



Submission to the Review of Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan

By

County Wicklow Public Participation Network

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County Wicklow Public Participation Network
CEART
Crinion Park
Wicklow Town
Co. Wicklow
Eire
Tel: 087 189 5145
Email: countywicklowppn@gmail.com

Introducing County Wicklow Public Participation Network

County Wicklow Public Participation Network (PPN) was established in July 2014 under the directive of the Department of the Environment, Community & Local Government and in accordance with legislation in the Local Government Reform Act 2014 (Section 46). Public Participation Networks were established to be an independent structure that would become the main link through which local authorities connect with the community, voluntary and environmental sectors in a process to facilitate communities to articulate a diverse range of views and interests within the local government system. Co Wicklow PPN has 166 diverse member groups including sports groups, women's groups, older people's groups, tidy towns, LGBT groups, Travellers groups, community councils, resident's associations, youth groups and more. Member groups span the 5 Municipal Areas of Co Wicklow and the 3 PPN colleges which are Social Inclusion, Community & Voluntary and Environment. Some of these groups are networks in their own right.

PPN representatives serve as a voice for the community on structures including: the Local Community Development Committee; Housing & Corporate Estate Strategic Policy Committee; Planning & Development Strategic Policy Committee; Transport, Water & Environment Strategic Policy Committee; Community, Cultural & Social Development Strategic Policy Committee; Economic Development & Enterprise Strategic Policy Committee; Wicklow County Childcare Committee; Co Wicklow Children & Young People's Services Committee; Co Wicklow Local Sports Partnership; Wicklow County Tourism Board; Co Wicklow Volunteer Centre and Co Wicklow Joint Policing Committee.

PPN Representatives strive to ensure that the needs of the community sector are prioritised within local policy processes.

Purpose

An invitation was issued by Mr Eoghan Murphy TD, Minister for Housing, Planning, Community & Local Government for submissions on the targeted review of the Government's Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness. The invitation was extended to Fingal PPN through their Local Authority and consequently circulated through the PPN Resource Workers Network

This submission draws on a consultation carried out at a Co Wicklow PPN Information & engagement seminar, "Let's Talk About Housing", the opinion of the Co Wicklow PPN Secretariat and Representatives, and input from Wicklow Planning Alliance, a member group. Co Wicklow PPN also promoted this consultation through its Facebook Page

Preamble

Housing remains a huge issue for Co Wicklow communities and Co Wicklow PPN welcomes the opportunity to feed into the review of the Rebuilding Ireland Strategy. However, we would like to point out the challenges in preparing this submission in the hope that they will be taken into consideration for future consultations.

- For Co Wicklow PPN to consult all member groups time is needed to send out information to the group contact, allow them time to meet, consult with the members of their group and feed back to us prior to our collating a collaborative response. Even if member groups agree to make their own submission they need time to facilitate meetings and compile a response.
- It is extremely difficult to participate in consultations during traditional holiday times i.e. Easter, summer, Christmas and this response has been adversely impacted by the holiday period

- National and Local Government appear to run the majority of consultations during the summer months. Co Wicklow PPN has highlighted 11 calls for public consultation in this month alone, most with tight deadlines with the latest being 4th September. As mentioned above summer time is not conducive to qualitative consultation and a vast number at the same time promotes consultation fatigue and can prevent engagement.

Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan – Key Objectives

[Do the current objectives remain relevant and valid and are there other priorities we should also be focussing on over the medium term?]

The key objectives set out in the Action Plan remain relevant one year later.

Co Wicklow PPN would also suggest that addressing issues such as overcrowding, Traveller accommodation, and direct provision should be included.

Government must ensure that short-term fixes do not lead to long-term problems.

Housing issues and responses cross cut the social and economic spectrum of service provision. Committees and forums should be established to ensure that all the services (financial and social) are informing each other and working together for societal rather than individual benefit.

Pillar 1: Address Homelessness

[What further action should now be considered in order to prevent homelessness, to find more permanent solutions for those in emergency accommodation and to help individuals and families to remain living in their own home?]

Resource local authorities to **adequately** provide individuals and families with access to social worker support, mental health supports, and community welfare services.

Develop increased partnerships with housing associations particularly those who provide tenant support services e.g. Respond

Support the development of sheltered housing schemes particularly for older people and people with disabilities. Build social housing for the elderly and people with disabilities close to services.

Define “Affordable Housing” and legislate for sustainable rent & mortgage payments. A sustainable rent or mortgage in Ireland should be no higher than 25% of net income. The cost of living in Ireland is much higher than in most EU countries and families are subject to high costs for childcare, education, transport etc.

Change the definition of social and affordable housing and increase the income band for social housing to allow more families to qualify for housing support. This will create a more sustainable housing option for low to middle-income families and those with little or no job security who are at risk of mortgage arrears/eviction.

Build and manage quality social housing well and make it more attractive and supportive of those who are on low to middle income.

Pillar 2: Accelerate Social Housing

[What further action should be taken to increase both the scale and speed of delivery of Social Housing? Are there new delivery models or mechanisms to accelerate output?]

Legislate to support more collaboration between Approved Housing Bodies and co-operatives such as O Cualann Co housing Alliance

Designate social and affordable housing as “strategic infrastructure” to speed up the planning process

Resource Local Authorities with enough qualified staff to efficiently and competently address and deliver on social housing issues

Pillar 3: Build More Homes

[What additional initiatives or policy tools can best activate housing lands and deliver new housing supply to buy or rent at more affordable levels?]

Invest more money in local authority building projects rather than with private sector builds. Allowing incentives to the private sector benefits developers and investors with no obvious benefit to those seeking social housing.

Make local authority land available under an affordable site scheme to people seeking to build their own home. Ensure that this does not benefit private developers

Consider investment from social organisations such as credit unions, trusts etc ensuring that financial returns remain within the social sector

Tax vacant sites and/or legislate for the development of land that was zoned and bought for development and remains idle

Pillar 4: Improve the Rental Market

[How can we encourage increased supply of rental accommodation and foster a sustainable sector that meets the needs of all tenants across the different rental market segments?]

Strict mortgage rules are essential in preventing families entering into unsustainable debt and to prevent increased competition in the market which will ultimately drive house prices up. However strict mortgage rules will also lead to an increase in the rental market which will contribute to rent increases. Rents are currently high which will prevent families from ever achieving deposits needed for mortgages. Consider restricting rents for a period of 3-5 years, this will allow time to focus on the housing crisis

Legislate to make long-term renting more attractive by ensuring security of tenure and that rent increases are linked to inflation

Be careful and prudent in relation to the rental accommodation scheme and housing assistance payment as they will ultimately distort the market and push rents higher while doing nothing to increase housing stock

Legislate to support local authority rent collection. It is in no one's interest for arrears to accumulate. Consider rent payment directly from income source similar to the local property tax.

Pillar 5: Utilise Existing Housing

[What further actions should be taken to identify, target and encourage the greater use of existing vacant properties for both social and private housing purposes?]

Tax vacant properties and use the tax gain to fund housing development

Many ground floor business and properties are not fully using the upper floors. Devise incentives/supports to encourage housing development on vacant floors.

NAMA is charged with “obtaining the best achievable return for the state on the assets it has acquired”. The best return for the state would be the provision of affordable homes, therefore use appropriate buildings under NAMA control for social and affordable housing.

Local authorities should be able to re-issue vacant houses quickly. This is not always the case and it has been reported that houses have been vacant for 12 months and more.

Consider legislating with the HSE to reduce the 80% supplement from the rental of a family home towards nursing home care. This might encourage more individuals and families to rent out their home.

Social Issues

Direct Provision Centres – Co Wicklow PPN is concerned that the living arrangements in direct provision centres, when analysed in the future, might be equated to the state institutions of the past. Government should monitor and evaluate the centres on a regular basis, while consulting with the client group.

Overcrowding - Is a huge issue with many children returning home to live with their parents. In some cases bringing their own families with them. This is masking the housing need because although they have no home of their own (as a singular unit) they are not considered homeless. While in some cases the extension of the family units works well in others it can cause stresses and tensions which in turn can lead to other social problems such as family units breaking up and domestic violence. Where appropriate local government should support families to extend their homes to reduce overcrowding and provide personal space.

Refuge Centres – While working with Approved Housing Bodies such as Respond would support the long-term needs of those escaping domestic violence, in the short-term the refuge centre will always be needed. Refuge Centres should be supported to provide a safe living space for those seeking to use their service. Government should work regularly with refuge centres to ensure that living arrangements are suitable and that there is enough spaces to cover demand.