exceeded 30% of determined cases in 15 local authorities, while seven displayed a reversal rate of over 40%.

A detailed examination of the longer-term annual reversal rates and the factors underlying the variation across the local authorities will be considered by the OPR as a future area of research, in conjunction with local authorities, ABP and the DHLGH. Such research might determine factors responsible for higher overturn rates and inform solutions to provide for more consistency in planning decision-making.

Figure 19 Percentage Reversal Rate on Appeal by Local Authority in 2021 (CSO, 2022, ABP, 2022)



[61] ABP Annual Report, 2020.

5 Enforcement, Land Activation and Legal Challenges

5.1 Planning Enforcement

NOAC publish an annual overview of enforcement activities undertaken by the 31 local authorities[62]. In 2020, (the latest year for which figures are available), 7,060 planning enforcement cases were either referred to local authorities by the public, or initiated by the authorities themselves. This was similar to the figure of 7,065 for 2019.

However, nationally, the number of investigated cases that were closed (4,983) decreased by 20.69% compared to 2019, despite the number of cases referred to or initiated being almost identical. This may have resulted from the Covid pandemic restrictions in 2020 which may have curtailed site inspections by local authorities.

The number of cases that were dismissed as trivial or without foundation, or as statute barred or exempted development, decreased to 2,178 in 2020 from 2,789 in 2019, 2,478 in 2018, and 3,401 cases in 2017. This represents a fall of 36% cases since 2017.

The OPR intends to examine the area of enforcement in more depth in the medium to longer term, informed by the outcome of the OPR pilot programme of review of local authority procedures in progress in 2021. It also intends to prepare a practice note on enforcement as part of the OPR's next Strategic Planning Research Programme.

5.2 Land Activation

The Government published Housing for All – A New Housing Plan for Ireland in September 2021, backed by the largest housing budget in the history of the State to enable it transform our housing system. It has access to over €20bn in funding through the exchequer, the Land Development Agency and the Housing Finance Agency over the next five years.

This Plan sets out objectives and actions to increase new housing supply to an average of at least 33,000 new units per year over the next decade. This will include over 10,000 social homes each year over the next five years, with 9,500 of these being new-builds, and an average of 6,000 affordable homes for purchase or rent.

[62] https://noac.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2.-NOAC-Annual-Report-2021.pdf

It also introduces incentives and measures to bring vacant and derelict properties back into residential use.

Of note, the Residential Zoned Land Tax (RZLT)[63], introduced by the Finance Act 2021, will replace the existing Vacant Site Levy (VSL). The objective of RZLT is to activate serviced land zoned for residential and mixed-residential use to increase housing supply, including through the regeneration of vacant and idle lands in urban locations. It will come into effect from 2024 and will be administered by the Revenue Commissioners rather than by local authorities. The OPR will continue to review the VSL during the period it is being phased out.

As of 1st January 2021, there were 313 sites listed on local authority vacant site registers[64]. The DHLGH estimates that these sites were liable to the 7% levy amounting to €9.96m in 2021 in respect of 2020 and a levy of €7.25m in 2022 in respect of 2021.

Local authorities also keep a register of derelict sites. The returns from local authorities indicate that c.261 sites were removed from the derelict sites register during 2021.

However, the extent of sites designated as either vacant and or derelict would appear to be very low in comparison to, for example, the number of vacant dwellings in Ireland recorded by the CSO in the last census.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that while the CSO's criteria for considering a dwelling vacant and the statutory criteria for a given site or lands to be considered as vacant and/or derelict are very different, there would appear to be very significant potential for local authorities to become more active in the area of tackling dereliction subject, to being sufficiently resourced.

The website www.vacanthomes.ie was set up by Mayo County Council on behalf of the local government sector. The website provides a central portal for individuals to anonymously log possible vacant properties and alert local authorities to those properties. As appropriate, Vacant Homes Officers[65] can then follow up with the owners to see whether the house can be re-used quickly. Statistics (May 2021) from vacanthomes.ie indicate that 5,210 properties have been recorded on the website since 2017.

The extent of sites designated as either vacant and or derelict would appear to be very low in comparison to, for example, the number of vacant dwellings in Ireland recorded by the CSO in the last census.

[63] https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/fbc41-residential-zoned-land-tax-guidelines-for-planning-authorities/

[64] DHLGH

[65] There is a Vacant Homes Officer in each local authority. The Department website provides contact details for the Officers in each county. https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/f59b3-vacant-homes-officer-contacts/

Table 9 **Vacant Site Levy (Jan 2021), Vacant Homes Logged (May 2021) and CSO Vacant Houses and Flats (excl. holiday homes) (2016)**

Planning Authority	Vacant Site Levy 01-Jan-21	Vacant Homes Logged[66] May-21	CSO vacant houses and flats (excluding holiday homes)[67] 2016 Census
Carlow	4	44	1864
Cavan	0	319	4829
Clare	14	150	6104
Cork City	0	178	4292
Cork County	12	1072	15645
Donegal	4	85	11704
Dublin City	54	542	18424
DLR	14	130	4596
Fingal	8	122	4944
Galway City	6	129	2841
Galway County	0	137	9646
Kerry	0	66	9691
Kildare	15	208	4560
Kilkenny	36	75	2995
Laois	12	56	3007
Leitrim	0	44	3589
Limerick	9	196	7752
Longford	4	40	2824
Louth	0	178	3952
Mayo	0	221	10597
Meath	16	163	4640
Monaghan	0	20	2884
Offaly	0	92	2640
Roscommon	18	84	5323
Sligo	21	47	4727
South Dublin	11	211	3495
Tipperary	0	107	7493
Waterford	16	182	5194
Westmeath	10	108	3728
Wexford	3	114	5918
Wicklow	26	90	3414
Total	313	5210	183312

[66] https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2021-05-13/263/

[67] https://data.cso.ie/table/E1068

A new fund Croí Conaithe was introduced under Housing for All (2021) to ensure that, aligned with the NPF, additional choices are made available to home buyers in our urban cores, and town centres by expanding home ownership options:

- In urban areas, for apartment living in blocks of four stories or more;
- In towns, where options for building new private dwellings has been constrained by the lack of serviced sites; and
- To support the refurbishment of vacant properties where the level of vacancy / dereliction is high.

The Croí Cónaithe Cities Scheme and Croí Cónaithe Towns Scheme have been established to achieve these objectives.

5.3 Legal Challenges

A judicial review (JR) is a procedural remedy concerned with the legality of the decision-making process. JRs are taken in court against a decision-maker and their decision. Therefore, in planning cases, JRs are usually taken against a local authority or ABP and their planning decision.

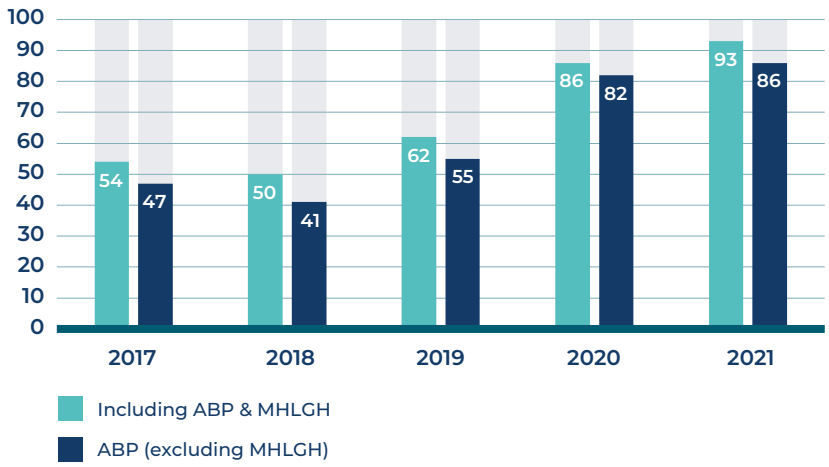
In some planning JR cases taken against ABP or local authority decisions, the Minister may be joined in the case where there is also a challenge to the planning legislation upon which the decision was made.

There is no single database of planning-related JR cases about decisions from across the central and local government sector, including ABP, albeit information on JRs is generally available to the public on the Courts Service website (courts.ie)[68].

However, ABP publishes data on legal challenges to its decisions in its annual report, and this provides a good yardstick on trends in planning JR cases.

Combining ABP's JR figures over the past five years, with information on planning JR cases involving the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (MHLGH) the levels of new applications made for JRs in the planning area involving ABP and/ or the MHLGH are set out in Figure 20.

Figure 20 Respondents on Planning-Related Legal Challenges (MHLGH, 2022, ABP, 2022)



[68] Analysis of recent judicial review cases involving the Board will be made available by the OPR as part of its ongoing review functions.

There has been a notable increase in the number of legal challenges brought against ABP decisions since 2019. In 2021, 94 legal challenges were taken against ABP decisions, where it was a respondent, as opposed to a notice party (this arose in an additional case).[69]

As noted in previous OPR Annual Reports, the increase in legal challenges against ABP, in particular, coincides with the enactment of the Environment (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2011, which introduced special legal costs rules regarding planning and environmental judicial reviews. ABP data indicates that in 66 of the cases commenced in 2021, the matters included Environmental Impact Assessment, Appropriate Assessment or public participation.

Legal challenges against SHD decisions would also appear to have led to an increase in the number of challenges. Approximately 50% of all challenges to ABP decisions in 2021 were in respect of decisions on SHD.

The OPR intends to publish a more in-depth analysis of legal challenges of ABP decisions as part of its statutory planning authority review functions.

It is also important, however, to consider the numbers of legal challenges against the absolute number of planning decisions being made within the system.

In 2021, over 34,769 planning applications were decided by local authorities[70] and 2,331 decisions (6.7%) were appealed to ABP.

In total, ABP made decisions on 2,775 planning cases[71], including 1,992 planning appeals, 101 SHD cases and 99 SID cases. Therefore, although increasing in recent years, the percentage of all of ABP's decisions subject to legal challenge remains small[72].

Of the 69 judgements issued in 2021 on legal challenges against ABP decisions, 15 decisions were upheld and 21 decisions were not upheld. In a further 19 cases, ABP consented to quashing the Order and 14 cases were discontinued, dismissed or withdrawn.

In relation to the operations of the OPR, in 2021 leave was granted to Cork County Council to apply for a JR of the Minister's decision to issue a direction under section 31 of the Act to Cork County Council's making of variation no.2 of the Cork County Development Plan 2014. The OPR was a notice party[73].

The OPR will seek the development of a database of JR cases in the planning sector. This will be done with the DHLGH, the Courts Service, the Local Government sector and ABP, in order to track, in more detail the trends and recurring aspects of judgements that need to be harnessed in feeding back into national planning knowledge, research and training programmes.

69 An Bord Pleanála.

70 DHLGH

71 This figure includes all decisions made by the Board in 2021. Appeals and other cases may be lodged in one calendar year and decided in the next.

72 Note due to the time delay in making a legal challenge, there will not be a complete calendar year overlap between year the decisions made and the legal challenge was submitted.

73 In this regard, it should be noted that under section 31 of the Act the Minister may decide to issue a direction where s/he is of the opinion that, among others, a planning authority in making the plan / variation / amendment has failed to implement a recommendation made by the Office, or failed to take account of any submission made by the Office. Under 31AM(8) the Office is required to make a recommendation to the Minister to exercise her/his functions under section 31 where the Office is of the opinion that plan has not been made consistent with its recommendations such that results in the making of a plan in a manner that fails to set out an overall strategy for the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.

6 Other Relevant Data

6.1 Finance: cost recovery

The Local Authority Financial Statement 2020, published by the DHLGH show that in 2020 the income from planning fees dropped by almost €712,000 on 2019, to c.€24.9m, a decline of c.2.8%[74]. This compares to annual increase in total planning fee income of 22%, 0.8%, 9.2% and 5.5% from 2016-2019, respectively, which reflect the strong momentum building up within the planning system as the economy rebounded from recession. The data indicates that there was a significant direct impact on the financial resources of local authorities from the Covid pandemic.

The Financial Statement data supports NOAC's contention[75], in its 2020 Performance Indicator Report, that the Covid pandemic and the emergency measures taken to mitigate it will have had a significant impact on the finances of local authorities. This will have resulted in a reduction and uncertainty over various income sources, together with increased levels of unexpected expenditures and a reduction in rates revenues.

The Financial Statements detail the annual expenditure for carrying out development management, that is the processing of planning applications and operating the planning system. The total cost of delivering development management in 2020 was €198.7m. Fees covered only 12.5% of operating costs. The system is largely funded by grants and local property tax, non-mortgage loans and other unspecified income.

The statements do not provide data on the cost of providing all planning services provided by local authorities, including forward planning and planning enforcement, at least not as separately itemised services. Such services absorb considerable resources and are essential to the effective operating of the planning system.

While it is likely that the planning fee income stream in 2021 will have increased in line with the volume of planning applications, the overall costs of delivering the planning services are likely to have increased due to the volume of development plans under review in 2020 and 2021.

[74] The statements for each year 2009-2020 are available at https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/e103b-local-authority-annual-financial-statements/

[75] https://noac.ie/?s=performance+indicators+report

6.2 Staffing and Resources

An overall breakdown of technical and administrative staff working in local authorities across the State, or within the individual authorities, is not readily available. This makes it difficult to determine the staffing resources dedicated to implement government planning policy on the ground and prevents a comparison between authorities.

According to NOAC, total whole-time equivalent staff employed by the local authority sector at the end of 2020 was 29,718, representing an increase of 1.9% or around 555 staff since 2019[76]. It also reports that 11 local authorities showed a reduction in staff numbers. While the reduction in seven of these (Monaghan, South Dublin, Wexford, Tipperary, Dublin City, Sligo and Waterford) was under 1% and three (Mayo, Roscommon and Kilkenny) was under 3%, Louth saw a 6.42% reduction or c. 41 fewer whole-time equivalent staff.

Total whole-time equivalent staff employed by the local authority sector at the end of 2020 was 29,718, representing an increase of 1.9% or around 555 staff since 2019.

[76] https://noac.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/NOAC-Local-Authority-Performance-Indicator-Report-2020.pdf

Summary and Concluding Comments

2021 was a year in which local authorities and ABP continued to deliver key statutory planning functions within strict timelines and in an operational environment that was challenging due to public health restrictions imposed as a result of the Covid pandemic.

Sustained progress was made in updating city and county development plans while a substantial backlog of updating the next tier of local area plans awaits.

High levels of throughput was also experienced in handling planning applications and appeals, with judicial review of the latter becoming a major issue for ABP.

In relation to the patterns of development enabled by planning policies and processes, housing continued to be the dominant sector of development that planning authorities dealt with in 2021.

Close monitoring will be required to see whether data signalling a shift towards a greater number of planning applications for smaller housing development proposals, particularly one-off housing, as opposed to larger scheme type housing in cities and towns, becomes a trend in 2022 and beyond.

If that trend became marked, it would signal that implementation of the NPF is becoming more difficult, but at this point data from one year is insufficient to draw definitive conclusions.

Beyond the residential sector, renewable energy continued to be a significant area of work, especially for ABP.

Close monitoring will be required to see whether data signalling a shift towards a greater number of planning applications for smaller housing development proposals, particularly one-off housing, as opposed to larger scheme type housing in cities and towns, becomes a trend in 2022 and beyond.

2021 was also a year of very significant activity for local authorities in accessing and starting to implement funding streams from Project Ireland 2040 aimed at securing urban and rural regeneration. Progress here will be a focus of future reports.

However, a critical complementary function to such investment concerns active land management and concerted action on vacant and derelict buildings, building on forthcoming initiatives such as the RZLT and vacant housing actions.

Finally, it is striking that while core planning functions continue to experience high volumes of activity, more is also being asked of planning authorities in relation to aforementioned items for example.

There is an increasing demand on our planning system. However, there is a largely static resource base, limited learning and development and planning fees only represent only a small fraction of the cost of delivering planning functions. Therefore, funding and resourcing the planning service in Ireland will likely determine whether or not it can deliver on its increasingly recognised and crucial function in enabling the proper planning and sustainable development of our country.

There is an increasing demand on our planning system. However, there is a largely static resource base, limited learning and development and planning fees only represent only a small fraction of the cost of delivering planning functions.

Oifig an
Rialaitheora Pleanála
Office of the
Planning Regulator

Office of the Planning Regulator

Fourth Floor (West Wing),
Park House, Grangegorman,

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

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