

## Respond! Jubilee Conference 2012.

### Does Ireland need a National Housing Plan? Of course it does!

“Adapting the Scheme of Letting Priorities” - Dr Padraic Kenna, NUI Galway<sup>1</sup>

I would like to thank the organizers of this conference at Respond! for inviting me here. Today, I am going to look at the social housing allocation system, with its residualised approach to need, and its outcomes. I will argue that we need to take a less deferential and humble approach as social housing advocates.

One great phrase used a lot these days is “targeting scarce resources at those in greatest need”. In other words, we are led to accept that there are insufficient housing and other resources to address all needs, and only those with the greatest need can be helped. Who can argue with that? It is a statement of common sense – is it not? Indeed, it absolves the conscience of the conservative, the liberal and the socialist, even at times of State cutbacks in welfare services. The provision of a minimum of State support to the poorest, most vulnerable, excluded and marginalized is also the call of the human rights advocate.

However, in using this approach for social housing allocation we are accepting a view of social housing as a “residualised” tenure, i.e., it is reserved for those who are inactive in the labour market and it will comprise concentrations of people on welfare benefits. Although various measures have been taken to address this, including the empowerment of tenants by *Respond!*, many structural issues remain unresolved.

At an event which asks the good question “Does Ireland need a National Housing Plan? Of course it does!” it is incumbent on us to put forward some original proposals. Choice based lettings can offer some improvement in peoples feeling of control over the allocation process. Perhaps we could move towards the Delft model.

Ultimately, however, we need to take a holistic approach to the housing system. We need a “new mindset”. Deference to failed orthodoxy must be replaced by recognizing that social/subsidized housing is as much an integral part of the housing system as mortgage lending and property law. We need a “courageous State” which will regulate the housing system as a whole, and not defer to banks access to international finance as the determinant of our housing

choices. We also need to challenge media portrayal of social housing that is skewed towards sensational and demonizing images of social housing estates. Equally, media statements by some bankers, economists and assorted *spivs* ignore or sneer at social housing, seeking to condescend those who work or live in it. Indeed, this often demonstrates how little responsibility they feel towards creating a better society.

Researchers and those who work in social housing will testify that the vast majority of social housing tenants are fine people, who are keen to help others and make a contribution to society. They are often frustrated by the failure of State agencies, resulting in “undeserved communities”.

So, before we begin the National Housing Plan we need to ask why the media behave in this way, depicting social housing as a form of housing fit only for second, or indeed, third class citizens.



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