



Sinn Féin

Putting Ireland First | Éire Chun Cinn



MAKING HOMES A PRIORITY

TACKLING THE 26 COUNTIES SOCIAL HOUSING CRISIS

INTRODUCTION

In 2008 when the sub-prime market collapsed Ireland was thrown into economic crisis. The Irish housing system had already been in crisis for years. 56,249 households were on Local Authority waiting lists and the state was spending over half a billion euro subsidising private landlords to house those who could not afford private rents or over inflated mortgages themselves. The most recent figure for housing need in the state stands at 89,872 households following a two thirds cut in the housing budget.

Despite record construction of private housing during the "celtic tiger" period a wholly insufficient number of local authority homes were built. Private developers were given the ability to opt out of their social responsibility under Part V of the Planning and Development Act. Local Authorities were also in this period selling off many properties but were slow to replenish stock.

The main focus in social housing of successive Fianna Fáil governments was the regeneration of existing social housing complexes but this only replaced pre-existing homes and in many cases it reduced overall social housing stock and allowed the private sector access to serviced valuable land where increased density encouraged them to speculate.

Fianna Fáil adopted the so called public private partnership models which prioritised profit over housing provision. In the case of regeneration projects like St Michael's Estate, Dominic Street and O'Devany Gardens in Dublin regeneration plans fell apart when developers decided that the profit margins were not good enough or when economic conditions left some bankrupt or in receivership.

In the last 6 years the many problems in Irish housing have worsened and become more complex but not intractable. There is a solution but successive governments have neglected the issue in favour of serving the interests of the troika and wealthy elites.

Over 1 billion euro has been cut from the housing budget since 2008. This, coupled with cuts to Rent Supplement and the failure to tackle the crisis in employment, has resulted in housing need spiralling to the present 89,872 households with record numbers experiencing homelessness or sleeping rough.

Sinn Fein believes the state can begin to tackle housing need today but it requires political will and significant investment.

Sinn Fein has identified €1 billion of unused money in Ireland's Strategic Investment Fund to provide an additional 6,735 homes on top of current government targets.

This is based on current cost projections from the Department of Environment which state the average cost of building a new social housing unit is €151,477 and the cost of renovating an unused social housing unit is approximately €15,756.

PRINCIPLES

The housing crisis is a complex one requiring a complex and multi-faceted response. Sinn Féin rejects the approach taken by Government in their Housing Policy Statement of June 2011. The Government's approach favours the use of public money to pay rents to and enter long term leases with private landlords and developers at the expense of local authority construction and purchasing programmes. Rather, we believe that a core component of any viable solution must be the development of a large publicly owned social housing stock.

Sinn Féin's approach to housing policy is underpinned by the following fundamental principles:

- » Housing is a basic human right and the state has a responsibility to ensure that everyone can access secure, adequate housing. This right should be enshrined in Bunreacht na hÉireann and enforceable by the courts as was recommended by the recent Constitutional Convention in its report on social and economic rights. We welcome that recommendation and call on the government to set a date for the necessary referendum as soon as possible.
- » Adequate housing should be defined as housing with suitable privacy, space, security, accessibility, lighting, ventilation, basic infrastructure, and location with regard to work and basic facilities.
- » Everyone has the right to protection from homelessness
- » Every person has the right to security of tenure which guarantees legal protection against forced eviction, harassment or other threats, regardless of the form of tenure: whether public or private rental, co-operative, lease, owner-occupied, emergency or informal accommodation.

This is not an exhaustive list. Sinn Fein believes that the right to housing should form part of a Bill of Rights for the people of Ireland and further rights can be found in the policy document 'Housing is A Right'.

INCREASING AND IMPROVING SOCIAL HOUSING

The state has a responsibility to provide housing. In the long term Sinn Fein believe social housing should not be the preserve of the most needy and that a greater social mix accessing publicly owned housing would be beneficial to society. At present though, given the large scale and very severe need for affordable social housing among the poorest in Irish society an immediate focus is required to tackle the unacceptable local authority waiting lists.

We need to build and maintain more publicly owned social housing. The government has promised in 2014 to deliver 5000 additional social housing units but the number of these homes which will be delivered by Local Authorities is too low and the system remains reliant on subsidising private rents and leasing off private landlords at great expense and with no long term return.

Sinn Fein believes that new funding mechanisms can be utilised in order to source financing for Local Authorities to deliver housing and reduce their waiting lists.

The government promised in their Programme for Government to explore social housing bonds which have raised billions of euro for social housing across Europe but have done little to deliver them. They have said they have no problem with Local Authorities establishing housing trusts but have done nothing to encourage or support them in this initiative.

Sinn Fein proposes to build new social housing where needed, to initiate a large scale renovation of unused housing and in certain cases to purchase homes which lie idle to build up the social housing stock.

Immediate capital investment

Using €1 billion from the Strategic Investment Fund Sinn Fein would invest in the social housing stock. A significant increase of social housing is vital if the growing housing need in this state is to be tackled effectively.

This money could fund the commencement of work on 6585 new homes and the renovation of a further 150 long term vacant homes over the course of 18 months. This would provide 13 times the amount of housing delivered so far by NAMA's special purpose vehicle.

Alternative models

Government policy over recent years has been to shift more of their responsibility to house people on to Voluntary bodies and a subsidised private sector.

We believe that new models of public housing provision are a better route to providing housing in the long term which will remain in the social housing stock and cost less over time. With a larger housing stock Local Authorities would benefit from the rent paid on the homes they provide.

Sinn Fein proposes:

- » Encouraging and supporting Local Authorities to establish housing trusts under their control. These bodies could raise finance independent of the national debt in order to build social housing in similar ways to voluntary bodies who have continued to increase their housing stock in recent years.
- » Social housing bonds should be explored whereby the government can attract social-motivated investors to finance the construction of social housing with dividends paid on the basis of positive social outcomes. Similar models across Europe have raised billions of Euros for housing bodies to provide more homes. This was proposed in the 2011 Programme for Government by Fine Gael and the Labour Party but no further action was taken.
- » Empowering Local Authorities to buy a limited number of houses in unfinished estates for social housing and affordable purchase. Funding can be provided by the Department of Environment and European Investment Bank. According to the Autumn 2013 Housing Development Survey there are 992 unfinished developments with residents in place.
- » Re-establishing the affordable housing scheme and strengthening Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000, removing opt outs for developers.
- » Maintain and increase requirement under Part V to 30% social and affordable housing on all new developments with at least 10% social and at least 10% affordable housing.
- » Broaden the Mortgage to Rent scheme so that more people struggling with their mortgage can avail of the scheme and stay in their home.

NAMA Housing

In December 2011 the government announced that NAMA would be releasing 2000 homes for use under the social leasing initiative by Local Authorities. A year later it was announced a total of 4374 homes would be open for consideration. This was heralded repeatedly as a great boost in combating housing need.

More than 2 years later just 516 homes have been delivered and 2306 of the homes released for consideration have been taken off the table.

Despite the short termist approach of the social leasing initiative, which sees no long term return to the state or the social housing stock, NAMA housing had the potential to play a part in housing a significant number of families. It can still do this but the process needs to be fast tracked.

- » Initiate review of NAMA housing stock deemed inappropriate for housing to ascertain what level of work would be required to get them up to standard.
- » Support Local Authorities where appropriate to purchase and complete or refurbish units.

Sale of Council Houses

Sinn Féin believes that tenants should have the right to buy their council house. Tenant purchase schemes allow for a better social mix and more cohesive communities. Allowing for this right should not mean a depletion of social housing stock over time.

- » Reintroduce the Tenant Purchase Scheme.
- » Reintroduce the Downsizing Scheme for Senior Citizens
- » Ring-fence money raised from the sale of council houses for the replenishing of the council housing stock.

Rent Assistance Schemes

Over the years successive governments have spent billions of euro subsidising private landlords through the Rent Supplement Scheme and Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS). Much of this money would have been better spent investing in publicly owned social housing.

In recent years the government has implemented cuts to Rent Supplement and introduced caps which were completely out of line with real rent levels. These measures put some families out on the

street while leaving many at great risk of becoming homeless.

The RAS has also proved unreliable as many tenants have been forced to leave their homes when contracts ended and Local Authorities are unable to rehouse them due to the shortage of social housing and spiralling rent.

Rent Supplement was supposed to be an emergency measure but is now a corner stone of how the state deals with housing need. It perpetuates a poverty trap stopping recipients from taking on full-time work. It is also expensive and leaves vulnerable tenants open to the whim of landlords driven by profit and the market.

A new rent assistance system to be known as the Housing Assistance Payment is in the process of being legislated for. This is an improvement on Rent Supplement but will not completely replace it meaning newly unemployed people in need of housing assistance will still be put into the poverty trap of the old system.

Sinn Féin would implement a system of Rent Assistance controlled by Local Authorities. Rent should be paid to the landlord and reviews of rent and negotiations could be carried out by the Local Authority themselves. This would ensure better value for money and better conditions for the tenant. It would also avoid abuse by landlords who in many cases have demanded extra top-up payments illegally from their tenants.

Sinn Féin also proposes:

- » Amending Equality Legislation to disallow the practice of landlords discriminating against recipients of rent supplement and immediately reforming the operation of that scheme to ensure recipients seeking rental properties are not unnecessarily disadvantaged.
- » Taking urgent action regarding spiralling rents by implementing a system of rent control that guarantees a fair rate of return for landlords and is linked to both the Consumer Price Index and the quality of the property.

RESPECTING DIVERSITY OF SOCIAL HOUSING NEED

Tailored provision for people with disabilities

People with disabilities make up almost 4,000 of those in housing need and more than 40% of the total homeless population.

- » Local Authorities can support people with disabilities to live in the community by matching appropriate housing to special needs. To this end, and to inform the development of local authority plans, information on the housing needs disability profile of the community and of those seeking to leave institutions should be enhanced.
- » Housing adaptation Grant schemes must be available and adequate.
- » Adequate provision of sheltered accommodation and facilities for independent living for people with disabilities and older people must be a priority in the allocation of housing budgets.

Traveller Accommodation

Local Authorities must draw down the maximum funding available for traveller accommodation.

- » Frontload funding for areas that present a plan for spending and have a track record of full draw down. This will incentivise full use of traveller accommodation funding and good planning.

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence has increased considerably over the past 6 years. Much of this problem has been exacerbated by the pressure of the economic crisis and austerity. The services which deal with people trying to get out of abusive relationships have also been very negatively affected by austerity and so while demand has increased, services have struggled to keep up.

Safe Ireland reported a 19% increase in Women's Refuge admissions between 2008 and 2012, an 80% increase in helpline calls and a 109% increase in requests for refuge that cannot be met.

Social housing and funding for emergency accommodation must support these vital services and the vulnerable families they protect.

Sinn Fein proposes:

- » Protecting and increasing funding for Women's Refuges and associated services.
- » Including domestic violence as a qualifying factor for social housing need.
- » Local Authorities must recognise those who have left their home due to domestic violence as homeless and afford them a priority status regardless of the status of the home they have fled.
- » Putting in place a legislative pathway for Local Authorities to deal with domestic violence in social housing.

Homelessness and Rough Sleeping

Despite successive governments' commitments to ending long term homelessness, the problem has worsened in recent years.

In 2013:

- » Focus Ireland reported dealing with 9,237 people experiencing homelessness or at risk of losing their home. This is a 20% increase on the previous year.
- » The Simon Community made contact with 4271 people who were rough sleeping.
- » 16 families lost their home each month in Dublin.

The problem with the government's approach to homelessness is not the contents of their strategy statement. The main problem is the inadequacy of the resources allocated to deal with the crisis. Fine Gael and the Labour Party believe they can sufficiently tackle homelessness without significantly increasing the amount of social housing available. The fact that growing numbers are at risk of homelessness due to rent rises caused by a lack of housing demonstrates the fallacy of their contention.

Local Authorities have a crucial role to play in ending long term homelessness and rough sleeping.

Prevention is better than a cure. In the first instance, this crisis must be tackled by prioritising the provision of an adequate supply of social housing which will help to stabilise residential rents and reduce the risk of homelessness.

Sinn Fein proposes:

- » A statutory and constitutional right to housing which will give the imperative to Local Authorities to protect people from homelessness.

- » Initiating a true “housing-led” approach with a significant increase in the provision of publicly owned social housing. A housing –led approach takes access to permanent housing as its starting point rather than its end goal. And involves tailored supports geared towards sustaining the person in a secure tenancy. It contrasts with the traditionally predominant approach of delivering supports in homeless residential or emergency settings with a view to getting the person ready for re-housing.
- » Exploring the further use of a Housing First approach placing people experiencing homelessness into housing immediately and providing appropriate supports. This must be done in conjunction with an increase in secure social housing stock.
- » Tying homelessness funding, especially for emergency accommodation to recorded homelessness figures. There should be no reduction in funding to homelessness services unless there has been a sustained drop in demand for these services and a reduction in homeless figures.
- » Repealing Section 16 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1997, which allows for to refusal or withdrawal of rent supplement where persons have been evicted or excluded from local authority housing. This increases the potential for those lawfully evicted to be rendered homeless and, as such, contravenes international human rights law.
- » Utilising several methods and/or combine different sources, and conform to international best practice in monitoring numbers experiencing homelessness. Prevalence studies (quantitative research tracking incidence, i.e. rates of homelessness among discrete groups) should be commissioned using multiplier and network analysis techniques, as this would be an appropriate method in estimating numbers of hidden homeless.