



PLANNING RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Office of the Planning Regulator

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Oifig an
Rialaitheora Pleanála
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1.0 Introduction

The Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR) was established under the 2018 Planning Act for a number of reasons including the promotion of research on planning to inform both practice and public engagement.

There is a wide range of research already conducted on planning and related topics by government and state bodies, local authorities, European and international research organisations, universities and professional bodies.

The establishment of the OPR creates opportunities to harness existing research, enhancing co-ordination and ensuring proper dissemination as well as identifying new and emerging research and information needs. These activities can utilise the National Planning Knowledge Group (NPKG) established by the OPR as a forum for information exchange and engagement with a broad group of interests in both research, policy and practice. Such activities support the OPR's Strategy Statement 2019-2024, which committed to:

"Driving innovation and learning for all those that are stakeholders in the planning process" (Goal 2)

This document sets out a framework to advance the goal above through a two-year programme of planning research, taking account of both current activities and emerging requirements.

2.0 Background

The key challenges the OPR faces in developing a research programme include identification of knowledge gaps in existing research, the roles and functions of the various stakeholders in the field, and supporting a research programme that best addresses such gaps with stakeholders.

The National Planning Knowledge Group, established by the OPR in 2019, comprises representatives from planning authorities, higher education institutes, NGOs, An Bord Pleanála, professional planning institutes, government agencies and departments.

During 2019, the OPR also undertook extensive consultation with key stakeholders, including local authorities. Such consultation identified areas for further research work including:

- Practical advice and tools for implementation of technical aspects of national and European legislation (addressing lessons from case law), Section 28 Guidelines, and the application of cross sectoral government policy;
- Development of best practice standards to ensure consistency and best practice across planning authorities;
- Opportunities to capture and share good practice across the public sector;



- Opportunities to partner academic research with practical, real world implementation; and
- Addressing societal and community issues such as the impacts of an ageing population for planning.

Ongoing discharge of the OPR’s statutory functions, including evaluation of statutory plans, reviews of planning authorities, and/or the examination of specific complaints also have the potential to suggest areas for research.

3.0 Research Framework Goal

In the implementation of this research framework, the key goal will be:

To develop an effective research programme that addresses the gaps in planning theory and practice, supports best practice in the planning system, facilitates greater public understanding and participation, and develops necessary tools and applications for practitioners and researchers.

4.0 Objectives

In achieving the research goal, we will seek to meet the following objectives:

Objective 1	To promote sustainable development (including UN Sustainable Development Goals), by supporting the practical implementation of Government policies in relation to climate action, public investment and the National Planning Framework (NPF) as well as other planning-relevant policies.
Objective 2	To provide support and reassurance for practitioners, and promote professional and public confidence in the planning system.
Objective 3	To address themes and issues identified as knowledge gaps by stakeholders (such as the NPKG, LGMA, AILG, etc.) and that emerge through the work of the OPR plan evaluations and reviews functions.
Objective 4	To work in partnership with other stakeholders to strengthen collaboration between planning practitioners, academics and policy-makers in carrying out research and addressing knowledge gaps.
Objective 5	To advocate and support the use of new technologies and innovation in the planning research realm with an emphasis on accessibility for all stakeholders including members of the public.
Objective 6	To avoid repetition of existing research functions undertaken by other stakeholders such as the HEIs, the EPA and in particular the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) in respect of S.28 Guidelines.
Objective 7	To prepare a two-year programme of research projects, with an annual review, to be carried out by the OPR.



5.0 Research Structure

Having regard to the research needs and objectives of the research programme identified above, and the remit of the OPR, three separate strands for research have been identified:

First Strand - Planning Issues

The research programme will aim to address pressing planning issues as well as forecasting likely emerging issues that require medium and long-term thinking and research.

'Issues' are the core, longstanding matters of planning concerns such as housing, urban regeneration, rural regeneration, transport, and environment. However, these will be nuanced to reflect the current legislative and policy context including, in particular, Project Ireland – the NPF and NDP, the Climate Action Plan, the National Biodiversity Action Plan and the various EU Directives.

The programme also seeks to be sufficiently flexible to react to unforeseen issues such as the impact of COVID-19, and will aim to be responsive to any other future emerging issues and their crossover with traditional planning themes.

Research under this strand should provide strong recommendations and findings, to assist policy-makers, planning practitioners and increase public awareness.

It is envisaged that research within this strand will be delivered by a range of OPR directly commissioned projects, partnerships and sponsorships with professional and academic institutes, including projects commissioned by other stakeholders that the OPR may participate in and/or co-sponsor. In particular, the OPR is committed to working with departmental or sector sponsors with a view to ensuring research informs both policy-making and/or practice relating to planning, as appropriate.

It is envisaged that the principal outputs within this strand will result in Research Reports and Case Study Papers (discussed in the following section). These will be developed into an OPR Research Report and Case Study Paper Series. This strand may also include other output types where deemed appropriate.

Second Strand: Planning Performance

The second strand relates to the processes within the planning process. Research in this strand will seek to evaluate whether the system and processes are delivering the over-arching policy objectives for which they were designed (e.g. how do pre-application consultations enhance the planning system and what systems or practices can optimise the benefits, minimise the weaknesses?).

For example, the OPR, together with the DHLGH, neighbouring UK administrations and the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), commissioned a foundation research piece into the 'Measurement of Planning Outcomes' which will inform and guide future planning performance research.



The purpose of the second strand research is to identify trends or patterns, establish causes and linkages, identify good and poor practice and make positive, practical recommendations that will improve planning systems.

It is envisaged that research within the second strand will mainly be directly commissioned by the OPR, although it will often involve active engagement with key stakeholders in the local and regional authorities. Similar to the first strand it is desirable to have a level of sponsorship for research in this strand so that it can have a positive feedback effect to policy and systems.

The second research strand may culminate in various output types (described below) including Case Study Papers, Practice Notes and Practice Applications.

Third Strand: Planning Practice

The focus and output of research in the third strand is on giving practical assistance to planners for their day-to-day work.

The identification of research projects under this strand will be informed by consultation with our stakeholders, particularly planning practitioners, and their experiences of working with policies, systems and technologies.

This strand is very much focused upon closing the gaps between high level policy, academia and frontline service provision. This strand also seeks to foster a culture of education, learning from experience and most importantly sharing knowledge and experience for the greater good.

It is envisaged that research within the third strand will be mainly directly commissioned by the OPR or in partnership with others. Engagement with planning and other relevant staff in the local and regional authorities will be key in terms of meeting the needs of practitioners.

It is envisaged that the principal outputs within this strand will be focused on Practice Notes and ICT applications, as discussed further below.

6.0 Delivery Options

The OPR recognises the value of working with other stakeholders, and in particular relevant government departments and state bodies, academic institutions, local authorities and professional bodies, to deliver robust and relevant research outputs. While some research projects will be directly commissioned and undertaken by our staff or consultants, others will involve partnerships with others in terms of commissioning or undertaking research including the scope for departmental sponsorship and collaboration. In other cases, the role of the OPR will be to contribute to research led by others. Some research projects may be expressly requested by the Minister¹.

1 Section 31Q(2)



The four delivery options identified in this framework are as follows:

Directed & Commissioned (DC)

Research projects may either be commissioned and overseen or directly undertaken by OPR staff. Where appropriate, we may seek the input of other agencies or experts. These projects may be fully resourced by the OPR. Directed and Commissioned research projects will more than likely fall within the second and third strands, as opposed to the first strand, for practical resourcing reasons.

Partnerships (P)

Certain research projects will lend themselves to be partnership projects with a stakeholder (e.g. HEI, Institutes). These are likely to be jointly funded and may also arise from joint competitive bids for funding from external sources. It is envisaged that the first strand research projects will largely be partnerships with stakeholders and other complementary disciplines where there are large prevailing issues to grapple with.

Demonstration Project (DP)

These projects may be undertaken with others, such as local planning authorities, to develop best practice standards or methodologies, or to trial new methodologies, procedures and approaches to a policy or system within the planning or broader environmental management fields. Demonstration projects may also be undertaken in conjunction with other methods of delivery. For example, an initiative to enhance planning practice developed directly by OPR Staff and piloted by a local authority planning department.

Contributor Role (CR)

In some instances, research projects that align with our objectives may be commissioned by other related organisations or stakeholders that value a planning perspective in general or specifically require the insight or knowledge of the OPR with its unique oversight role in the planning system. The resource input to these research projects will principally be the time, expertise and experience of OPR staff. These projects will, like all others, be required to satisfy the overarching objectives of this framework.

7.0 Research Outputs

In line with the objective to provide support and reassurance for practitioners, and promote professional and public confidence in the planning system outputs will range from traditional research reports to more practical implementation type tools such as practice notes on certain technical issues or ICT applications to assist both practitioners and the public. Lessons from best practice may also be developed by means of case study papers examining any aspect of the planning system in more detail.

Some research projects may generate more than one output, for example a practice note addressing issues arising from a case study paper.



The OPR is also committed to developing new technology and innovation including online GIS tools and applications.

The four research outputs identified in this framework are as follows:

Research Series Reports

These research reports will be discrete publications on a particular topic/issue and will reflect the format of more conventional research reports found in professional journals or academic periodicals. It is intended that the OPR will build a series of these over time that can be published as a Research Series.

Case Study Papers

These will be publications based on an audit/review of a particular theme/issue (e.g. planning application validations) or of a geographic area (e.g. border counties). These papers will start with no fixed premise or hypothesis and will be based on sound methodological surveys, analysis of evidence and will clearly set out findings. From an analysis of case studies, good (and poor) practice learnings can be understood and shared.

Practice Notes

Practice Notes will take the form of a short paper that examines a specific subject matter from the perspective of the practitioner. These will seek to fill the gap between high-level legislation and policy and the practicalities of implementation on the ground.

The intention is that they will provide support and reassurance for practitioners and promote professional and public confidence in the planning system. These Practice Notes will predominantly relate to the work within the third strand, but may also evolve as an output of the first and second strands.

Practice Applications

These research outputs will be applications that focus on the use of digital media and software technologies, including, but not limited to, GIS. These will complement the Practice Notes by maximising use of technology to aid the practitioner and all users of the planning system.

8.0 Communication and Public Awareness in relation to OPR Research Outputs

An important aspect of the research function of the OPR is to ensure that research outputs are accessible to both specific stakeholders within the planning process as well as the general public, where relevant.

Whether outputs include research reports, case studies, practice notes or applications, it is critical that they inform knowledge and practice through effective communication. Accordingly, the OPR will utilise a range of communication tools to disseminate our work including the following.



OPR Website

News Page Feature: this will be utilised when work is initiated and/or at key stages to invite participation and engagement from stakeholders where required or to publicise the findings of a finalised output.

Research Page: this is a dedicated page/tile within the website to host all of our research outputs emanating from our Strategic Planning Research Programme. All research project outputs will be available at this location.

Planning Library: Ultimately our research outputs will be contained in our online library as a permanent archive location readily accessible for those that wish to explore a particular topic.

Social Media Platforms

Similar to the news page feature, the OPR will utilise our Twitter and LinkedIn platforms to reach a wide audience.

Electronic Newsletter

The OPR's periodic e-newsletter presently under development² will include information about the OPR's latest research work and highlight relevant events that will assist in promoting the research outputs to the target audience.

Stakeholder Engagement

The OPR will continue to grow our relationships with the members of the NPKG, which represent the Higher Education Institutions (HEI), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), An Bord Pleanála, planning institutes, government organisations, departments and representatives from planning authorities. This will enable our research outputs to reach a wide audience and build future collaborations.

Training

The OPR has a statutory remit in relation to the training of elected members and staff of regional and local authorities in respect of planning legislation, guidelines and matters relating to proper planning and sustainable development. The OPR's research, education and training functions go hand-in-hand therefore the OPR's training programme, which will be informed by the research outputs, will be utilised to as a platform for knowledge sharing.

Conferences and Seminars

The OPR will participate in relevant public events, conferences and seminars to further communicate the findings of our research outputs and to share knowledge.

2. At the time of writing



Public Awareness

As part of the OPR's broader communication strategy we aim to adopt an open and honest approach to communication with the media, and to form and maintain positive relationships with journalists. The OPR has part-sponsored episodes of the Eco-Eye television series and, where appropriate, the research outputs may inform the content of future collaborations with the media.

Sectoral Publications

If appropriate, the OPR can approach other industry bodies to seek inclusion of the OPR's research output in either their in-house or external publications.

Infographics

When feasible, the OPR will package and present the research findings into accessible and user-friendly infographics. These will highlight the salient findings and can also be effectively deployed across our social media channels.

Analytics

Where possible, the OPR will keep track of and monitor the number of engagements, viewings and interactions associated with the communication of the research. This will be done by keeping track of on-line analytics, social media data and reach of electronic publications.

9.0 Project Governance

Project governance should begin at the earliest possible stage in the life of a research project. Ideally, the evolution from conception should be informed by and aligned with the framework goal and objectives. This will not be possible in all instances, especially where the OPR joins forces with another stakeholder in a partnership or contributory role. In order to retain the integrity, transparency and accountability of the OPR the following structured approach will be employed in the implementation of our research programme.

High Level Project Evaluation

Opportunities for research projects are likely to emerge from a number of avenues as part of the overall working of the OPR. They may develop from engagement with our stakeholders, including our parent department, government departments, the NPKG, local government, sectoral groups and the public. It will not be possible or practicable for the OPR to pursue all research proposals, and there needs to be a clear focus on prioritising research which aligns best with our statutory functions.

Regardless of the delivery type, research projects pursued by the OPR will, in the first instance, be required to satisfy the overarching goal and objectives of the framework. It is unlikely that a single project would satisfy each and every objective, given the breadth and depth of the objectives and the



strands. Nonetheless any project pursued should clearly support at least one of our research framework objectives (as detailed in section 4.0 above)

Project Evaluation Criteria

To assist with the evaluation of the merits of a research proposal the table in Appendix A sets out a number of questions that should be considered. Ultimately the decision whether to carry out a particular piece of research is a qualitative, balanced decision located in a particular time (or set in a timeframe or similar). The project evaluation criteria in **Appendix A** serves to guide and inform the evaluation process.

Project Approval Mechanism

Following a project evaluation exercise it shall be the role of the OPR's Executive Management Team (EMT) to approve whether a specific project is pursued. This approval will be documented as part of the project governance and included in the roadmap, discussed as follows.

Research Project Roadmap

Once the decision to progress with a research proposal has been made, a project roadmap should be prepared which sets out the key elements of the project including its objectives, outputs, relationship to the overall framework, identification of stakeholders etc. This roadmap will be utilised as a practical management tool. To an extent, the roadmap will be a living, working document, especially for larger scale and longer running projects that may encounter difficulties or that may need to respond to changed circumstances. A pro-forma for the project roadmap is attached at **Appendix B**.

Appendix A

Project Evaluation Criteria		
O ppportunity, range and scope:		
	will the project.....	
1	<i>Be relevant to a range of different local authorities and regional assemblies and take into account regional variations?</i>	
2	<i>Consider both urban and rural areas?</i>	
3	<i>Engage with a variety of stakeholders?</i>	
P inciples and standards:		
	will the project.....	
1	<i>Contribute, in an original way, to the study of an under-researched topic about/related to planning?</i>	
2	<i>Be conducted in an ethical way?</i>	
3	<i>Promote robustness and trustworthiness?</i>	
4	<i>Provide a strong evidence base to inform the work of the OPR?</i>	
5	<i>Deliver value for money?</i>	
R elevance, appropriateness and application		
	will the project.....	
1	<i>Support the OPR's Research Goal?</i>	
2	<i>Promote the overarching principles of proper planning and sustainable development?</i>	
3	<i>Relate to government policy such as that set out in the NPF, S.28 Guidelines, Climate Action Plan etc.?</i>	
4	<i>Promote greater understanding and confidence in the planning system?</i>	
5	<i>Provide support for practitioners?</i>	
6	<i>Strengthen collaboration between stakeholders?</i>	
7	<i>Help narrow the gaps between strategic policy, academia and practice?</i>	
8	<i>Address the needs and requirements of various stakeholders?</i>	
9	<i>Promote effective use of modern technology?</i>	
10	<i>Avoid duplication with research undertaken by another stakeholder?</i>	
11	<i>Result in clear and accessible reports or other outputs?</i>	

Appendix B

Project Management Road map	
Project name	
Project Reference No.	
Research Framework Strand:	
Delivery Method:	
Project Output:	
Project Objectives:	
Project Scope/ Exclusions:	
Compliance Research Framework Goal & Objectives:	
EMT Project Approval Date:	
Stakeholders:	
Project Leader:	
Project Team Members:	
Project Duration:	
Schedule:	
<i>Commencement Date</i>	
<i>Draft Stage or other Key Internal Landmarks:</i>	
<i>Completion Date:</i>	
Project Costs:	
Documents required:	