



**16<sup>th</sup> October 2019**

**Opening statement to Oireachtas Joint Committee  
on Housing, Planning and Local Government**

**General Scheme of the Land Development Agency Bill 2019**

Chairperson, Deputies and Senators,

Thank you for the invitation to give evidence to your committee on this important topic. My name is Caroline Spillane and I am the Director General of Engineers Ireland. I would like to introduce Dr Kieran Feighan, a Past President of Engineers Ireland and Chartered Engineer, who is joining me in representing our Institution at this morning's meeting.

**Engineers Ireland and The State of Ireland 2019**

Engineers Ireland is one of the oldest and largest representative bodies on the island of Ireland, with over 25,000 members. This membership incorporates all disciplines of the engineering profession in Ireland: in consulting and contracting organisations, the public sector, semi-state bodies and educational institutes.

Earlier this year, we published 'The State of Ireland 2019: A review of housing and infrastructure in Ireland'. The report's findings are based on the deliberations of an advisory group of engineers and other housing professionals from the public and private sectors. At the launch of the report, we were pleased to get the perspectives of many stakeholders and we hosted a panel discussion which included John Moran, Chairperson of the LDA.

The report covers five core housing issues – the first of which is “land and supporting infrastructure”. Here, we note that urban land redevelopment offers major potential to meet housing demand and to rejuvenate areas of our towns and cities. The State is a significant landowner and should play an active and transformative role in land management.

In this context, there was very strong support by our expert advisory group for the establishment of the LDA. Indeed, one of our key recommendations in The State of Ireland 2019 report is to:

“Actively manage public land, ensuring the Land Development Agency has a strong mandate and sufficient capacity to coordinate the development of State lands and to assemble strategic land banks from a mixture of public and private lands.”

Engineers Ireland therefore welcomes the General Scheme of the Land Development Agency Bill 2019 which establishes the LDA on a primary legislative basis. We have five recommendations for the Bill, generally relating to Head 8 (Objects of the LDA) and Head 9 (Functions of the LDA), and I outline each recommendation briefly.

### **1. Clarity on institutional relationships**

There are many State and semi-state organisations involved in or related to land development activities. Indeed, the complexity of the interactions between the landholdings of these bodies partially gave rise to the LDA. Much greater clarity is needed in relation to the hierarchy of objectives, powers and compellability that will govern the interactions of the LDA with a range of state, semi-state and local authority bodies. This includes existing local authority functions in planning and land disposal, the potential functions and powers of directly elected mayors, and the statutory role of the National Transport Authority in relation to integration of transport and land-use planning in the Greater Dublin Area and nationally.

### **2. A coordinated approach to infrastructure development**

The LDA has major potential to embrace a cross-departmental approach to land management and development. However, a key constraint to land development and housing construction is the availability and capacity of infrastructure (for example, transport, electricity and water). Currently, there is a clear lack of coordination in the planning and delivery of infrastructure with responsibility shared across many bodies. Engineers Ireland has consistently called for a single infrastructure unit (or National Infrastructure Commission) for the prioritisation, procurement and co-ordination of all key public infrastructure projects.

### **3. Compulsory Purchase Order powers**

We strongly support the view that the LDA should have sufficient powers to be able to carry out its mandate efficiently and effectively, and we believe that these powers should include the compulsory purchase of land. Even if these powers are infrequently used, they send an appropriate signal to the market.

### **4. An explicit focus on developing sustainable communities and quality homes**

In the General Scheme of the Bill, there are references to supporting the implementation of the National Planning Framework and having regard to the policy of the Government on proper planning and sustainable development. These references do not go far enough. We are in a climate emergency. Developing sustainable communities must be a fundamental objective of the LDA, added to Head 8 Subhead 2. For example, new LDA-developed communities should have excellent public transport links, highly energy-efficient housing, recreational amenities and promote biodiversity.

### **5. Resources and professional competence**

The LDA should directly employ qualified professional construction specialists, including Chartered Engineers, so that it has the in-house skills and expertise to manage the buildings, infrastructure and land assets (and liabilities of those assets) on its register. These competences will enable the LDA to maximise potential for sustainable housing development, but also the strong element of asset management which will be crucial in fulfilling its objectives. Furthermore, if the LDA is to provide professional services to relevant public bodies (as stated in the General Scheme), these competences will be crucial.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the potential for the work of the LDA to transform Ireland's approach to land management should not be underestimated. However, the LDA must have a strong legislative mandate, should be well governed and adequately resourced in terms of funding and expertise to fully grasp these opportunities for environmental, social and economic transformation.

Thank you.

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