

Building a Consensus on Our Housing Crisis

A Waterford-focused discussion document on housing, authored and recently published by TD David Cullinane (SF), takes issue with the current Government's approach to addressing the housing crisis. But it does so without resorting to the sort of language journalists are immediately drawn to and prone to base big, bold headlines on.

Instead, Deputy Cullinane's tone is as composed as it's measured and doesn't opt for the Eoghan Murphy bashing that there's been a great deal of in recent months, some by members of his own party, yet far from exclusively. "To date the Government has no credible vacant homes strategy and to date no accurate and up to date study on construction costs," writes Deputy Cullinane.

"The Government has taken a minimalist approach to rising rents in the private sector and their solutions simply have not worked."

Compare this to the sentiment expressed by economist Jim Power (hardly, by his own declaration, a champion of the left) who addressed the issue at Waterford Chamber's Business Breakfast, held on Wednesday last.



The housing discussion document prepared by TD David Cullinane offers realistic targets on what could be delivered in the immediate term.

"It appears that one housing policy is implemented and within a couple of months, surprise, surprise, it's not working because these things take a lot of time to feed through the system but the political pressure comes on and they immediately change course again. Maybe I'm just being way too dramatic or negative, but given the mess that housing policy is at the moment, I just have no idea how they can possibly do what needs to be done, which is to increase housing supply." It's a measure of where are right now that when it comes to housing, only the width of a beer mat appears to separate the views of Jim Power and David Cullinane on this matter. In the document, Deputy Cullinane calls for 40,000 "real social houses" to be delivered (be they built or purchased) by local authorities and approved housing bodies between now and 2021. While affordability of houses has been primarily a Dublin issue in recent years, David Cullinane added: "But it is becoming a problem here in Waterford as well, as we're seeing house prices increasing month on month, year on year. There is no affordable housing programme of any substance being put forward by this Government. We're told that the Land Development Agency which is being established will be setting targets of 10 per cent social and 30 per cent affordable, but there's no details on the affordability at all and that's what would concern us: how will they define affordability and how are they going to make sure these targets are realised."

In terms of local targets, Deputy Cullinane believes City Hall should be more ambitious when it comes to its own building plan and called for a minimum of 2,000 to be delivered by the end of 2021 (the 'Rebuilding Ireland' plan commits to 687 such homes). "That would leave us with less people on the housing list at the end of that four year spell as opposed to even more people and to me that's a basic ask," he said. "We shouldn't have a situation where, at the end of the identified four years that we'd actually end up with more people on the housing list than that we do now. Anything less than that doesn't strike me as being particularly ambitious...and I don't think the 687 target shows any ambition on behalf of the Council's corporate body."

Deputy Cullinane, referencing the National Planning Framework, added: "We've been told that the ambition is to increase Waterford's population by 60 per cent; well if you want to do that and then factor in the current housing target as it stands, then it's clear and woefully inadequate."

To deliver 40,000 houses over the next four years is a noble aspiration, one that no-one I know would offer any form of objection to.

However, if every cent required to build each of those houses was made available tomorrow morning, are there enough block layers, plasterers, carpenters, fitters, plumbers and electricians in the country to deliver on that ambition currently? "There's no doubt that we don't have the (tradespeople) capacity that we had during the Celtic Tiger years," Deputy Cullinane replied. "But those from the various strands of the construction sector along with those representing the sector, who came before the all-party Oireachtas Committee (on Housing and Homelessness) have told us there would be enough (workers) to deliver 10,000 houses annually. That figure was based on, one: looking at need and two: a target that the Committee, in addition to the stakeholders who came before the Committee felt could be met. Of course if we want to aim even higher, which we and the Peter McVerry Trust argued for, then yes, we'll have to look at issues such as skills and bringing people back from abroad who left due to the crash and went to the US, Canada and Australia for work. We need to attract those skilled people back...but there's certainly scope to achieve the 10,000 per year target."

With the private rented sector (as a total of national housing stock) rising by 11 per cent between 1981 and 2011, coinciding with the slowdown in Council house builds since the late 1980s in particular, the current crisis has effectively percolated for over 30 years. A decades-old disregard for public housing clearly needs to be addressed by Central Government.

As David Cullinane conceded, housing will remain the singular issue facing whomever succeeds Eoghan Murphy. And his coherent and well-tuned discussion document offers a hyperbole-free approach to helping turn this particular tide in a more acceptable direction.