



Oifig an
Rialaitheora Pleanála
Office of the
Planning Regulator

Office of the Planning Regulator

Communications Strategy



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Foreword

Good communication is critical for the effective operation of any organisation. At the Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR), good communication will be central to all of our activities. Staff will share the responsibility for communicating clearly, concisely and effectively within the OPR, with customers and with stakeholders.

Being a recently formed organisation, we recognise we have a unique opportunity to meet high standards of communication from the outset. Establishing a transparent communications ethos with robust mechanisms and procedures, is essential to the OPR being recognised as a clear, fair and independent voice on the effectiveness of Ireland's planning process.

Planning objectives such as developing high-quality places for people to live and work is an aspiration shared by all. However, it can be difficult and complex to deliver on this. This is why explaining how the planning process works is a key function of the OPR. Accordingly, we recognise the need for openness, transparency and clarity in our communications.

This strategy sets out the OPR's communications objectives over the next four years. It supports the organisation's Strategy Statement 2019-2024 and outlines a charter that will ensure that stakeholders have the opportunity to fully understand what we do, and are facilitated to engage with and participate in our work.

In creating this strategy, we are committing our organisation to putting effective communications and engagement at the centre of our work to continuously enhance Ireland's planning process.



Niall Cussen

Planning Regulator



Introduction

The Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR) recognises the value of effective communications both internally and externally. As a public body we are committed to transparency and accountability in what we do, and we consider it important that there is a shared public understanding of our work.

This communications strategy was compiled with reference to other relevant OPR strategies including the organisation's Customer Charter. The Customer Charter outlines the OPR's commitment to delivering fair, effective, courteous and timely services to all its customers, and it gives details of our customer feedback and complaints system.

Consultation with staff was also undertaken. Specifically, individual meetings were conducted with the members of the executive management team and a staff-wide workshop was held so that all employees could make input. Best communication practice for public bodies was also considered as part of the process.

Communications principles

This strategy sets out a vision for communications and aims to:

- support open, transparent, timely and effective communication;
- support the delivery of our organisational goals;
- be an effective means of demonstrating the success of our work;
- outline communication approaches and channels that will be used to support the work we undertake in pursuit of our purpose;
- set out actions that we will undertake to help realise our vision;
- identify key communication tools, including new ways to communicate more effectively both internally and externally; and
- seek to inclusively engage with all stakeholders in a consistent manner.

Background

This Communications Strategy builds on the OPR's Strategy Statement 2019-2024 which committed to ...

“develop a communications policy with a particular focus on timely communication of changes in the planning system and topical issues with stakeholders”

The Strategy Statement 2019-2024 sets out the following goals:

- building a reputation as a clear, fair and independent voice on the effectiveness of Ireland's planning process;
- driving innovation and learning for all stakeholders in the planning process;
- focusing on the needs of customers and those with whom the OPR engages;
- creating a high-performing and efficient organisation that supports and enhances Ireland's planning process; and
- building a resilient and agile organisation with a commitment to continuous learning.

Stakeholders and audiences

Our success as an organisation relies heavily on our ability to communicate effectively with our key audiences. Good communication practice demands that we be aware of our audiences, listen to them, understand their needs and communicate in an accessible language using their preferred channels.

The OPR's audiences are varied and diverse, so methods and emphasis can be tailored accordingly. Getting the message across will require the use of various approaches such as public relations, on-line presence, media relations, social media, publications, infographics, newsletters and others.

Our key stakeholders will come from the following groups.

Internal

- Staff
- Finance, Audit and Risk Committee

External

- The public
- Local authorities
- Local authority members
- The Minister for and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government
- The National Planning Knowledge Group
- Consultees with a statutory remit in the planning process (Government Departments and State agencies etc.)
- Regulatory and oversight bodies with a mandate in the area (includes Ombudsman office, SIPO, NOAC and others)

- NGOs (An Taisce, Friends of the Irish Environment, etc.)
- Representative bodies with a stake in construction
- The Oireachtas
- Commercial and state-sponsored bodies involved in infrastructure delivery
- Professional bodies and interest groups (e.g. Irish Planning Institute, Royal Town Planning Institute)
- The third level education sector (particularly the five planning schools on the island).

OPR in the news



Channels of communication

The OPR will communicate with a range of audiences through a variety of channels. In some cases, communication will focus directly on key stakeholders such as local authorities and bodies with an interest and role in planning. In others, notably when targeting the general public, print and broadcast media and social media will be utilised.

Under this communications strategy, the OPR will use some of the following mechanisms to conduct communication with staff and stakeholders:

- national media releases;
- regional media releases;
- national and regional opinion articles;
- electronic newsletter;
- social media;
- internal meetings;
- external meetings;
- conferences/seminars;
- sector engagement;
- publications including the OPR's Annual Report;
- infographics;
- planning training workshops for elected members and staff of local authorities;
- research.

We have a chance to finally get planning right in Ireland



Niall Cussen
Opinion

At least 200 new city, county and local plans will be produced in the next six years

In its latest housing market monitor, the Banking & Payments Federation of Ireland highlighted a significant increase in house sales in Dublin's commuter belt counties – Louth, Meath, Kildare and Wicklow.

A shortage of affordably priced homes for sale or rent in the main cities invariably means households have to search further and further away from where they work or would prefer to live for that ideal home.

Finding new ways – quickly – to deliver homes and communities that people want and can afford to live in within our cities and towns is the single biggest planning issue we face. Proper and visionary planning is critical in offering the alternative to the 6am rise and 8pm return too familiar to too many commuters.

Ireland is always changing. Over the next 20 years Ireland will become home to an extra million people, requiring half a million new homes and 600,000 extra jobs under Project Ireland 2040, the Government's strategic plan.

We have an obligation to plan and manage that change in a much more environmentally responsible way, essentially the right development in the right

places and at the right time. Importantly, the Government's National Planning Framework recognises this and promotes what is known as "compact growth". This is about delivering good-quality and affordable new housing and infrastructure within the existing built-up areas of cities, towns and villages on infill and/or brownfield sites close to jobs, services and amenities.

All our cities and towns contain lots of amazing potential areas for renewal, centrally located and frequently publicly owned, for homes, jobs, amenities and services. But they need a streamlined and co-ordinated approach to their development, with investment in enabling infrastructure and supporting amenities, to realise their potential. And they don't need to be undermined by out of town development alternatives that are invariably easier and often cheaper – in the short term – to deliver.

Target
The National Planning Framework target is for at least 40 per cent of all new housing to be delivered within the existing built-up areas of cities, towns and villages on infill and/or brownfield sites. Density and consolidation, not sprawl, is needed. The scene is set. Government policy on planning has never been clearer, never been as joined up in terms of infrastructure investment following planning rather than the other way around.

What will be the response of the local authorities as they soon approach mandatory reviews of their statutory development plans in the context of new Government planning policies?

It is often claimed that local Government in Ireland is weak and exerts little influence. However, our 949 elected county councillors have an unparalleled opportunity to shape how Ireland's urban, suburban and rural areas will look and function into the future.

This is because over the next six years, at least 200 new city, county and local

plans from around the country will be produced. County councillors are responsible for approving these plans which determine which areas get zoned and approved for development.

Vision and leadership at local level is going to be key. But already, pressure is building on local councillors to open up more and more residential zonings stretching out from the cities, particularly Dublin, along mainly road transport-based routes. Do we seriously think this is the answer?

Last April, the Government established the Office of the Planning Regulator to work with local authorities in ensuring a coherent and effective approach to planning ahead. We will be conducting independent assessment of these statutory plans to ensure they have properly

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Pressure is building on local councillors to open up more residential zonings stretching out from the cities . . . Do we seriously think this is the answer?

taken on board national and regional planning objectives in addressing the particular planning issues in every one of our 31 local authorities.

We will monitor and independently report on the progress being made to meet Government targets for development on urban and brownfield sites.

We've already commenced our work by assessing and reviewing several local area draft plans.

If the plans all join up, will the housing

■ **The National Planning Framework target is for at least 40 per cent of all new housing to be delivered within the existing built-up areas of cities, towns and villages on infill and/or brownfield sites.** PHOTOGRAPH: CYRIL BYRNE

developers, including a massively expanded public sector housing programme, be able to deliver?

Encouragingly, there have been recent positive signs of an uplift in the level of interest in advancing major apartment schemes in our cities and an increase in new planning permissions. It has taken time but public housing delivery is also increasing significantly now.

Too expensive
However, there is still evidence to suggest our model of apartment and housing delivery is just too expensive, particularly in inner urban areas and that the construction sector could and should, through more innovation and inventiveness, bring the costs of delivering quality homes and quality communities into line with the rents and purchase prices ordinary people can afford.

A positive influence in this process will be the work of the Land Development Agency. This agency is working collaboratively to clear the hurdles in imaginative redevelopment of State-owned lands that enables high-quality and strong delivery of a rich mix of affordable public and private housing.

Just over 50 years since Ireland's first major planning Act, and having just established an independent Office of the Planning Regulator to support a process of continual enhancement of the quality of our planning process, we now have the golden opportunity in the next generation of city and town and county plans to make the places in which we will want to live and work.

Niall Cussen is the planning regulator

Communications objectives

The core objective of this communications strategy is to help the OPR to achieve its strategic goals. The OPR's aim is to make sure that there is clear, consistent and appropriate communication of our work to relevant stakeholders, both internal and external to the organisation.

Specific communications goals include:

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

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graph TD; A[INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS] --> B[• promote awareness of the OPR's vision, mission and goals among all staff, including by incorporating them into all relevant internal communications  
• encourage staff engagement  
• promote good information-flow to and from management  
• inspire confidence and commitment among all internal stakeholders.]; B --> C[THIS WILL BE ACHIEVED BY]; C --> D[• developing two-way communication and an ongoing system of feedback  
• promoting awareness and understanding of the role of individual staff in achieving the OPR's goals  
• ensuring that all information shared is accurate and of a consistent quality  
• establishing clear and accessible internal communication practices  
• assessing and implementing all relevant staff training needs  
• highlighting staff achievements];
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- ensuring that all information shared is accurate and of a consistent quality
- establishing clear and accessible internal communication practices
- assessing and implementing all relevant staff training needs
- highlighting staff achievements

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS



The aim of external communications is:

- to encourage much greater public involvement in the making of plans
- to act in a listening capacity in relation to the effectiveness of our planning process
- to ensure local authorities at official and elected member levels understand and value what the OPR does
- to build a reputation as a clear, fair and independent voice on the effectiveness of Ireland's planning process
- to ensure that the requirements of ethics and standards in public office legislation are used fully in public policy implementation
- to highlight good examples of planning practices
- to promote evidence-based planning
- to counter any historical perception of weaknesses within the planning system.



THIS WILL BE ACHIEVED BY



- developing positive relationships with the media, locally and nationally
- identifying key initiatives and work that would benefit from external publicity
- overseeing the production of reports, publications and infographics
- managing the website and all social media channels
- identifying appropriate speaking and presentation opportunities
- ensuring consistency and clarity of all messaging
- developing a communication toolkit to encourage more extensive public participation in the plan-making process
- arranging briefings with relevant elected representatives as appropriate
- creating an annual communications calendar

Accessibility of information

Information must be accessible to its target audience. This is especially important for any communication that is intended for a general public audience, including people who are not native speakers of English or Irish and those with literacy challenges. According to the National Literacy Agency (NALA), 17.9% or about 1 in 6 Irish adults are at or below level 1 on a five level literacy scale. At this level a person may be unable to understand basic written information.

The OPR will strive to implement the guidelines outlined in *The Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service - A Universal Design Approach*. This contains guidance to inform the design of customer communications across the public service. The toolkit is based on a Universal Design approach promoted by the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design at the National Disability Authority.

Universal Design is about creating an environment that can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people, regardless of their age, ability or disability. Through its style and language guide, the OPR is committed to promoting the use of Plain English in the organisation. When communicating with the public, staff will avoid using jargon. We will also endeavour to explain any abbreviations that are necessary and we will avoid abbreviations or acronyms, wherever possible.

Brand

The OPR has developed a corporate brand. This will contribute to the identity of the OPR and will create a consistent image that distinguishes the organisation in relation to other planning bodies. Therefore, relevant print and electronic material must use:

- the official logo
- designated colours
- adhere to font and stylistic requirements.

Communications mechanisms

Internal

All staff meetings

These should be held approximately every eight weeks. To facilitate two-way communication, staff should be asked for their input in advance. These briefings will be used to communicate any significant developments to staff.

Management meetings

EMT meetings take place fortnightly.

Unit team meetings

Unit managers hold weekly meetings to keep their staff informed of important issues concerning their unit.

Finance, Audit and Risk (FAR) Committee meetings

Finance, Audit and Risk Committee meetings will take place quarterly.

External

Media relations

The OPR aims to adopt an open and honest approach to communication with members of the media. The media help us to communicate our messages and we consider forming and maintaining positive relationships with journalists as key to the achievement of our communications goals.

All requests from media must be referred to the OPR communications officer.

Pro-active media engagement

The OPR will identify and develop a pro-active communications calendar. This will increase awareness and understanding around the OPR and its work.

Media collaboration

The OPR part-sponsored an episode of the television programme Eco Eye which was aired on RTE1 Television in January 2020. The programme examined the issue of sustainable spatial planning. The reason for the OPR's involvement in the programme was to create awareness, build ownership and empower citizens about how good planning can have a huge impact on our health and physical activity levels. Future collaborations with these and other producers will be explored.

Website

The OPR website should be accessible, searchable, reliable and a flexible source of information about the OPR's work. It should be kept up to date and in line with accessibility guidelines.

Social media

The OPR will continue to develop and increase subscription to its social media channels. The OPR will also consider adding to its suite of social media outlets.

National Planning Knowledge Group meetings (NPKG)

The purpose of the Group is to act as an advisory board for the OPR in meeting its statutory mandate in relation to education, research and training functions as outlined under Section 31Q of the Planning and Development Act. NPKG meetings will be held three times a year. Minutes of the meeting are circulated to the group and are available to OPR staff.

Conferences/seminars

The OPR will seek to participate in relevant public events and seminars concerning planning-related matters.

Imagery

Developing a strong bank of photos for use on-line, in presentations and reports is ongoing.

Sector engagement

The OPR will grow stakeholder relationships to share information, experience and expertise among its sectoral colleagues and partner organisations. Some of these bodies include:

- The City and County Management Association (CCMA) Land Use and Transport (LUTS) Committee

- The Association of Irish Local Government (AILG), which through its various conferences and events provides an effective mechanism for engagement with the 949 city and county councillors in Ireland.
- The Department of Housing Planning and Local Government (DHPLG) Governance Meetings (held quarterly)
- An Bord Pleanála

Annual report

The Annual Report will provide an overview of the OPR's activities. It will also include updates on practical experience of the implementation of relevant strategies, policies and initiatives at national, regional and local levels and how these are being co-ordinated.

Research The OPR will publish and promote the OPR's research interests. This is a good method to highlight the work of the OPR, establish our expertise and focus on topical developments in the sector.

Publications

All publications should use the house style and language guide and adhere to the brand guidelines. They should also adhere to the principles of Plain English.

Electronic newsletter

A periodic e-newsletter will be developed and disseminated to target audiences. This will include information about the OPR's latest work, policy updates and upcoming events.

Infographics

Informative and easy-to-access infographics are an effective way for the OPR to display information. These will be regularly used for written and on-line material.

Review and measurement

The OPR will harness best communications practice in the local government sector. It will seek to identify mechanisms that have proven to be effective in enhancing communications in the sector in order to share, collaborate and promote good practice.

The implementation and effectiveness of the communications strategy will be reviewed by the OPR's communications officer on an ongoing basis. The communications officer will provide regular reports on the progress of the strategy to the executive management team of the OPR.





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