

Reforming the social housing sector

As well as expanding the investment programme the Government will implement a programme of reforms aimed at improving service and ensuring that social housing is delivered in a way that is fair and efficient. The changes will encourage greater community participation and more assumption of responsibility by households. We will continue to support local authorities in tackling anti-social behaviour. The reforms, including the bringing forward of the necessary legislation, will involve:

- improvements in the provision of housing advice;
- new means of assessing need;
- implementation of a fair rents policy across all social housing tenures;
- improved management and maintenance of local authority housing stock and services to tenants;
- improvements in the governance of the voluntary and co-operative sector.

Paths to home ownership

The Government believe that home ownership should be available to as many people as possible where this is their preferred option. Homeownership can be an important factor in underpinning social stability and promoting good civic values. The Government will support access to housing by first-time buyers from low-income groups, through the following new measures:

Tenant Purchase

The Government will introduce a new tenant purchase scheme, operational from January 2007, which will allow for the sale of local authority flats under certain conditions. We will work with the Voluntary and Co-operative Sector to pilot a tenant purchase scheme for some new voluntary homes.

Affordable Housing

Sustained increases in housing supply and improvements in tax reliefs and stamp duty are giving better access to housing by first time buyers. The Government are also committed to delivering targeted support through affordable housing measures for lower income groups. In August 2005, the Government established the Affordable Homes Partnership which is already making good progress in accelerating the supply of affordable housing in the Greater Dublin Area. This progress will continue, and in addition the Government will

- from January 2006
 - increase the income eligibility limits for affordable housing schemes to €40,000 (€100,000 dual income);
 - increase loan limits to €185,000;
 - increase income eligibility limits for rent and mortgage subsidy to €28,000;
 - increase site subsidies available to local authorities to deliver affordable housing.
- by Summer 2006, we will
 - introduce a new simpler and streamlined affordable housing scheme;
 - commence a pilot project on affordable homes for renting.



Housing Policy Framework

Building Sustainable Communities

December 2005



Housing Policy Framework – Building Sustainable Communities

The total Exchequer capital investment over the next three years in social and affordable housing will be about €4 billion or over 20% higher than the total investment over the past three years.

There have been huge advances in housing over the past decade. The overall supply of houses has increased dramatically. More social and affordable housing, and improved options for accessing this kind of accommodation, have been made available to people. We need now to build on this progress and to respond to the new housing needs of our fast growing society. That is what the Government, supported by Budget 2006, are determined to do.

500,000 new houses have been produced in the past 10 years: one third of Ireland's houses have been built in the past decade. We must continue this strong pace of housing production: our population is likely to grow by 1 million over the next fifteen years. We must also manage this expansion of housing so as to ensure a quality living environment for householders and local communities.

A new policy statement for housing will be launched early in 2006. The focus will be on underpinning the building of sustainable communities. Based on the objectives of the National Spatial Strategy, it will take account of the recent analysis of housing by NES, the 2005 assessment of social housing needs and the work of the Housing Forum. This new statement will outline a detailed programme of investment in social and affordable housing over the next three years; and it will set new policy directions required over the medium term for housing. A key objective of this policy is to promote the conditions whereby the maximum number of people can access affordable accommodation through private provision. A range of supports is required to assist those who cannot access such accommodation from their own resources. All of these policies must be implemented in a manner that promote sustainable communities. The forthcoming statement will outline the detailed approaches to these issues, and a summary of the key elements of the forthcoming statement is set out below.

Supporting an effective private housing market

The Government and its agencies have worked to support a high level of housing output over recent years, with output in 2004/2005 at about double the level of 1996. As a result, more and more people have been able to purchase a home, the private rented sector has expanded and there has been a huge growth in construction employment. The Government will continue to support investment in infrastructure to deliver high levels of housing and improve affordability. The quality and affordability of housing is vital to both the country's social cohesion and its competitiveness.

There will be a strong focus on building active and successful communities through quality housing. The quality of Irish homes is generally high. One third of all houses have been built in the last ten years and to improved standards of energy efficiency and access to people with disabilities. The Irish National Survey of Housing Quality (ESRI 2003) found that 92% of Irish households were satisfied with the quality of their housing accommodation.

The Government are committed to continuing improvements in the quality of houses and neighbourhoods. Guidance on best practice on planning new housing developments in urban areas is set out in the Residential Density Guidelines. These will be further developed so as to support better urban design and to deal with emerging issues such as the design and management of apartments.

Private rented accommodation has expanded in recent years, widening choice for those seeking this form of housing and facilitating mobility in our society. We will continue with measures to modernise the private rented sector now that new Private Residential Tenancies legislation is operational.

Expanding social housing provision

Our objective is to deliver high quality housing for those who cannot afford to meet their own housing needs. We will expand social housing options over the coming years by:

- commencing in the region of 23,000 new social housing units between 2006 and 2008 in the local authority and voluntary and co-operative housing sector. This includes commencing 6,000 new units by local authorities in 2006.
- fully implementing the Rental Accommodation Scheme by end 2008, which could benefit up to 33,000 people in the private rented sector who have been in receipt of rent supplement for over 18 months.

We will drive delivery of this ambitious programme through the five-year Action Plans 2004 to 2008 now in place for all local authorities. Active land management strategies will be put in place to support these programmes. There are already over 600 bodies registered to provide voluntary and co-operative housing. To further develop this sector, the capital funding limits will be increased. Over the coming year, we propose to develop new funding arrangements to support increased delivery by the voluntary and co-operative housing sector including involvement of the sector in the Rental Accommodation Scheme.

Special Housing Needs

Specific strategies are required to meet the housing of all those with special needs (the homeless, Travellers, older people and people with disabilities). Some of these strategies are already in place, while others need updating to include specific targets within the Action Plans. The voluntary and co-operative housing sector has a particular role in this regard. Measures will be introduced to improve inter-agency co-operation where there is a care dimension additional to accommodation needs. The Disabled Persons Grant and Essential Repairs Grant have been reviewed and will be reformed to improve equity and targeting.

Improving the quality of the social housing stock

The Government are committed to delivering high quality social housing in mixed community settings. It is not acceptable that the social housing domain should be compared unfavourably with private housing development. The Government believe that there should be a very high level of ambition for social housing. The aim should be to support and build communities in which people can take pride.

To make a reality of better social housing, the Government will ensure that:

- new housing is designed and planned on quality principles, includes an appropriate housing mix and provides necessary social infrastructure;
- management and maintenance of estates is prioritised.

We also need to intensify efforts to rejuvenate much existing social housing. Almost €1 billion has been spent on regeneration and remedial works for local authority housing estates since 1997. Over the coming years, we will build on this investment by:

- rolling out a programme of regeneration to all run-down estates nationwide;
- completing the installation of central heating systems in all local authority housing by 2008;
- rolling out a programme of other remedial works to improve local authority housing.

An audit of the social housing stock will be undertaken in 2008 to ensure that standards and levels of satisfaction are rising. Based on experience to date, public private partnerships can play an important role in regenerating areas, and we will encourage this approach where appropriate.

