

# LOWDOWN ON THE LEESIDE'S HOUSING NEEDS

The challenges of meeting Cork City's social housing needs, the current schemes in the pipeline, and his belief that the solution to the housing problems depends on the private sector, are just some of the many issues outlined to 'Council Review' by Brian Geaney, Programme Manager of Cork City Council's Housing and Community Directorate.

**Q: You are at the coalface of meeting the social housing needs of people in Cork city and its environs. How challenging is your role?**

**A:** As you would expect the role of Programme Manager operating in a vibrant city in a state with a dysfunctional housing system in major crisis throws up constant hard and soft challenges on a daily basis. These can range from regulatory and political to resources and finance; you just deal with them as they arise or try to predict them, where possible.

This is overcome mainly by our team approach to project deliver. I'm very lucky with the team I have around me and the support by Valerie O'Sullivan, Director of Services for Housing & Community and Chief Executive, Ann Doherty.

Observers never cease to be impressed by the commitment and enthusiasm of my team here in Housing Capital & Regeneration; my challenge is to select the right game-plan and make sure we're winning.

**Q: You have a good team around you since you became Programme Manager. Tell us a little about the people and schemes that you are working hand in glove with?**

**A:** I have a great team but saying that now that we are on site and at the implementation stage on large projects. We don't need to repeat the mistakes of the past. Large multi- million euro building programmes come with commercial and technical risks that need experienced and skilled management.

**Q: What Government bodies do you work most closely with and what sort of a relationship do you have with the powers-that-be in Dublin?**

**A:** Primarily, we work with the DHPCLG; we have developed a great relationship with the people there who are also on a steep learning curve dealing with the housing and homelessness crisis. Naturally, there will be conflicting ideas from time to time but this is healthy and leads to innovation.

We learn from each other. The transactional nature of a public service department as opposed to a project delivery office and the fact that there are no devolved funds for housing for local authorities pose difficulties. We are at an early stage and have made a good start in dealing with the housing problem.



The 28-unit housing scheme opened at Sheridan Park, Tramore Road in February by Minister Simon Coveney.

**Q: How much do you liaise with the private sector?**

**A:** The entire solution to this crisis depends on the private sector on so many levels. In our own council constructed housing units which are now coming out of the ground once again we depend on the local construction sector and on key professional advisers ranging from engineers to architects and quantity surveyors in order to deliver projects.

On the wider social housing programme we have specifically engaged with the private sector through a competitive dialogue integrated procurement and planning process which is delivering results. We expect to deliver further and more ambitious solutions through other versions of this process now that we have had the experience.

**Q: Do you see a bigger role for the private sector in increasing the supply of housing in Cork going forward?**

**A:** Without a doubt, the solution to the housing problems depends on the private sector and it is in part because of the dysfunction in the banking and construction that we have this problem in Ireland.

There are clearly some national decisions to be made at Government and EU level to resolve the problems in the sector. The industry is literally dragging itself out of the grave after a decade of austerity and recession; it's not going to be easy particularly without banking support. Here in the Housing Department we are attempting to support delivery by the private sector by unlocking sites at the Old Whitechurch Road (600 units) and Boherboy Road (153 units).

A further 539 social housing units are either under construction or almost to the construction phase. The council is already well advanced on a further 178 units under the Cork City Northwest Regeneration Scheme.

The Old Whitechurch Road site is supported by the LIHAF infrastructure funding which our team are managing in order to enable the private sector to deliver affordable and sustainable housing on this site. The conditions need to be put in place that normal private sector markets and conditions can resume, otherwise the crisis will get worse.

**Q: Nationally, the housing crisis shows little sign of abating but to what extent does demand exceed supply in Cork City in particular?**

**A:** Clearly Cork is on fire at the moment commercially and tourism wise; this is putting further pressure on a hard-pressed housing market with rents constantly on the increase and the population increasing. We already see evidence of large employers having to block book housing for potential employees; this is a perfect storm and housing has now become an economic factor aside from the social dimension. The conditions have to be right and they clearly are not. In the interim, we will do the best we can with the resources available to us on the social side.

**Q: Has the cost of providing social housing increased in recent years?**

**A:** Social housing is no different from all housing and construction in terms of costs. Costs are on the increase as you know in the City and we are in that space.



Cork's Lord Mayor Cllr Des Cahill, Cork City's chief executive Ann Doherty, Minister Simon Coveney and city council officials at the official opening of Sheridan Park.

**Q: How frustrating must it be not to actually be in charge of the purse strings when drawing up objectives?**

**A:** You are talking about an ideal world of course. I think there should be devolved funding and less regulation in terms of projects up to a certain threshold for local authorities as in the case of the Department of Education where the schools programme has worked very well. But it's all about relationships and managing these to get results; I like to think that we are flying the flag in that regard here in Cork City.

**Q: How has the slump in recent years within the construction industry affected the council plans/policies?**

**A:** We still have a building and development sector on its knees and a banking sector not at the races yet with respect to housing, so the answer is obvious – a housing crisis. The council plans and policies adapt always to the prevailing demand and conditions that prevail; we too have to cut our cloth according to measure and get more for less, where we can.



Lord Mayor of Cork Cllr Des Cahill pictured with Minister Simon Coveney at the official opening of the Sheridan Park housing scheme.