

A faint, light grey outline of a classical column capital is centered in the background. The capital features a wide, flat top with a central rectangular opening and two large, curved volutes on either side. Below the capital, the column shaft is represented by several vertical lines of varying thicknesses.

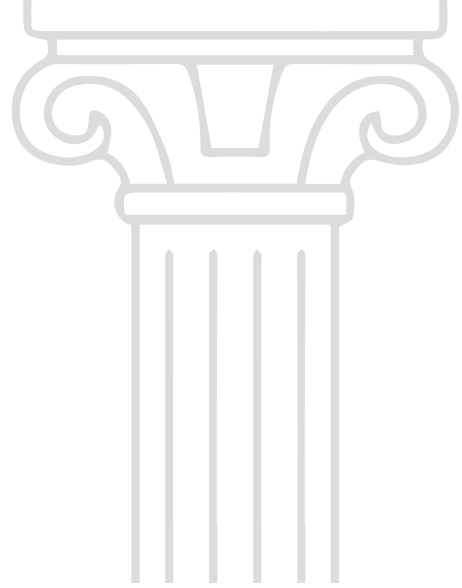
Rebuilding 'Rebuilding Ireland'

TIME TO KNOCK
AND REBUILD
REBUILDING IRELAND

When it was published in July 2016, Rebuilding Ireland described the Irish housing sector as ‘dysfunctional and under-performing’. Three years later, by practically every metric, the crisis has deepened.

In 2017, the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice published a comprehensive analysis of Rebuilding Ireland, outlining the flawed philosophy and principles undergirding the policy. This research was not blind to the fact that, as the authors wrote, ‘undoubtedly, many of the specific actions to be taken will bring important benefits for individuals and families who are experiencing housing difficulties’. Even this small amount of optimism and good will was misplaced. Rebuilding Ireland has been an abject failure. The JCFJ is vindicated in its assertion in 2017 that ‘a philosophy which emphasises “market forces” as a solution to many, or most, of our housing problems as Rebuilding Ireland currently does, will ultimately be doomed to failure’. The largest social crisis of this generation appears to endlessly deepen. Hundreds of thousands exist in uncertain housing conditions, tens of thousands of people are homeless, and the number of children who are without a home rightly scandalises the nation.

The feverish activity around Rebuilding Ireland can be summarised as ‘delusion and data’. The unwavering assertion that the policy is working requires a blind faith that mimics fundamentalism. The Government has allowed itself to redefine terms and figures to suit their agenda and still they cannot get a handle on the crisis. This is not just the failure of one minister, or one department, but a Government-wide commitment to bankrupt ideas and crumbling policies. A radical reorientation is required.



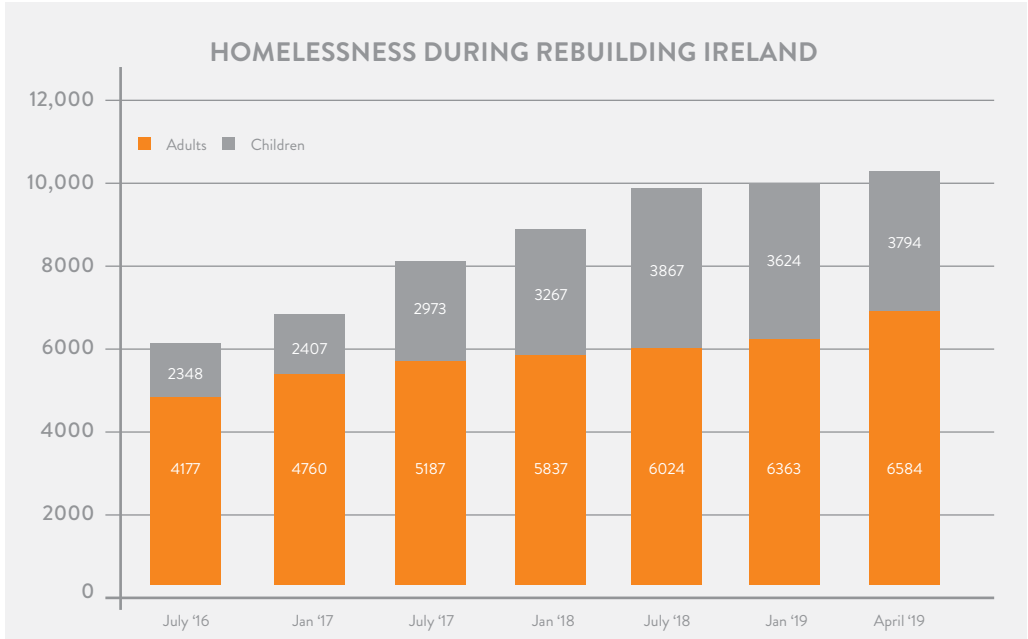
Overleaf, this policy document will provide a short analysis of the five pillars of the policy based on outcomes over three years. If Rebuilding Ireland was true to its name, the broken edifice of the market philosophy of the Irish housing sector would be acknowledged as a failure and demolished. We need more than a renovation or a retrofit. Housing is a common good, a basic human right. We need a housing sector shaped around flourishing communities, which protects the environment, and which extends the basic human need of a home to everyone in Ireland.

Three years on, we must conclude that ‘dysfunctional and under-performing’ now describes Rebuilding Ireland as a policy. We, in the JCFJ, call for an immediate rebuilding of Rebuilding Ireland from the foundations up, concluding with five concrete steps which must shape immediate and future policy.

“The entire Irish housing system is dysfunctional. Homelessness is inexorably growing, for adults and children, in the cities and in the countryside. Even after the terms have been narrowed, the list of people waiting for social housing conservatively tops 100,000. Rental prices have disconnected from real incomes and left people in profound financial distress. House prices are rising beyond the reach of public servants like nurses, teachers, and guards. The hangover of the Celtic Tiger lingers with tens of thousands of mortgages in distress. Even small landlords complain they are being pushed out by institutional investors. From every perspective, this is a foundational social system in fundamental freefall. In this review of Rebuilding Ireland, three years on, we find that the five pillars of the plan have collapsed entirely and it is high time for a real solution from Government.”

Pillar One: The 'Normalisation' of Homelessness

The launch of Rebuilding Ireland was a recognition from the Government that we were in the midst of a housing and homelessness crisis. In the three years the policy has been active, homelessness has increased by almost 2/3s. The budget allocation for emergency homeless accommodation has increased by €48m in the last two years, totaling €146m in 2019. Every month since Rebuilding Ireland was published, the number of homeless people has increased. This is a clear pattern of a catastrophically failed policy.



The previously unimaginable landmark figure of 10,000 homeless adults and children was reached in February 2019. The rate had hovered close to that figure for the 12 months previous, but various redefinitions, recategorisations, and official obfuscations sought to avoid it slipping into five-figures.

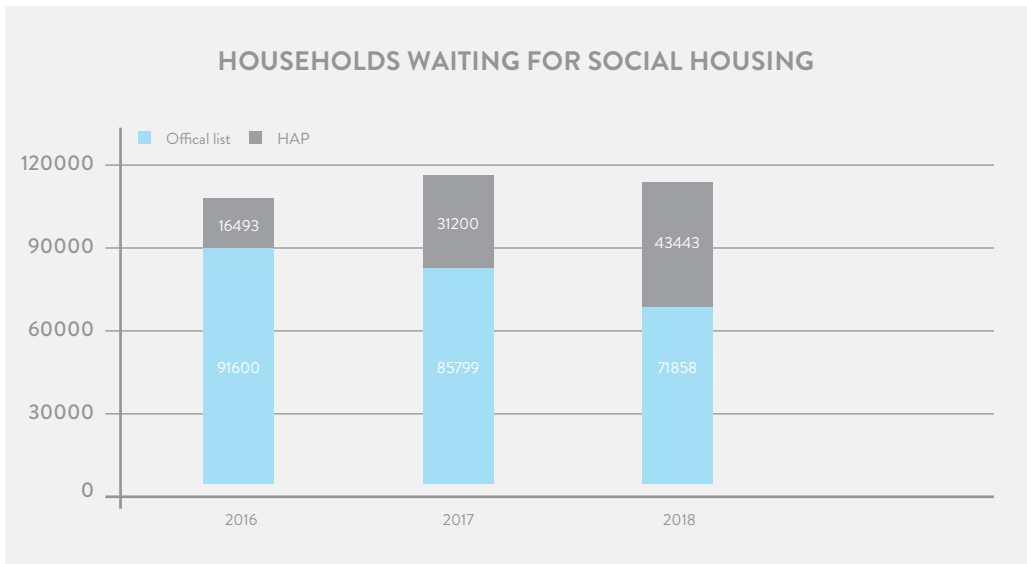
A key aspect of this accounting trick was a strict redefining of homelessness – distinct from many of our EU partners – as only those in (certain types of) emergency accommodation. The figure is blind to the many who ‘couch-surf’ with family and friends, those sleeping rough, or in tents or cars, about 800 refugees who have been granted leave to remain in Ireland but are unable to leave direct provision as they cannot access accommodation, and families living in domestic violence refuges. Official figures also do not account for those with unmet housing needs such as adults living with parents because they cannot afford to move out. Worryingly, the Government seems content with this figure, but it is a vast under-estimation of real homelessness.

Pillar Two: Social Housing, Privately Owned

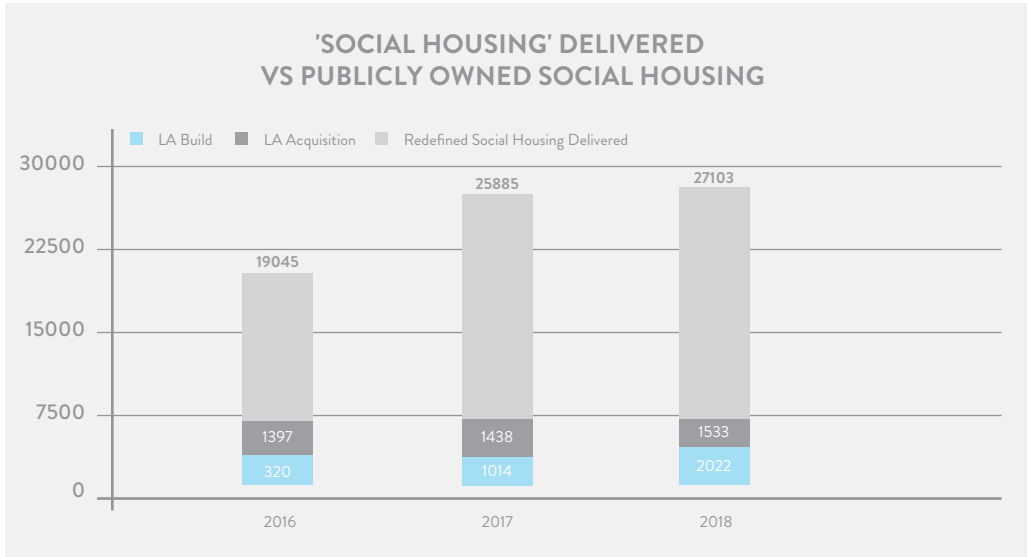
Rebuilding Ireland does not just redefine categories. It redefines social housing. It creates a profound policy incoherence – social housing is provided privately. In 1975, this country built 8,500 council houses; 6,900 in 1985; and in 2015, the country built 75 council houses. Meanwhile, the Government’s current policies cost over €2 million a day.



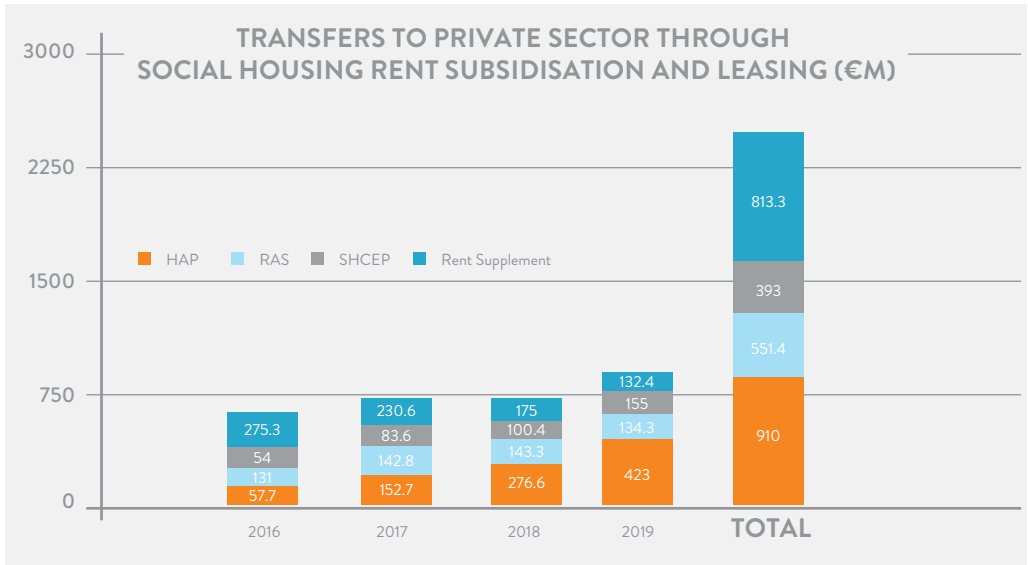
Legislation, preceding Rebuilding Ireland, which introduced HAP, redefined what it means to be on the waiting list for a house, by transferring each household receiving a Housing Assistance Payment off it. This makes the headline numbers less alarming, but those households taken off the list are still in housing precarity.



Rebuilding Ireland claims to have provided over 72,000 social housing units in the last three years, but when you look at the details, this too is spin. In the midst of a dire crisis, we have seen just over 7,500 publicly owned houses built or acquired by local government. To suggest that privately owned (often by international conglomerates) properties are social housing is an absurdity.



Instead of building environmentally adaptable, high-quality homes which would be an asset for the nation, the current policy relies on huge public wealth transfers into the private rental sector. Well over €2.5 billion has been paid in such subsidies and leases over the present life of Rebuilding Ireland.





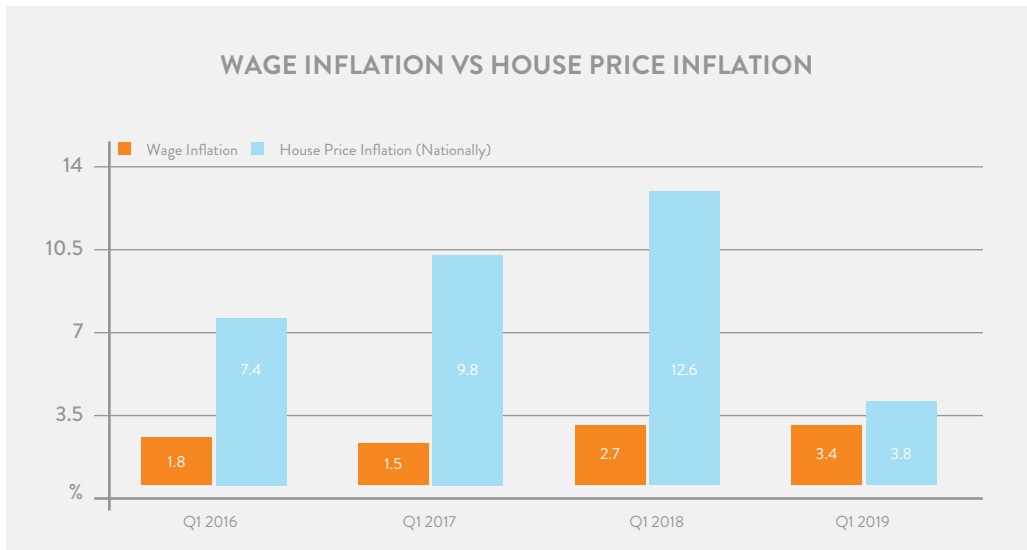
What this amounts to is that we pay over €2.3 million a day - the equivalent of building 12 publicly owned houses - to private landlords to provide “social” housing.

The present Government prides itself on its fiscal prudence. Rebuilding Ireland is not just failing as a policy which alleviates suffering, it fails as a policy which is economically efficient. The only solution is an ambitious commitment from local government to housing built by, owned by, and lived in by the people.

🏛️ Pillar Three: Private Developers are No Longer a Solution

Rebuilding Ireland promised to build more homes, but left the responsibility for that almost exclusively in the hands of private developers. Dublin Docklands is a symbol of all that is wrong with that policy. 22 hectares of publicly owned land was sold to a private developer who aims to build 2,600 homes. Few, if any, of which will be social or affordable housing. Although they are legally obliged to offer 10% of the homes to Dublin City Council, they will likely be too expensive for the city to purchase. In lieu, the developer will offer Dublin City Council alternative social and affordable housing at an alternative site in an already saturated community at the edge of Dublin without adequate transport infrastructure.

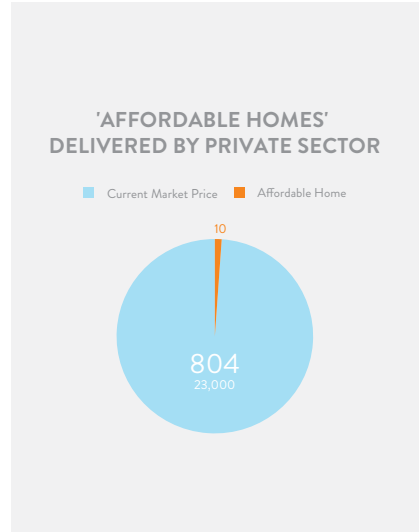
Homes are being built for profit, not to meet need, or sustain community, or to adapt to climate breakdown.



The runaway prices for homes across the country naturally remind us of the worst excesses of the Celtic Tiger. Even with *Rebuilding Ireland*'s measures in place, house price growth is out-stripping wage growth, in ways which have made home ownership unattainable for many.

Rebuilding Ireland established a €200 million fund known as the Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund (LIHAF) to provide public off-site infrastructure in key development areas. Even with such large-scale support, private developers have failed to provide a reasonable supply of affordable homes. While ubiquitous in the discourse surrounding Rebuilding Ireland, the term “affordable housing” was never defined. The Government promised the delivery of 23,000 homes through this scheme. At the time of writing, 814 units have been finished under the LIHAF scheme, with a total of 10 homes which were designated as affordable.

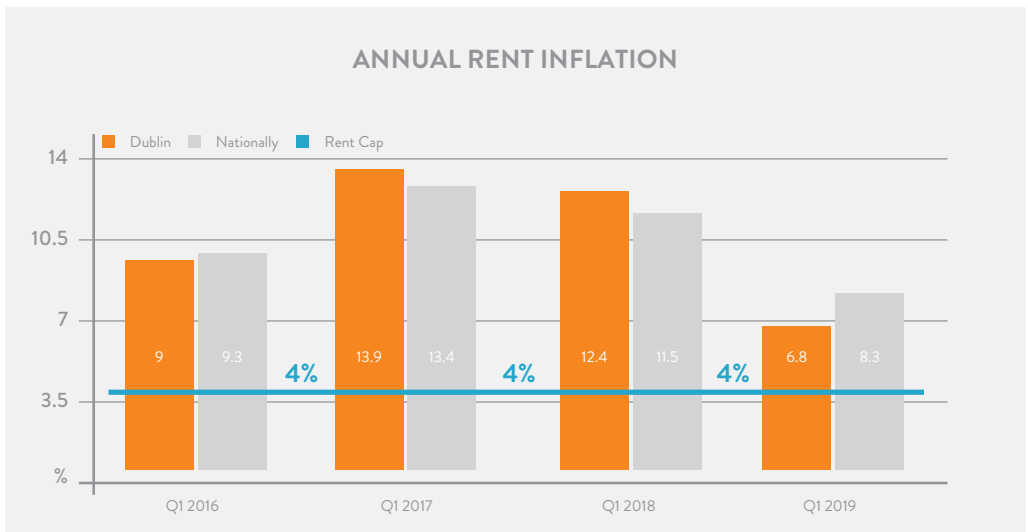
Even though the outline of cranes on the Dublin skyline is reminiscent of the Celtic Tiger, private developers have demonstrated themselves more interested in providing hotels, student living and co-living accommodation than social or affordable homes when predictions estimate a long term demand of 25,000 homes per year up to 2040. The continued subsidisation during Rebuilding Ireland has been to little avail.



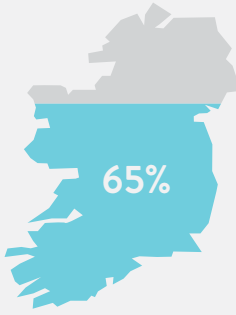
Pillar Four: Exacerbation of the Rental Crisis

Though initially proposed as a means of moderating rapidly rising rents so tenants and landlords could plan financially for the future, the policy of designating Rent Pressure Zones (RPZ) should have, alongside other decisions, created a ceiling in annual rent inflation.

Perversely, RPZ created a floor under which the rate of annual inflation did not even get close. While the RPZ may have dampened rent inflation somewhat, it is clear that many landlords have ignored the rent caps, clearly opposed to the suggestion that a private landlord should not recoup market prices in a housing crisis. Those that didn't can interpret the zones as a guaranteed return of 4% a year.



There is little doubt that the 45,900 households (end of Q1 2019) who are renting with the benefit of the HAP subsidy has significantly increased the demand for private rented accommodation and consequently has contributed significantly to rent inflation, making renting more difficult for those on low or middle incomes who are not eligible for a state subsidy. Furthermore, the housing agency, Threshold, has found that almost half of those renting accommodation using the HAP subsidy were required to pay extra rent on top of their HAP payment in order to maintain their tenancy. These unsanctioned, and often unaffordable “top-ups” (which average €117 per month) are common in the private rented sector.

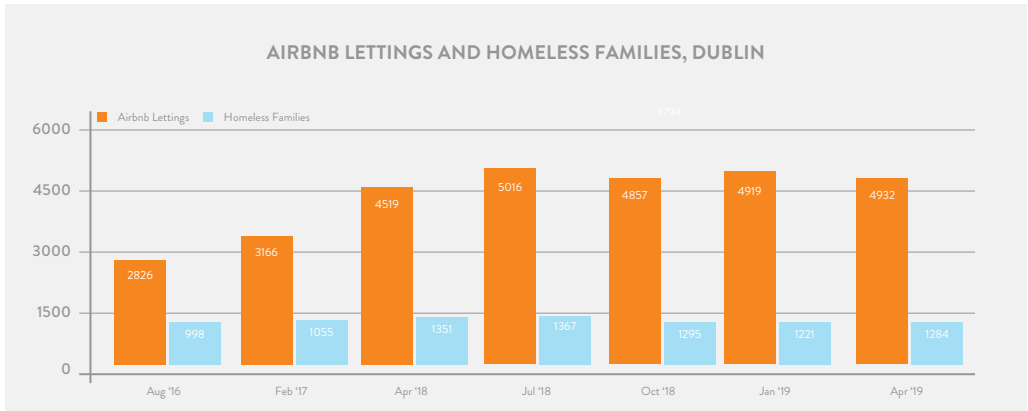


With 19 new RPZ areas added in July 2019, 65% of the homes available to rent in Ireland are now located in a pressure zone. When the Government's policy effectively designates all of Ireland as a Rent Pressure Zone, that is proof that the "zones" are not working.

Pillar Five: Housing Stock, But Not for Residents

While the Government has been relying on the market to resolve this crisis of profound human suffering, the market has been innovating new ways to do what it is meant to do: return profit to shareholders.

The numbers of listings on the AirBnB website have skyrocketed during the years of the Rebuilding Ireland policy. Far more properties are available for short-term rent to tourists than would be needed to house families who are homeless.



The Government promised to 'utilise existing housing' but what has happened is that the market has decided they are better deployed for holiday-makers, not people experiencing homelessness.

FIVE RECOMMENDATIONS TO **REBUILD** REBUILDING IRELAND

1. VASTLY INCREASE CONSTRUCTION OF PUBLICLY OWNED HOUSING

Investment in publicly owned housing is fundamental, a priority on a par with schools and hospitals. At present, publicly owned housing is confined to housing for the poor. Publicly owned housing should expand to provide a range of housing for households of different income levels, and include affordable housing, and cost rental housing. The state owns enough land to build well over 100,000 houses. Publicly owned land should be used exclusively for publicly owned housing. Publicly owned housing is housing that is owned and controlled by the state and is immune from decisions made by the private sector, which is motivated primarily by profit. Reclaiming vacant buildings can be a central component in this. Where the owners are unable or unwilling to bring vacant properties back into use, compulsory purchase orders should be pursued.

2. LEGISLATE AGAINST EVICTING A HOUSEHOLD INTO HOMELESSNESS FOR THREE YEARS

In an emergency, you need to take emergency action. Most households becoming homeless today are being evicted from the private rented sector, usually because the landlord is selling the house. Unless that flow into homelessness can be halted, homelessness will continue to increase. For a limited period of three years, until we can get the problem under control, it should be illegal for landlords, or banks, or vulture funds, to evict households into homelessness. Previous legislation to prohibit evictions into homelessness have been defeated. Exceptions should be made for tenants engaged in anti-social behaviour or refusing to pay rent with the development of appropriate mechanisms. While this would undoubtedly be an inconvenience for some landlords, the alternative is thousands of families and children experiencing the trauma of homelessness during those three years.

3. EXPAND THE MORTGAGE TO RENT SCHEME

There are currently about 40,000 mortgages in rent arrears of more than two years (28,000 owner-occupied and 12,200 buy-to-lets). Almost all of these are unresolvable to the satisfaction of the lenders. In the absence of a resolution, a report published by the Central Bank estimates that at least 50% of these will be repossessed. The mortgage to rent scheme allows households to remain in their home but become tenants with their home being purchased by an approved housing body of which they then become a tenant or by a private company, with the household becoming a tenant of their local authority. This scheme is currently limited to household of low income and houses below certain value but should be expanded to almost all mortgages in arrears of more than two years, where the household is genuinely unable to service the mortgage.

4. INTEGRATED INTER-GENERATIONAL COMMUNITY PLANNING

The housing and homelessness crisis is a social tragedy. Responding to it demands radical creativity and a commitment to rethinking how we provide homes and build communities. Our critique of Rebuilding Ireland could be summarised as an argument that the reimagining provided by the Government puts profit at the centre of our lives. We insist that human flourishing should be the core of how we respond.

Across Europe, the most liveable cities are places where housing is viewed as a common good and where communities are planned to see humans – across ages, class, and the ability-spectrum – to flourish. We should look to developments like the Amaryllis eG in Bonn, as an example of how to harmonise our social vision of inclusion and care with our built environment. The crisis provides an opportunity to break the bad habits of poor planning and poor design which has marred much of Ireland's urban landscape and instead commit to buildings which adapt with stages of life. We need to be building communities, not just houses.

5. OUR HOUSING POLICY IS THE FRONTLINE OF OUR ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

Responding to the housing crisis demands a vast increase in the construction of publicly-owned housing. Every single build should be designed to mitigate and adapt to climate breakdown which includes higher density housing. From the insulation to the heating system, from the designation of green space to the design of developments for walking and cycling, the crisis is an opportunity to build communities fit for the 21st century. Even the “new” developments we have pursued, like Orberstown and Adamstown, commit to the old, bankrupt reliance on the combustion engine to get around. The Government's all-departmental climate action plan should find a focal point in its response to the housing and homelessness crisis, using the commitment to largescale public housing development as a means to ready Ireland for an age of climate breakdown.

CONCLUSION

The Minister for Finance acknowledged, in an interview with the Sunday Independent on 17th December 2017, that the homeless/housing issue is the biggest crisis this country has faced in a generation. Since then we have seen no sense of crisis or urgency in the decisions that the government has taken. In that same month, the Taoiseach was asked on a radio programme when could we see a decline in the number of homeless people, and he replied that he could not answer that question. Again, in the same month, on a television interview, the Minister for Housing was asked if he could guarantee that the number of homeless children in December 2018 would be less than the number in December 2017 and he replied that he could not give that guarantee. Indeed, it was not. December 2019 is unlikely to be much different.

It is time to stop issuing press statements. It's time to stop redefining the terms. It's time to start building public housing for the people, by the people. The mantra, "that the solution is to increase supply" is only part of the story. Every aspect of the housing system is dysfunctional. Practically every aspect of Rebuilding Ireland has failed. It is time for the Government to raze the policy to the ground and start with foundations that view human flourishing, not profit, as the central goal of our housing policy.

The Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice advocates for social justice in penal & prison reform, environmental justice, housing & homelessness and economic justice.

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