

Opening statement by Irish Planning Institute (IPI) to the Joint Committee on Autism

Introduction

1. I would like to thank the Chair and Committee members for offering us the opportunity to talk to you this morning on autism and planning, buildings and public space. My name is Brendan Allen FIPI and I am Hon. Treasurer and a Past President of the Irish Planning Institute. I am accompanied by Emma Flanagan MIPI who convenes our Practice Committee and Dr Seán O’Leary MIPI, Senior Planner with the Institute.

About the Irish Planning Institute

2. Founded in 1975, the Irish Planning Institute is the all-island professional body representing professional planners engaged in physical and environmental planning in Ireland. The Institute’s mission is to advance planning by serving, improving and promoting the planning profession for the benefit of the community and the common good.
3. Representing over 1,000 planners on the island of Ireland across the public and private sectors, members of the IPI work in Local Authorities, An Bord Pleanála, Central Government, Regional Assemblies, academia, in private practice as consultants, for large developers and for semi state organisations.
4. It is also affiliated to the umbrella body the European Council of Spatial Planners (ECTP-CEU) and has international links with the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) and the New Zealand Planning Institute (NZPI) and is a member of the Global Planners Network (GPN).

Observations

5. Proper planning and sustainable development is the cornerstone of the Irish planning system. Pursuing sustainable development involves seeking positive improvements in the quality of the built, natural and historic environment, as well as in people’s quality of life.
6. A key concern for planning is placemaking, taking a multi-faceted approach to the planning, design and management of public spaces. Placemaking seeks to achieve connections between people and the public places they use and it is our view that we can work to ensure autism friendly spaces through this placemaking lens.
7. There is a key role for planners, architects, engineers and accessibility consultants in ensuring universal design at the project stage but there also may be a role for incorporating neurodiversity at the strategic, plan making, level –

however to facilitate consistency in decision-making such policies should be evidence based and consistent in order to avoid a situation where some planning authorities may differ significantly in their requirements – leading to mixed outcomes.

8. Currently, new planning legislation to replace the Planning and Development Act 2000 is being progressed. As we have made clear in our evidence to the Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage as part of their pre legislative scrutiny of the Bill, and reflected in their report, better planning outcomes will require ensuring greater public participation in plan making and empowering local people to shape their surroundings. We note that the principle of social cohesion underpins this new legislation, which should facilitate a greater awareness of the need for design to work for people with different sets of spatial needs.
9. We note that the forthcoming publication of draft *Sustainable and Compact Settlements Guidelines for Planning Authorities* for public consultation will see a focus on quality design and placemaking and this Committee may also wish to integrate their views into that consultation.
10. There may also be a role for evidence based, autism-specific design guidelines to raise awareness among planners, architects, engineers and landscape architects of the need to deliver safe and accessible spaces for everyone; and indeed there may be scope for statutory ministerial guidelines following the passage of the new planning legislation.
11. Recently we held a CPD webinar on *Universal Design and Inclusive Public Spaces* attended by over 60 members. This heard that public spaces do not meet the current requirements for neurodiverse people and that we need to look at how we can improve the experience of these spaces for autistic people, the need to raise awareness about urban design opportunities to reduce anxiety and less intense sensory experiences, create greater accessibility and reduce sensory load and the value of initiatives such as Dublin City University's *Autism-Friendly University Design Guide*.
12. The Institute is happy to continue working to ensure we build the capacity of our members in this regard.
13. However, it must also be acknowledged that there are very real resource constraints in the planning system at present and that the overall quantum of planners in the public and private sectors must increase to deliver current roles and responsibilities. Only this will allow our members, and other built environment professionals, further specialise in urban design and neurodiversity

etc. Creating obligations without adequate resources will risk raising expectations without necessarily improving outcomes.

14. Finally, the IPI's education guidelines, which we use to accredit planning programmes in third level institutions, require students to learn about access and additional needs, urban design and about planning and health, social justice and diversity and it may be appropriate for future guidelines to place an additional focus on planning for neurodiversity.

Conclusion

15. We are happy to address any questions that the Committee members may have. Should the Committee wish to further engage with the Irish Planning Institute on any aspect of today's discussion, we would be happy to assist in any way possible.

**Irish Planning Institute
11 May 2023**