

Commission on Housing in Ireland

This document, agreed by a group with a high level of expertise and experience, proposes the establishment of a Commission on Housing in Ireland. (See Appendix 1)

The Changed Context for Housing and Housing Policy

Effective housing policy is critical to a prosperous and sustainable economy and vibrant, fair and inclusive society. The absence of an adequate supply of good-quality, affordable, secure, sustainable housing, with access to transport, education, health and other services, can create hardship for large numbers of people. For an economy dependent on attracting and retaining foreign direct investment and skilled labour, housing supply shortages can damage competitiveness, thus threatening living standards into the future.

Over the past century, Ireland made considerable progress in improving the availability, affordability and comfort of housing in both urban and rural areas. Two achievements were particularly significant:

- Large scale provision of good quality social housing over several decades;
- Achievement of a high level of home ownership.

But, in thinking about housing policy and provision for the 21st century these undoubted achievements are qualified in a number of significant ways:

- The systems in place to promote home ownership and social housing have been unstable and subject to periodic crises, most spectacularly in the early years of this century, when a housing and credit boom led to a major economic, fiscal and social crisis;
- The conditions underlying Ireland's past approach to social housing and home ownership have changed in fundamental ways.

While the tendency to volatility, and the continuing crisis of housing supply, are widely acknowledged, the deeper and enduring changes in context are less recognised.

The relevant changes in context include:

- The move from an inflation-prone to a low-inflation monetary environment, which fundamentally alters the conditions for achievement of outright home ownership during the working life;
- Changes in the financial and credit systems, which mean that previous approaches to both house construction and home purchase are no longer available;
- Changes in the public finances and fiscal rules which mean that earlier approaches to both social housing provision and housing supply via macroeconomic management are no longer available in the same way;

- Demographic changes—in household size, age distribution and overall population—, which have fundamentally altered the kind and number of housing units which are required, making less effective and relevant the approaches to construction and supply that prevailed since the 1960s;
- Economic change—reflected in greater labour market flexibility and significant inequality in market incomes—which have altered patterns of both housing demand and housing need.
- The climate change and environmental challenges, which mean that we can no longer meet housing need through low-density urban sprawl and heavy reliance on one-off rural housing;
- Technological change in the building industry—in which the production methods and disciplines that transformed manufacturing in recent decades are now being adopted in housing worldwide, offering superior alternatives to Ireland’s traditional home building methods and materials.

These changes have removed the conditions which made Ireland’s housing achievements of the 20th century possible. They have created a new context which demands a fundamental rethink of how we plan, finance and manage our housing system in the decades ahead.

It is critical that we create a broad societal, political and stakeholder consensus on how we achieve high-quality, affordable and sustainable housing in the 21st century. In other areas of policy—such as job creation, European integration, fiscal management, industrial relations and social protection—we moved from divergent understandings and policy volatility in earlier decades to significant consensus and effective long-term policy. Most recently, the Sláintecare process has brought a high degree of cross-party and wider stakeholder consensus on how to deliver and fund our health service.

A settled, long-term, view is more critical in relation to housing than most other areas of policy. There is a long lead time between the planning, funding and completion of housing. Housing policy initiatives require legislation, infrastructure, provision of vital public services and institutional change. The impact of housing policy endures over political and economic cycles. Consequently, a shared understanding on the thrust of public policy is immensely valuable in ensuring that housing strategy can endure over economic, political and planning cycles.

Time for a National Housing Commission

In view of the factors outlined above, a group of people with extensive experience and a wide range of perspectives on the housing system have concluded that the most effective way of creating a new consensus would be the establishment of a national commission on the future of housing. To have the greatest impact, the Commission should be established by the Government after the next general election, which is the optimum time in the political cycle to build societal and political consensus. Such a vision and enabling policies would take us beyond the horizon of existing policies and strategies

Mission of the Commission on the Future of Housing

To craft a shared, coherent, achievable, long-term vision and enabling policy recommendations that will deliver to the people of Ireland, on a sustainable basis, good quality, secure, affordable homes, suited to their needs, in well-serviced communities.

Suggested Terms of Reference

This section gives an outline the terms of reference for a Commission on Housing.

Terms of Reference

A Commission on the Future of Housing in Ireland is being established to develop a coherent long-term vision and enabling policies that will deliver, on a sustainable basis, good quality, secure, affordable homes, suited to people's needs, in well-serviced communities.

Establishment of the Commission

- Membership of the Commission will be determined by the Department of the Taoiseach, with the aim of achieving broad societal and political consensus.
- The primary criterion for determining membership will be expertise in the domain of housing and related subject matter and a diversity of perspectives.
- Membership will include experts of international standing from countries considered to be relevant exemplars.
- The breath of representation on the commission may be extended through the establishment of sub-groups to which additional contributors may be co-opted.

In carrying out its work, the Commission shall:

- Consult widely, including with the public and civic society through face-to-face meetings around the country.
- Invite written submissions and presentations to a New Ireland-type forum.
- Consult with local authorities and other relevant State bodies.

- Consult with developers, builders, voluntary housing associations and other stakeholders directly involved in the provision of housing.
- Have regard to relevant international experience.
- Consider relevant existing reports on housing in Ireland.
- Commission specific pieces of research.
- Maintain throughout their deliberations close contact with the relevant Oireachtas committees and the wider political system.

Tasks of the Commission

In setting out a vision and plan for housing in Ireland, the Commission should have regard to:

- The estimated level and pattern of demand for housing in coming decades. This will require estimation of future demographic changes, income levels, urbanisation and other trends.
- The supply of housing needed to meet the anticipated demand and how this increased supply will be provided. This will include:
 - Setting targets for future housing supply, in the knowledge that these targets will need to be adjusted during the period of the plan.
 - Examining different models of housing supply, both public and private, and the role of land and land management.
 - Considering the role of NGO/voluntary housing bodies.
 - Considering the most effective way public resources, funding and incentives can be used to increase the supply and affordability of housing.
 - Considering how high-quality affordable housing can be realised in all housing tenures.
 - Examining ways in which housing and land management policy and public housing delivery can act in a counter-cyclical fashion to prevent the boom and bust cycles of the past.
 - Considering the integration of housing supply with other elements of a sustainable community, including transport, education, and other facilities.
- The nature of different housing tenures; and whether new housing tenures should be developed. This will include:
 - Providing an estimate of the optimum proportion of different tenures and mix of tenures across urban and rural areas.
 - Examining how to cater for people who cannot afford market rental housing but are not eligible for social housing.
 - Examining such issues as security of tenure and rent certainty.
- The causes and nature of homelessness, and the development of specific proposals that will prevent homelessness occurring, and that will respond effectively and quickly to homelessness where it does occur.

- The housing and accommodation circumstances of Travellers, and their housing needs, including the provision of Traveller-specific accommodation.
- The constitutional, legal, fiscal, environmental and constitutional implications of the vision and plan.

The above list of considerations is not definitive. It is envisaged that in its early deliberations the commission will finalise the specification of the work to be done, putting the necessary boundaries on the scope of its work.

Time frame:

The Commission will draw up a final report or reports which will be presented to Government within 18 months.

Commission secretariat:

A skilled and adequately resourced Secretariat will be appointed to work for the Commission.

Appendix 1 – Membership of Group on Proposed Commission on Housing in Ireland

Mike Allen	Focus Ireland
Simon Brook RIP	
Mark Brennock	Murray
Billy Coman	Former Housing Director, South Dublin County Council
Aidan Culhane	The Iveagh Trust
Tom Dunne	Chair RTB
Dr. Aideen Hayden	Threshold
Dr. Eddie Molloy	Management Consultant
Prof. Michelle Norris	University College Dublin
Dr. William Nowlan	Urbeo Residential
Prof. Rory O'Donnell	University College Dublin
Dermot O'Leary	Goodbody