

The Components of the National Housing Plan

Gerry Sheeran

Former President, Irish Planning Institute

The disfunctionality of the housing market in the current deep recession is probably the most significant example of the failure of the system during the economic boom in terms of overstimulation of the market, poor planning and policy. The time is certainly opportune for a National Housing Plan. It should deal with housing in its totality, both private and social housing, as each City and County Council is obliged to do their Housing Strategies under the Planning Acts.

The Government's Housing Policy Statement of June 2011, sees the vision for the housing sector as one of "choice, fairness, equity across tenures and on delivering quality outcomes for the resources invested". In the bullet points below I will list the areas which I would like to see included in any new national housing plan

- Evidence based zoning of housing land based on the concept of the core strategy as required by the Planning & Development Act 2010
- Location of housing in accordance with the National Spatial Strategy and Regional Planning Guidelines.
- Community facilities commensurate with the provision of housing, including schools, parks, playgrounds, leisure facilities.
- Issues regarding the ratio of urban to rural housing and implications for smarter travel policies and sustainable development.
- Density and quality of housing having regard to the Government guidelines on "Sustainable Residential Development in Urban Areas", 2009, particularly energy efficient dwellings of high quality design
- Focus on development of brownfield sites within cities and towns rather than development on suburban or peri-urban green field sites.
- Social integration with a mix of tenure, house types and income. The projected target scenario as between owner occupied, privately rented, assisted rented and social housing.
- How access to housing will be provided for disadvantaged groups such as those on low income, disabled, travellers and homeless.
- The need for soft supports for social housing i.e. community strengthening, education, health, budget management skills, security.

- Dealing with legacy issues including substantial overzoning of lands for housing, ghost estates, mono-tenure in large social housing estates and the proliferation of one-off housing
- The role of NAMA in sustainable housing provision.
- Future monitoring and performance indicators of the National Housing Plan at a high level including at regional level and at Government level.

OVERVIEW

The core strategy requirement introduced by the Planning Act 2010 requires that each Planning Authority defines exactly the amount of land to be zoned for housing and other uses based on population projections carried out by the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government. This is a statutory requirement and has resulted in a significant amount of land throughout the State being de-zoned. It requires the provision of only enough zoned land, working from the centre of urban areas out, in the specific locations to accommodate the projected future populations. Its aim is to ensure the development of sustainable settlements with people living near where they work and encouraging sustainable, vibrant villages, towns and cities in line with national policy.

One of the major issues is the proliferation of one-off houses throughout the state. There are now approximately 488,000 (30% of all housing) of these as compared to 156,000 in 1971. In 2010, 40% of all housing units permitted were one-off houses and this percentage has significantly increased in the interim. The many negative effects of this type of development are undermining the vibrancy of rural towns and villages. These are serious environmental impacts on ground water and bio-diversity, costing the state three times as much to service over urban houses, being unsustainable in terms of traffic generation and carbon footprint and also causing a serious social imbalance where the more affluent move to the countryside with the less well-off remaining in villages and small towns (the average one-off dwelling has double the floor area of the average urban dwelling). The National Housing Plan needs to address this major issue.

NAMA is required to provide a social dividend. This is because in the final NAMA Act, Section 2 requires it to contribute to the social and economic development of the state and also in Section 12 “NAMA shall have regard to the proper planning and sustainable development as expressed by Government policy and in any relevant regional planning guidelines and development plans”. It should be noted that the Irish Planning Institute made submissions to have these added to the NAMA Act and the eventual Act did include these amendments. NAMA in regard to the social dividend is now offering 2000 houses for social provision.

This is a positive step. However we must be cautious with regard to the provision to ensure social integration and not repeat previous mistakes where large groupings of social housing were provided. Instead we should look to integrate social housing in a more pepper pot way with other tenures including owner occupancy and privately rented. Neither should the importance of social integration be overlooked by local authorities in housing provision or by the voluntary housing sector.

Three key principles for a new national housing strategy could be:-

1. To enable every household to have available a dwelling of good quality, suited to its needs and a good environment and as far as possible at the tenure of its choice.
2. To promote balanced and sustainable communities by transformation of the income and tenure mix of urban areas.
3. To work to deliver the population targets and population distributions set out in the national spatial strategy and the regional planning guidelines which support the settlement hierarchy of each region followed by the inclusion of key towns as primary locations for development, including economic development