

Charter for Housing Rights

Time for a major
public housing
building programme

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The housing and homelessness crisis is the defining issue of our time. It demands an urgent, coherent and significantly enhanced official response.

The crisis is symptomatic of increased social divisions and greater inequality and its resolution could help tackle this growing divide.

There is a direct connection between the lack of affordable homes to rent or buy and record numbers of homeless people: both are manifestations of the same essential problem.

The housing and homelessness crisis is not intractable and it can be resolved - but this will require significant official policy change.

A critical component of that resolution must be a major public housing building programme, as part of a wider strategy of transition to a European cost rental model and the creation of a secure and sustainable housing system for all.

In order to ensure a resolution of this crisis, we believe the following principles must be adopted and fully implemented:



1 Declare a national housing & homelessness emergency and initiate a major public housing building programme, delivering a minimum of 10,000 new homes annually over the next five years.

The emergency housing programme must be led by local authorities, who can coordinate across geographical regions to draw together the skills and expertise required to maximise impact. The programme will cost €1.8 billion annually and the government must seek necessary flexibility on the EU Fiscal Rules for this investment.

The programme should form part of a coherent national strategy of well-planned, mixed income and socially inclusive housing that includes public homes, affordable rental and affordable purchase homes. In addition, there should be some form of housing prioritisation for essential service workers – hospitals, transport etc – particularly in the major urban centres. The public housing programme must prioritise decent working conditions for those employed in its delivery and ensure that it does not support or facilitate any form of bogus self-employment.

2 Hold a referendum or introduce legislation within a set timeframe that affirms the right to housing for every citizen of the state.

The right to housing is recognised in the constitutions of Belgium, Spain and Sweden and is enshrined in legislation in Austria, France, Germany, Luxembourg and the UK. The right to adequate housing is a cornerstone of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social & Cultural Rights and the European Social Charter. There is no such provision in Irish law. A right to housing would create a basic level of protection for all citizens and require the State to uphold and validate this right in all its decisions and policies.

3 Legislate to ensure that all tenants within the rental sector enjoy security of tenure and certainty in relation to rent and standards of accommodation.

The private rented sector continues to expand and currently houses almost 20% of the population. Yet the sector is characterised by insecurity and uncertainty and it is clear that tenants require greater levels of protection, including:

- Ensuring that private rental tenants enjoy at least the same rights as commercial tenants, where a change of landlord does not automatically result in eviction.
- Ensure there can be no evictions in the buy to let sector for the purpose of renovations or to accommodate a member of a landlord's extended family.
- Introduce 'indefinite tenancies'.
- The Residential Tenancies Board must have the power and authority to determine if rules on rent are being applied by landlords, as opposed to the current situation where tenants must police the system. Continuous abuse of system would see landlords being deregistered.

Over the longer term, policy must focus on the development of a 'European Cost Rental Model', as set out by NERI. This will help create a more stable rental sector, with greater security and help address spiralling rental costs. It will also deliver savings, given that the State has spent some €5.5 billion since 2002 in rent supplement for private landlords.



4 There can be no evictions to nowhere and evicting a family or an individual into homelessness must be prohibited by law.

No eviction should be allowed to legally proceed in either the private or public rental sector, until suitable alternative accommodation has been found for the family or individual in question. Local authorities should be given a defined, statutory duty to provide housing for those who are homeless within their respective areas, as opposed to their 'general responsibility' for housing provision under the 1988 Housing Act. Local authorities in Scotland, Wales and England generally have more clearly defined duties to provide housing for those threatened with homelessness.

5 Develop a national Land Management Policy commensurate with a Right to Housing.

Any such policy must take account of the citizen's Right to Housing (see above) and would include specific measures to aggressively target 'land hoarding'. Data from the CSO shows there is 13,900 hectares (1 ha to 2.47 acres) of serviced land available nationally, that could be utilised for house construction. The use of publicly-owned land is key to the supply of affordable housing for renting and owner occupation ('affordability' equates to 30-40% of net income).

- To this end, we must adopt a national Land Management Policy focused on the supply of affordable, secure and high quality accommodation. Land Value Capture mechanisms must be introduced to capture private windfall gains from rezoning and 'betterment' arising from infrastructural development.
- All public land must be reserved for public housing and not passed to the private sector for development.
- We need the immediate introduction of a Vacant Site Levy with proceeds ring-fenced for public housing provision.
- The use of Compulsory Purchase Orders to acquire land for housing, as necessary. In line with the Kenny Report (1974) local authorities should have the resources to purchase land for housing at less than market value – existing use value, plus 25%.

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