

Fast action – and rule changes – can help our slow housing sector

By removing some of the requirements for social housing, progress is possible



Construction: there is no shortage of land, building skills and building materials, but there remains a delay in new building projects. Photograph: Yui Mok/PA Wire

Nobody in Ireland with a social conscience can fail to worry about the housing situation. As someone with a lifetime of experience in the industry, I have been scratching my head as to how to provide social and affordable housing quickly and where it's needed – mainly in Dublin and other larger cities.

The blockages are land availability, planning delays, and getting someone to finance, develop, construct and then own the houses when completed.

Starting with land, Dermot O'Leary pointed out in a recent *Irish Times* article that we have no shortage of land. Development management and community management skills are abundantly available within the social and affordable housing bodies and the local authorities. Design and project management skills are available on the market.

Building skill

On construction, the easiest resource of all to procure is building skill and building materials. If there is one thing that we Irish are good at it's building houses – and we have not lost that skill. As to finance, there is a large untapped reservoir of investment funding now going into commercial property but bypassing the lower end of the housing rental market. So what is holding up the show?

It is the disconnect between the land, money and building skill. It's the planning system which was, and is, designed for normal times but cannot cope with the extraordinary housing circumstances where no development has taken place for nearly seven years, resulting in the current housing crises. Extraordinary circumstances require an extraordinary response. What should that be? I have two possible solutions.

The first is to exempt voluntary housing bodies from the need to secure planning permission for specific types of new housing. This is within the Minister's power at the stroke of a pen subject to the approval of the Dáil. Certain school and home extensions, and many other forms of development are exempt from the need to get planning permission – why not social and affordable housing under defined circumstances, for a limited period? We need it, and we need it quickly.

The second initiative is to accelerate the work of a committee, known as “the Social Housing Proposals Clearing House”, set up to look at ways of linking institutional finance with social and affordable housing. I and others have made carefully structured proposals to enable pension funds and others to invest in housing provided by Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs). Those proposals should be fast-tracked and conclusions reached – fast.

Integrated

There is potential to make very large sums of money available for integrated and carefully designed and managed communities. And by integrated, I mean communities composed not solely of social tenants, but providing proper housing for key workers and middle-income households – young gardaí, teachers, nurses, etc. In turn, the AHBs will ensure that savings from these concessions are reflected in lower-than-market rents for tenants and not as windfall profits for developers. I am not saying that all our carefully crafted planning laws should be abandoned in panic, but that parts should be suspended until normal market conditions return in three or four years. Neither am I saying that development by AHBs should be uncontrolled.

Formal planning procedures might be temporarily set aside, but the provisions of the Development Plan should apply, including building standards, road safety, open space and traffic. Local authorities should work with housing bodies with a view to quick delivery of housing in a sustainable manner. It should also be provided that to avail of the exemption, any non-social rented units have to operate on below-market rents.

This approach will not cost the Government a penny other than providing the normal subsidies to the social housing sector which are there in any case.

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