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**SINN FÉIN SUBMISSION
TO REVIEW OF
REBUILDING IRELAND**

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REBUILDING IRELAND



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INTRODUCTION

Sinn Féin has said from the outset that the government’s action plan for housing, Rebuilding Ireland, is deeply flawed. The plan is rooted in an over reliance on the private sector to deliver social housing solutions. Rebuilding Ireland has no concrete plans for the delivery of affordable rental or purchase housing. There is no vacant homes strategy and to date no study on construction costs. There was very little in terms of legislative change for those living in the private rented sector, especially in relation to security of tenure issues. Sinn Féin welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the review of this plan and recommendations will be laid out under the headings of social housing, affordable housing, private rented sector and homelessness.

BUILD MORE SOCIAL HOUSING

Sinn Féin believe that adequate funding should be provided to Councils in order to fully develop their own mixed tenure estates. Allowing Councils to develop mixed tenure estates helps to create sustainable communities and will reduce the cost of constructing homes as there are no associated land costs.

Rebuilding Ireland aims to deliver 47,000 “social housing solutions” by 2021. These solutions are broken down as follows. 26,000 units will be built by local authorities and approved housing bodies (AHBs) or delivered through Part V acquisitions from private developers, 11,000 units will be acquired by local authorities and AHBs and this figure includes refurbished long term voids. 10,000 units will be leased from the private sector in long term leases.

In addition to this Rebuilding Ireland has made a commitment to have 83,000 HAP tenancies in place by 2021.

Of the 130,000 social housing solutions promised in Rebuilding Ireland, 93,000 are private units leased for two, four or ten years. 72% of the government’s social housing plan is not social housing at all but subsidised private sector units.

79% of Rebuilding Ireland’s social housing delivery targets for 2017 are private sector “social housing solutions” consisting of leasing, HAP and the Rental Accommodation Scheme. The number of real social housing units due to be delivered in 2017, houses owned by local authorities or approved housing bodies, is only 4,450.

Sinn Féin Recommendation

1. The government must significantly ramp up its real social housing delivery targets in line with the cross party Housing and Homelessness Committee report, which stated that government should be delivering 10,000 real social housing units (owned by Local Authorities and Approved Housing Bodies) per year via local authorities and AHBs.
2. Abandon the expensive and contractually risky use of Public Private Partnerships and Joint Ventures/Land Initiatives and fully fund local authorities to develop mixed tenure estates and regeneration projects on public land. These estates should include social, rental, affordable rental and affordable for sale housing based on local need and with the appropriate social and economic amenities and infrastructure provided in parallel with any new housing.
3. Address the bureaucratic approval, tendering and procurement process which is slowing up the delivery of social housing. This cumbersome four stage process delays the delivery of social housing projects by 24 to 36 months. Sinn Féin believes a one stage approval process should be put in place which can deliver units from conception to tendering in less than a year.
4. Ensure that there is an adequate supply of adapted homes to meet the needs of those households on the social housing waiting lists with disabilities, mobility issues or who require wheelchair access.



AFFORDABLE HOUSING

There has been no government affordable housing scheme in place since 2011. Rebuilding Ireland mentions the roll out of an affordable rental scheme, which has not yet been developed. The Help to Buy Scheme was sold as a way of increasing the supply of new homes for first time buyers. Instead it did what the government and Fianna Fáil was told it would do by Sinn Féin and others and pushed up prices. Other schemes such as the Planning Rebate Scheme and the Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund have so far proved unsuccessful at delivering affordable rental or purchase housing.

Sinn Féin Recommendation

1. Sinn Féin believes that the provision of affordable housing for average income earners should be a priority for the government. There is a rising number of households earning between €40,000 and €70,000 a year in need of an affordable home to purchase or rent, and that the State should step in and provide these homes.
2. Affordable rental homes should be provided through existing vacant housing stock. The government should amend and increase the amount of funding for the current Repair and Lease scheme so that the scheme provides affordable rental homes.
3. Local Authorities should be tasked with the delivery of affordable homes for rent and purchase on local authority developed mixed tenure estates. For an average family sized home it costs local authorities about €191,000 all in. The homes could be sold just over cost price within a range between €180,000 and €240,000 depending on size and location and money recycled back into local authorities to deliver more public housing.
4. Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund (LIHAF) should not be given to any development that does not include an appropriate number of affordable rental and/or purchase units. The taxpayer should not be subsidising big developers without guaranteeing any return in terms of affordable housing. Developers must also have to demonstrate that they are not in a position to fund the infrastructure themselves.

PRIVATE RESIDENTIAL MARKET

The private housing market is increasingly unaffordable. The latest data available from the Central Statistics Office shows that house prices are continuing to rise. Figures show that house prices increased by 11.6% in the year to June 2017.

The government's Help to Buy scheme was the flagship policy of its plans to get supply going in the private market. Unfortunately all this scheme has done is increase house prices. Further to this we are still awaiting the study on construction costs and we are basing our housing completion statistics on inaccurate ESB connection data.

Sinn Féin Recommendation

1. The Help to Buy scheme is not fit for purpose and must be scrapped.
2. We urgently need an independent study on construction costs. We have no accurate data on how much the all in cost is of building a home in private sector. This data is essential in order to define affordability.
3. We need another method of counting housing completions. The data on compliance certification from the building control management system to count annual completions of new build housing units, rather than or in addition to connections to ESB supply.

PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR

The government is failing renters. The private rented sector in this state is dysfunctional. The government's strategy for the private rented sector was unambitious and did little for ensuring greater security of tenure for renters. What's more a two-tier rental market is emerging with those entering the sector being offered very little in way of protection as some landlords seek to circumvent the rent pressure zone legislation.

Sinn Féin Recommendation

1. The government must introduce real rent certainty, with rent reviews linked to an index like the CPI.
2. En lieu of this, Rent Pressure Zone legislation must be applied to all areas immediately. To ensure that landlords are complying with the legislation the Residential Tenancies Board must be provided with additional resources in order to properly police the sector.
3. The government must do more to ensure greater security of tenure for renters. The Residential Tenancies Act 2004 must be amended to make tenancies of indefinite duration the norm, without denying tenants the choice of shorter term lets when required. The sale of property, own use, use of family member and change of use criteria should be removed as a justification for serving notices to quit. Receivers and lenders should be included in the definition of landlords for cases of repossessed buy-to-lets. The government must immediately enact the deposit protection scheme legislation. Furthermore it must also act to ensure that landlords cannot insist on more than one month's rent in advance as a deposit.



TRAVELLER ACCOMMODATION

Over the past two years there has been an underspend on traveller accommodation by many local authorities. Only 8.9% of government funding has been drawn down by local authorities seven months in to 2017. Of the €5.5m allocated in 2016, only €4.3 million was recouped to local authorities.

Sinn Féin Recommendation

1. The funding for Traveller specific accommodation should be restored to 2008 levels of €40m.
2. In cases of local authorities that are not drawing down funding or not implementing the traveller accommodation plans, the Minister should step in and direct the allocated spend towards the provision of traveller specific accommodation.

HOUSING FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

More must be done to assist people with disabilities to access social housing, the private rented sector or to make their existing homes more appropriate for their current needs. Last month we learned through a PQ response that only €2.1m of a €10m ring fenced fund specifically for the provision of accommodation for persons with disabilities transitioning from congregated settings was spent in 2016.

Sinn Féin Recommendation

1. Sinn Féin believe that the existing local government led housing adaptation grant schemes are underfunded. In our Alternative Budget for 2017 Sinn Féin committed to increasing the central funding of these grant schemes by 50% through the allocation of an additional €15.75m.

TACKLE HOMELESSNESS

The government is running to standstill on the homelessness issue. Despite providing additional funding for homeless services the numbers of adults and children in emergency accommodation is at a record high. With the latest figures for June 2017 showing that there are 1,365 families, 2,895 children and 5,046 adults living in emergency accommodation across the state. Sinn Féin believe there needs to be greater focus on stemming the flow of people into homelessness and on getting people into permanent housing solutions as quickly as possible.

Sinn Féin Recommendation

1. Focus Ireland put forward an amendment to the Residential Tenancies Act 2004 late last year that was rejected by the government at the time. The amendment would have given greater protection to tenants renting buy-to-let properties. Sinn Féin and others tabled the amendment which restricts the termination of tenancies in buy-to-let dwellings by limiting the landlord's options if they want to sell, so that they must sell the property with the tenant in place.
2. Housing First must be expanded, with more housing units being secured for this purpose. In Sinn Féin's Alternative Budget for 2017 we made a commitment to work with Local Authorities to start ring-fencing a portion of the annual homeless budget to secure additional housing units for Housing First tenancies.
3. Provide more accurate homeless figures by including in the Department of Housing monthly homeless figure reports all adults and children in Tusla funded domestic violence refuges and step down accommodation and all adults and children in Department of Justice funded Direct Provision accommodation who have some form of status.





CONCLUSION

The housing system at all levels in this state is dysfunctional. The immediate focus needs to be on how the government can deliver more council homes either via local authorities or AHBs. This will in turn take the pressure off the private rented sector.

There is also a huge government policy gap in terms of affordable housing for purchase and for rent. A huge cohort of people are being locked out of the market and this will only get worse as house prices increase.

Finally we need to look at preventing homelessness and at measures to keep people in their homes.

Sinn Féin has published many more detailed recommendations on individual aspects of housing policy. For the purposes of a short term review we believe the recommendations we have included in this submission are the priority actions that should be taken by the government. We have also already made a detailed submission to the government's vacant homes strategy.





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