

AMBITIOUS TARGETS SET FOR HOUSING SECTOR

With €3.1bn allocated towards housing in Budget 2021, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage Darragh O'Brien tells Grace Heneghan that whilst this year's target to deliver 12,750 homes, of which 9,500 will be new-build, is very ambitious especially during the pandemic, he says it can be achieved, and outlines the building blocks being rolled out.

According to Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Darragh O'Brien TD, the €3.1bn allocation in this year's Budget towards social housing (a 24% increase of €733m on Budget 2020) highlights the priority afforded by the Government and his department to the housing sector.

"The Cabinet Sub-Committee on Housing meets every month to identify where the blockages have been in the past and to focus on the Programme for Government's commitment under the 'Housing for All' strategy.

"For 2021 we have set a target for our local authorities, in association with approved housing bodies, to deliver 12,750 homes, of which 9,500 will be new-build homes with the remainder through leasing and small acquisition agreements. Yes, while this is an ambitious target it's also very realisable, and we have said we will deliver it."

Minister O'Brien claims that a "step-change in delivery" is badly needed, and he has expedited a lot of time to liaise with local authority chief executives, while he is also in regular contact with council mayors and cathaoirleigh across the country.

"We need to work in co-operation with the local authorities to deliver this target, and to ensure that the process is streamlined and simplified. One of the first things I did on coming into office was to change the single-stage approval process – the famous five-stage process is gone and now any development up to €6m will be a one-stage process of approval.

"A lot of local authorities sought that and I delivered it for them, and I want to see them now utilising this. Having a great regard for local authorities here in the Custom House my plan is to build up this trust."

LOCAL AUTHORITY FEEDBACK

An ambitious target indeed, but how can this all be achieved within just one year especially during the current pandemic? "Some people have wondered how we got the Budget to focus €3.1bn on housing, yet we have done that. Housing is a priority for me and the



(Pic: Dermot Byrne)

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Government, and to do that we have to back that up with action. Yes, it's an ambitious target but in setting the target we have worked with the local authorities to see what is actually achievable."

While he admits that this would push capacity to the limit, he points to some positives – "the AHBs will help us in delivering this target, while more building works being done by the councils themselves will permeate into each town and village throughout the country. The aim is to also get more small operators involved in this delivery – we need a small boats approach – you've often heard it mentioned about the 'Dunkirk approach' to housing.

"You won't get it done with four or five big builders alone, and so we need to have a sustainable construction sector. I've always believed that the State needs to lead by example, and we need to set that out clearly in the first year of this government. It is ambitious and it's going to test both myself and the councils."

Since last November he has been visiting a number of local authorities around the country to address the main issues of housing delivery and funding mechanisms. "I have been working with them on their own housing target for 2021, and how they intend to achieve it. I'm grateful for their feedback and I will be meeting them again over the following months."

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AT THE FRONTLINE

"Local government is at the frontline of government in Ireland, and we have acutely seen this during the pandemic, with the roll-out of the 'Community Call' initiative. The outreach service provided by local authorities across the country, particularly in terms of helping our more vulnerable and senior citizens, has been great. However, funding has been problematic as local authorities have lost a lot of money since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic."

In response to local funding problems, the Minister and his Department in association with Minister Michael McGrath and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform secured a €900m rate rebate.

"We waived commercial rates for SMEs in this country, which is a good business support for them to keep in operation over the coming months. But since these rates are a big part of funding for the local government sector, there was a justifiable concern that local authorities would lose out heavily, so I have put forward an additional €430m to the Select Committee on Housing and Local Government."

He has also maintained regular with the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) and the County and City Management Association (CCMA).

"Their feedback has been very positive. I'm a firm believer in strong local government, and with a local government reform agenda contained in the Programme for Government I want to see that rolled out very soon. The Minister of State with responsibility for Local Government and Planning, Peter Burke, is doing a lot of work in that regard."



A package of over €5.2bn has been allocated in Budget 2021 to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage – with €3.1bn towards social housing (an increase of €733m on Budget 2020). (Pic: Breege Rowley)

AFFORDABLE HOUSING MEASURES

With Cabinet approval given at the end of last year for the priority drafting of the Affordable Housing Bill 2020, this will provide for the establishment of a new Affordable Purchase Shared Equity scheme, which will see the State take an equity share in a home while the owner takes out a mortgage with a bank on the remainder.

It is intended that the scheme, to be finalised in the coming months, will be open to all new build homes subject to price caps and targeted at first-time buyers. The Bill will also, for the first time, define 'Cost Rental' as a new form of tenure and place it on a statutory footing. This legislation will provide the basis for the first 400 Cost Rental homes in the State which will be delivered in 2021 with many more in the pipeline in the years thereafter.

Commenting on the Affordable Housing 2020 Bill, following Cabinet approval, Minister O'Brien said: "The introduction of an Affordable Purchase Shared Equity scheme will assist those who do not qualify for social housing but are struggling financially to meet their housing needs from the market.

"It will help them secure their own home by bridging the gap between the mortgage available to them and the price of the home they want. By doing this it will also boost housing supply. The final details of the scheme are being negotiated with stakeholders and will be informed by our engagement with the EU Commission."

LAND DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

Cabinet approval has been received by the Minister for a new provision to ensure that there is a statutory obligation to deliver affordable housing on State-owned land, and this provision will be contained in legislation to establish the Land Development Agency (LDA) on a primary statutory footing.

"Setting the LDA on a statutory footing is at an advanced

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The LDA is currently working on this flagship development, in partnership with Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council, which will see 597 homes delivered at Shanganagh Castle.

stage and I hope to publish the Land Development Agency Bill within the coming months.” The Land Development Agency Bill 2020 will see the LDA established as a Designated Activity Company (DAC) through primary legislation. This will allow the Agency to drive strategic land assembly to ensure the sustainable development of new and regenerated communities well-served by essential services.

Having been established in September 2018 to open up State-owned land for development and to regenerate under-utilised sites, the LDA is currently working on nine sites, including their flagship partnership with Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council (which will see 597 homes delivered at Shanganagh Castle).

“Some of these sites are very strategic, such as Shanganagh Castle, the former Custume Barracks in Athlone, Limerick’s Colbert Station Quarter, Castlelands in Balbriggan and the redevelopment of the former Central Mental Hospital in Dundrum.”

It’s expected that 4,000 homes will be delivered across these sites, and the majority of these homes will be made

available on a cost rental or affordable purchase basis. The Agency is also engaged in urban regeneration master planning initiatives with city councils in Limerick, Cork and Galway.

“State-owned lands are one of our most valuable resources and it is my intention that they will be a key part of the solution to quickly deliver affordable homes across the country through the LDA.

“As a further demonstration of the Government’s commitment to supporting the LDA, €65m was allocated in Budget 2021 while a further investment of €1.25bn will be made by the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF) from 2021 onwards. My department is working closely with the Office of the Attorney General to draft the LDA Bill, with a view to bringing this forward to the Oireachtas as a matter of priority.”

HOUSING FIRST MODEL

Describing the Programme for Government’s plan for housing as “very specific”, he says that his department is also set to allocate significant funding to expand the Housing First model in association with Bob Jordan, the National

Director of Housing First, and his team. The former CEO of the national housing charity Threshold (2007-2016) was also responsible for developing the National Housing First Implementation Plan 2018-2021.

“To date the Housing First model has been rolled out in 14 different areas across the country, and has housed 500 people, who may have complex health needs or addiction issues.

“At the start of every week there are two meetings – the first is with the Homeless Task Force, which involves my department’s team at the Custom House and some of the main housing NGOs and homeless charities such as Peter McVerry Trust, Focus Ireland, Threshold, Depaul and Simon Community. The second meeting then takes place with the housing delivery unit which is involved with the local authorities and the AHBs.

“With the shutdown on construction sector for three months at the start of the pandemic in March 2020, it was interesting to hear the criticism levelled from some people that our housing completion at the end of Q2 was only at nine per cent. To put it mildly, they were being disingenuous, since they neglected

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to note that construction was shut down during that time, and good progress was made to catch up on lost ground during the second half of the year.”

KEEPING STOCK OF VACANT PROPERTIES

Last year Minister O'Brien issued a national call to property owners and developers to make vacant properties available for social housing use, and he estimates that his 'Call for Housing 2020' measure will probably see about 300 properties returned to the public housing stock.

And to address the issue of vacant housing across the country, an extra €40m was made available by the Minister in July 2020 for local authorities to get their vacant housing stock back into use; and he had then set a target of 2,500 to be allocated and/or occupied by December 2020.

“We need to look at how to better

FACTFILE – DARRAGH O'BRIEN

Fianna Fáil's Darragh O'Brien has served as Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage since June 2020. He first entered the arena of local politics, following his election as councillor with Fingal County Council (2004-2007), and represented Portmarnock, Malahide and Kinsealy Ward.

He has been a TD for the Dublin Fingal constituency since the 2016 General Election, and previously from 2007 to 2011 for the Dublin North constituency. Having narrowly lost his Dáil seat, he was elected to Seanad Éireann in 2011 as a Senator.

Up until his election to Dáil Éireann in 2007, he worked mainly in financial services, specifically in the Pensions Sector, becoming a Senior Area Manager with Friends First Assurance Company. His brother Eoghan is a County Councillor in Malahide, and served as Mayor of Fingal County Council from 2019-2020.



manage the stock of vacant homes, and I will allocate more money to get an additional 1,000 properties back into use this year'. I will look at the process of

tenanting and de-tenanting in partnership with the local authorities.”

He points to Peter McVerry Trust, as an example of a housing charity that is using

KEY ELEMENTS OF HOUSING CAPITAL PROGRAMME

- Funding of €220m will continue to support the delivery of new social housing homes by the AHB sector, via the Capital Advance Leasing Facility (CALF). The increase in funding will allow for the provision of 3,800 additional social homes through new build and acquisition in 2021.
- Funding of €11m for the Repair and Leasing Scheme will allow local authorities and AHBs to provide financial assistance to property owners to remediate up to 170 vacant private homes so they can then be leased for social housing.
- €23m will support the continuation of the Mortgage-to-Rent Scheme and will allow for 330 additional households to be supported and to remain in their own homes.
- Funding of €65m is available in 2021 to retrofit 2,400 social housing homes to a Building Energy Rating (BER) of B2 or cost optimal equivalent;
- A number of affordability measures with funding totalling €468m will include:
 - » A new funding model to accelerate the delivery of 400 cost rental homes through the AHB sector as part of an €110m Affordability Measures package [new Cost Rental Equity Loan Facility (CRELF) will allow AHBs to borrow up to 30% of the cost of rental homes from the State].
 - » €50m will be allocated to the Serviced Sites Fund (SSF) to provide infrastructure to support the delivery of homes to purchase or rent at discounted prices;
 - » The Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund (LIHAF) will be supported by an allocation of €38m in 2021, to go towards funding major public infrastructure projects and ongoing delivery of up to 20,000 new homes across public and private sites over the lifetime of the scheme;
 - » Funding package for the Land Development Agency: The LDA has nine sites with the potential to deliver in the region of 4,000 new homes, and the majority of these homes will be made available for cost rental or affordable purchase;
 - » €73m provided for the National Regeneration Programme, to benefit some of the most economically-disadvantaged communities;
- €218m to support and help those experiencing homelessness to successfully exit homelessness as well as to support the roll-out of the Housing First model;
- Additional funding of €59m under the Social Housing Current Expenditure Programme (SHCEP), giving a total provision of €250m, will help to deliver 6,450 additional social housing homes in 2021, as well as supporting over 20,800 leased homes already in place;
- An allocation of €558m for the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) will enable 15,000 new households to be accommodated in 2021, as well as support for over 59,000 households already in tenancies by the end of 2020.

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the 'Repair & Lease Scheme' very effectively. "I've upped the limit to €60,000 as to what will be paid, for properties, which has also been welcomed by AHBs and others."

However, he claims that the 'Buy & Renew' scheme, which provides grant-aid incentives to people to renovate their property, has not been used as widely as it should have been. "My policy advisor and I are looking at a simpler scheme for private homes, particularly those above commercial units. For example, in my constituency in Balbriggan, very few people reside on the Main Street, so we need to look at how to get people to return to live on our main streets, possibly through the Urban Regeneration Development Fund (URDF)."

A NEW DIRECTION

He is also keen to look at a rural funding scheme, and says he would like to work on this with the Minister for Social Protection, Community and Rural Development Heather Humphreys TD.

"A lot of people may have moved back to their place of origin due to this pandemic, having realised that they can now work from home. For example, a TG4 documentary featured a number of people working for tech companies in Dublin or Galway who have moved back to the Gaeltacht as they can now work remotely. Remote working will be a positive thing for our regions and this is something that we should harness.

"This is a new government and it's a new direction with a particular focus on housing delivery so we have to be ambitious, yet the targets we've set are also realistic.

"However, we have to build up capacity so we must be realistic. I'm working with both the construction sector and the local authorities and even with the sector closing

down for three months in the first half of 2020, that target is achievable. The cloud that is the pandemic can also bring some small silver linings."

However, with the construction sector now in lockdown yet again, barring those building works deemed 'essential', only time will tell the adverse and long-term effects this will have on meeting such ambitious housing targets for 2021.




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