



NATIONAL PLANNING KNOWLEDGE GROUP (NPKG)

TERMS OF REFERENCE (Rev 2)

1.0 Context

- 1.1 Section 549(1) of the Planning and Development Act 2024 (the Act) provides that a core function of the Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR) is to conduct education and training programmes for members of planning authorities, regional assemblies and the Commission and for staff of local authorities, regional assemblies and the Commission in respect of:
 - the role of such authorities, assemblies and the Commission under the Act, including in respect of National Planning Statements and the plans and policies under the Act, including for the purposes of ensuring compliance with sections 28, 29, 42, 43, 71, 72 and 73 of the Act;
 - the role of such authorities and assemblies in respect of guidelines under section 7 of the Maritime Area Planning Act 2021 and directives under section 8 of that Act;
 - matters relating to proper planning and sustainable development and maritime spatial planning as requested by the Minister, and
 - any other matters that the OPR determines are relevant to its functions, particularly, the functions relating to proper planning and sustainable development.
- 1.2 Section 549(2) of the Act provides that the OPR must conduct research in relation to matters relevant to its functions as well as any other matters requested by the Minister.
- 1.3 The Act enables the OPR under Section 549(3) to enter into arrangements with any person or body that the OPR considers to be suitably qualified to undertake or assist in undertaking the provision of its research, education and training activities.
- 1.4 Section 549(4) of the Act introduced a new requirement that the OPR must conduct programmes designed to increase public awareness in relation to planning matters. These programmes must include measures designed to enhance public understanding of the planning process and the role of the public in this process.

2.0 Purpose of the National Planning Knowledge Group

- 2.1 The purpose of the National Planning Knowledge Group (the NPKG) is to act as an advisory committee for the OPR in meeting the OPR's statutory mandate in relation to education, training, research and public awareness functions as outlined under Section 549 of the Act (see Section 1 above and Appendix 1 attached)

- 2.2 The NPKG is a key mechanism to steer and shape the activities of the OPR that flow from the legislative framework.
- 2.3 The NPKG advises the OPR in relation to the current state of knowledge on both pressing and strategic planning matters and gaps to be addressed in conjunction with stakeholders.

3.0 Objective

- 3.1 The overarching objective of the NPKG is to advise and support the OPR in delivering on its statutory mandate to drive national planning research, training, education and public awareness activities. The OPR's current Strategy Statement recognises the potential of the NPKG and sees that the Group has the potential to assist the OPR in:
 - **Developing an accessible on-line planning knowledge and training resource point** that is easy to navigate for those engaged in the practice of planning as well as those, such as the public, who seek more information so they can participate more effectively in the planning process;
 - **Delivering a strategic planning research programme** that meets both immediate and longer-term knowledge requirements, such as: understanding the requirements of climate assessment of plans and projects, new mobility technologies, the impacts of an ageing population, better plan implementation, and project visualisation techniques to enable more members of the public to understand the implications of the various decision processes in planning;
 - **Enabling brokerage** between those seeking new data or insights into topical planning issues for policy development and practice delivery, such as Government, An Bord Pleanála and local authorities and those with capacity to meet such needs, such as the HEI sector or professional bodies with a research role;
 - **Disseminating information about the benefits of, and achievements in, planning** – so that the general public can better understand, through local engagement, the broader function of planning and, importantly, their role in shaping the process.
- 3.2 The work of the NPKG will also assist and complement the achievement of the OPR's Goal 2 as outlined in the Strategy Statement i.e. to drive “innovation and learning for those that are stakeholders in the planning process”. The key actions outlined under Goal 2 are to:
 - Create synergies with other stakeholders, such as local authorities, regional assemblies, planning institutes and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to identify existing knowledge shortfalls, create standards of best practice in planning and to inform OPR research programmes.
 - Provide educational programmes for specific stakeholder groups, such as the elected members, local authority Directors of Services, administrative and technical staff, professional planners and non-governmental organisations.
 - Develop accredited CPD programmes for professional planners.
 - Build upon, and complement, existing planning authority initiatives to improve public awareness of the planning process by disseminating information about the benefits of and achievements in planning.
 - Deliver regular events for all stakeholders in the planning process focusing on promoting best practice in planning.

4.0 Membership of National Planning Knowledge Group

4.1 The National Planning Knowledge Group includes representation from the HEI sector, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), planning institutes, government organisations and departments and representatives from planning authorities including:

- An Coimisiún Pleanála
- Association of Irish Local Government
- CCMA Planning and Land Use Committee
- Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage
- Environmental Protection Agency
- Housing Agency
- IBEC
- Irish Planning Institute
- Local Government Management Agency
- Maynooth University
- Maritime Area Regulatory Authority
- National Economic and Social Council
- Queens University Belfast
- Royal Town Planning Institute
- Technological University Dublin
- Ulster University
- University College Cork
- University College Dublin

4.2 Each represented organisation will designate an individual member of the Group. Attendance at the Group can be delegated to another official. Additional officials may attend the NPKG upon request. Additional organisations may be invited to attend at the NPKG at the sole discretion of the OPR.

5.0 Functioning of the Group

5.1 The Group will normally meet online three times per annum with the option to meet in-person, as and when required.

5.2 The group may decide to have additional meetings or establish working sub-groups should the need arise.

5.3 The Research, Training, and Public Awareness Team of the OPR will provide the secretariat for the Group.

5.4 A meeting schedule will be prepared for each calendar year and disseminated to Group members to integrate into their calendars and to ensure generous notice of the timing of meetings.

5.5 Papers for each meeting will be circulated at least one week in advance to allow participants to have sufficient time to prepare for the business of the relevant meeting.

5.6 With effect from 01 January 2025 the Planning Regulator (who chairs the Group) and Directors of the OPR became designated public officials under Section 6 of the Lobbying Act 2015 and are subject to the requirements of that legislation. To this end, it was determined that the NPKG is a “relevant body” as provided for in the Transparency Code prepared by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform under Section 5(7) of the Lobbying Act 2015

5.7 In order to comply with the transparency criteria set out in the Transparency Code the following information relating to membership and workings of the Group will be published on the OPR website:

- The name of the Chair together with details of the Chair's employing organisation;
- The names of the members of the NPKG together with details of their employing organisation;
- Confirmation of whether any non-public servant members of the NPKG were previously designated public officials;
- The Terms of Reference of the NPKG;
- The agendas of each NPKG meeting;
- The minutes of each NPKG meeting;
- The timeframe for the group's work; and
- Reporting arrangements.

5.8 The Chair will also ensure that the work of the Group is conducted in a manner that is in accordance with the Terms of Reference and in the public interest.

5.9 The Chair will include a statement in the OPR's Annual Report confirming compliance with the Transparency Code.

Appendix 1:

Extract from the *Planning and Development Act 2024*

Section 549

(1) *The Office shall conduct education and training programmes for the members of planning authorities, regional assemblies and the Commission, including the members of the staff thereof, in respect of—*

(a) the role of such authorities, assemblies and the Commission under this Act, including in respect of National Planning Statements and the plans and policies under this Act, including for the purposes of ensuring compliance with sections 28, 29, 42, 43, 71, 72 and 73,

(b) the role of such authorities and assemblies in respect of guidelines issued under section 7 of the Act of 2021 and directives issued under section 8 of that Act,

(c) such matters relating to proper planning and sustainable development and maritime spatial planning as the Minister may request, and

(d) such other matters as the Office considers are of relevance to its functions, in particular, the functions relating to proper planning and sustainable development.

(2) *The Office shall conduct research in relation to matters relevant to its functions as well as such other matters as may be requested by the Minister.*

(3) *The Office may enter into arrangements with any person that the Office considers to be suitably qualified, including any professional, educational or research organisation, to undertake or assist in undertaking the provision of services to which subsection (1) or (2) relates and that are relevant to its functions.*

(4) *The Office shall conduct programmes designed to enhance public awareness in relation to planning matters, which shall include measures designed to enhance public understanding of the planning process and the role of the public in such process.*