

**Consideration by Committee on Public Accounts of
An Bord Pleanála Annual Accounts and Report for 2018**

Opening Statement by

Dave Walsh, Chairperson of An Bord Pleanála

Thursday, 3rd October 2019

A Chathaoireach, Committee members, good morning and thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee to assist in your examination of An Bord Pleanála's most recent Financial Statements, and to discuss the Board's important work and its recent progress in delivering on our statutory mandate.

I am joined this morning by my colleagues, Mr. Gerard Egan, Director of Corporate Affairs, and Ms. Carol Moloney, our in-house accountant and head of our Finance Section, and we are also joined by Mr. Terry Sheridan, Principal Officer over the Planning Policy Section in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government.

As I took up the post of Chairperson of An Bord Pleanála in November 2018, with your indulgence, I may ask my colleagues to address some of the issues that may be raised during the session, as they may be more familiar with such matters.

At the outset, it is important to remind the Committee that it would not be appropriate to discuss individual planning cases, as to do so could compromise decisions or indeed various judicial review cases before the courts. However, where we can discuss generalities of case types and broad issues emerging, we will endeavour to be as helpful to the Committee as we can.

The Board is well aware of its critical role in considering and determining planning appeals and major housing and infrastructure proposals and we remain committed to delivering decisions as quickly and effectively as possible. We are also very cognisant of our corporate governance responsibilities and I can confirm that the Board considers itself in full compliance with all applicable provisions of the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies.

We have developed and use a framework of assurances, including an Audit and Risk Committee, internal audits as well as undertaking regular updates at Management Committee and Board levels of our risks and mitigation actions. As is required under the Code of Practice, I receive a report annually from the independent, external Chair of the Audit and Risk Committee and the Committee's most recent report has confirmed that our risk management processes and internal controls are operating effectively. As Chairperson, I am also reassured of our financial and governance controls through the unqualified audit opinion from the C&AG, both for 2018 and for all previously audited years.

The Committee will have noted from our Annual Report and Accounts that, in financial terms, the Board had a total income of €24.4m in 2018, comprising primarily of an Exchequer grant of €17.5m and fees revenue of just over €4m. We spent just over €24m, which gave us a surplus of just over €550,000 when capital transfers and appropriations were taken into account.

To give you a little background on the organisation, the Board currently has 164 whole-time equivalent staff and 10 board members. The Minister and Department has been very supportive in approving recent resource requests, including our Work Force Plan 2019-2020, in recognition of the increasing demands and complexity of the cases that are coming before the Board, including in relation to strategic housing developments, vacant site levy cases and major infrastructure projects, and taking into account the forecast increase in cases.

In policy terms, the National Planning Framework and the emerging Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies set a clear priority for appropriate development in the right locations to facilitate the sustainable and orderly growth of our cities, towns and rural

hinterlands, and the Board has a clear role in implementing such policies through efficient and consistent processing of case decisions.

In a constantly evolving and more complex legislative and legal context, where environmental issues and public participation are rightly to the fore, it is also crucial that the Board has all the information it needs to make sound decisions and gives people time to feed in their views on proposals during the deliberative process, reflecting our core principles of integrity, independence and fairmindedness.

While it is acknowledged that the Board's capacity and performance to meet our statutory objective period (SOP) of 18 weeks has been impacted by the transition to our new case management system (Plean-IT), the increased case-load as well as the fall-out from reduced Board capacity in 2017, we have made strong progress to turn things around in recent months.

In 2018, we recorded a 32% increase in the number of cases decided over the previous year, with over 2,800 decisions made. In November and December alone, we decided almost 600 cases (up 36% on the same two months in 2017) and reduced the number of cases on hands by more than 300 from over 1,355 to just over 1,000 files. This reflects the commitment of our hard-working staff and Board to really get to grips with the back-log generated and deliver robust decisions as efficiently as possible.

In terms of meeting our 18-week statutory objective period for deciding normal planning appeals, we are aware that an overall 43% compliance rate for 2018 is not where we want to be. But equally, since I arrived, the priority and focus for me has been to process and decide those cases longest with the Board, which has had a consequential impact on our percentage compliance rate last year.

However, we have a clear plan in 2019 to clear the backlog and get back to a compliance rate of 70-80% by the end of 2019. Things are going well, with our aggregate compliance rate for appeals up to 67% by end-August, and an average decision time of 19.5 weeks, down from 22.5 weeks in 2018. For the last four months, we have averaged 78% compliance but we know that more work is needed.

The Board's performance in relation to Strategic Housing Developments (SHD) has been very strong, with 39 cases decided during 2018, all within the 16-week target. In overall terms, last year the Board granted permission for 27 applications for over 7,100 housing units and almost 4,500 student bed-spaces, which is a vital contribution to the overall increase in residential activity. This trend has ramped up significantly so far in 2019, with 40 applications granted permission in the first 8 months, with a cumulative 9,070 homes and over 3,000 student bed-spaces. We are continuing to prioritise these cases and to deal with any large-scale housing appeals expeditiously.

Over the course of 2018, An Bord Pleanála prepared a 5-year Strategic Plan with four clear goals to:

- i. Protect and enhance our reputation for independence, impartiality, integrity, trust and transparency;
- ii. Make robust, timely and high-quality decisions which support proper planning and sustainable development;
- iii. Improve our service to meet changing customer expectations; and
- iv. Foster a motivated, resilient and responsive organisation.

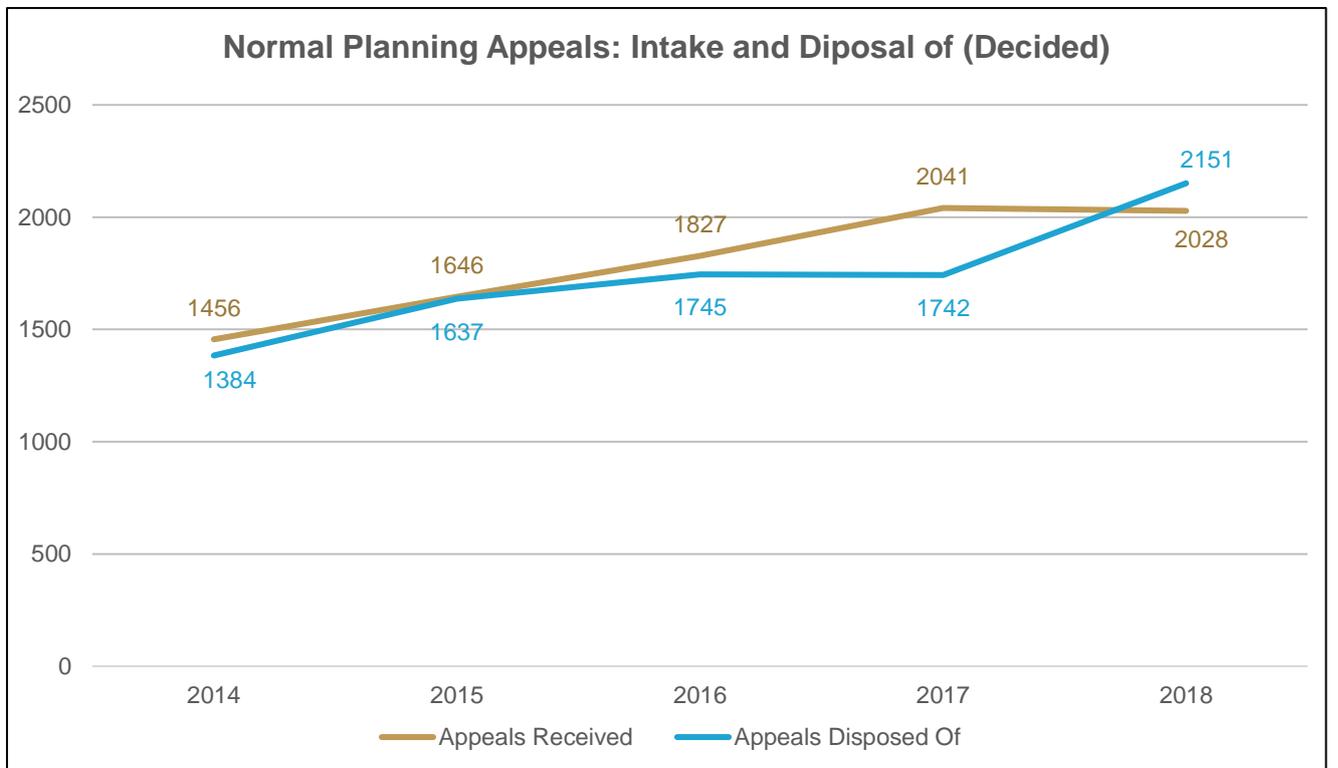
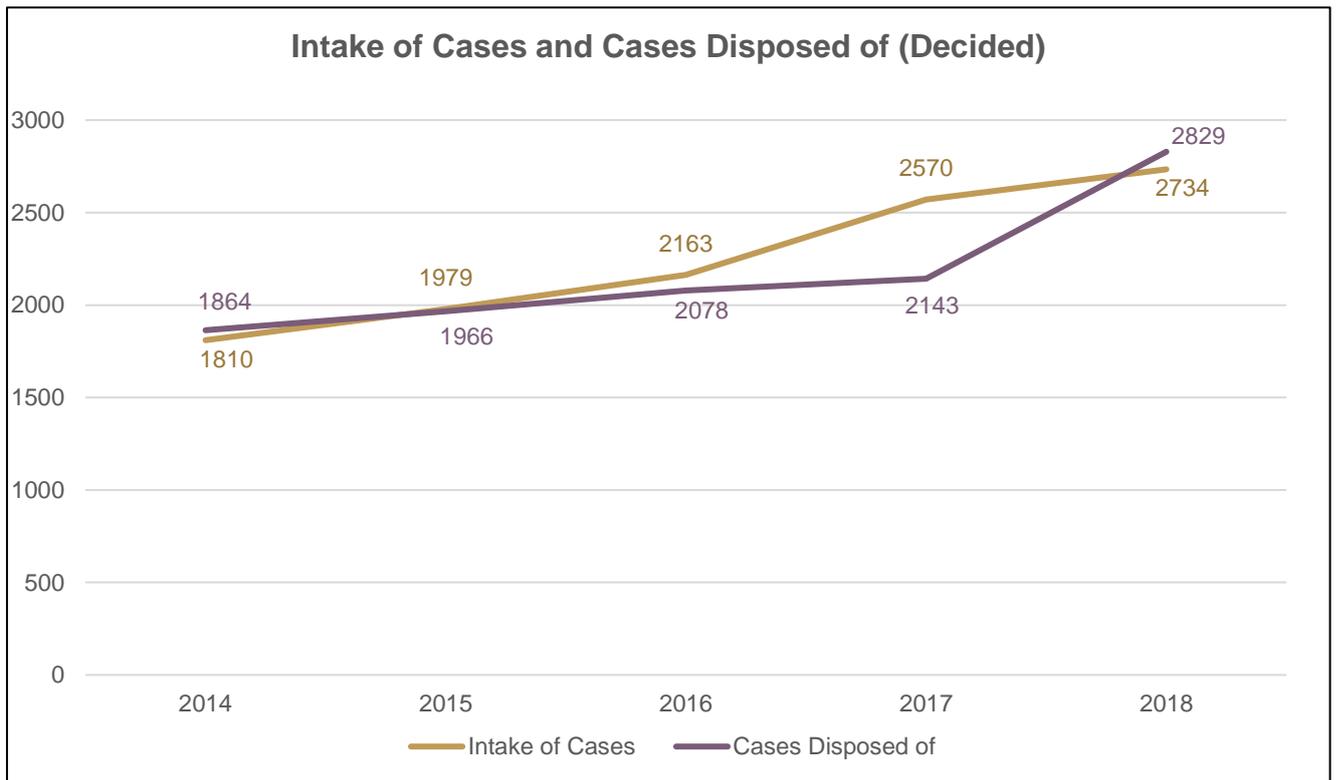
While this is, of course, a five-year Strategy, there are a number of initiatives and actions that we are prioritising in 2019 to help to realise these objectives and set us

on the right path. High among these priorities is the roll-out and refinement of our Plean-IT project which will ultimately enable appeals, observations, submissions and applications to be made on-line, linking in with the local authorities' own *e-Planning* initiative.

I am conscious that I am taking up members' valuable time to raise specific issues so I will leave it there. We are happy to take any questions.

Thank you.

Addendum – Summary charts



Normal Planning Appeals by Development Type Received 2018

