'National guidelines needed for solar farm projects'

National guidelines are needed to help planners decide if large-scale solar farms are acceptable.

The chair of **An Bord Pleanála**, Dr Mary Kelly, also said it would be a "good thing" if data centres were allowed to utilise fast-track planning as is already enjoyed by major projects, such as large wind farms and electricity projects. This, she said, would allow schemes to be dealt with in a "holistic" manner.

Dr Kelly said the board did not have any policymaking role, but did advise the Department of Housing of issues in relation to legislation.

It had told the Government that data centres should be designated as strategic infrastructure and that solar projects should be subject to guidelines similar to those in place for wind farms.

"We would often say parts of the legislation aren't working, that things are cumbersome. We did suggest that the data centres would be strategic infrastructure," Dr Kelly said.

She said the board was dealing with some 40 solar farm applications and that it would be "preferable" if guidelines were in place.

Around seven applications for wind farms were also being processed, along with "six or seven" data centres.

Among the issues in relation to data centres were not just the physical infrastructure, but the electricity needed to power them. Dr Kelly said: "They use a lot of energy and they need to be situated near power. Sub-stations can be part of the transmission system, so they are strategic infrastructure, but the warehouse is not.

"With Apple (data centre in Athenry, Co Galway), we had the data warehouse, which went to the planning authority, and we got the appeal. The sub-station had to come into us separately. A strategic infrastructure designation would be a good thing."

Source – The Irish Independent