

**Social
Democrats**

Homes within Reach: Making housing available, making housing affordable

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Vote Social Democrats.*

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Introduction

Housing is the greatest challenge this country faces, and yet Ireland is failing its people. For the second time in a decade, we are struggling through a savage crisis in housing and homelessness. Housing is unaffordable, rents continue to rise, homelessness is at record levels, and large numbers of first-time buyers are effectively locked out of owning a home.

Right now, in all aspects of housing policy, Fine Gael has chosen the most expensive method of delivery. From the chaotic HAP system to purchasing luxury units from private developers, to giving REITS free reign of our rental market, to relying on privately-owned land banks for most of the for-purchase housing available - Ireland has one of the most expensive housing delivery systems in the world. This has to stop.

The Social Democrats believe that **housing is a fundamental right**; one that is needed to ensure that our people can live dignified lives without undue financial hardship, precarity or stress. To turn the tide, we will need to **radically rethink public policy, and reimagine the social contract**. As a key overall objective, the Social Democrats want to change our housing system around so that the clear aim is to **deliver good quality housing at the lowest possible cost to purchasers and renters, rather than the highest possible profit to developers and land speculators**.

Our Housing Priorities Are:

- Maximising the use of public lands to **deliver an actual build of 100,000 homes over the next 5 years**.
- Introduce a **nationwide rent freeze** until increase in housing supply drives down the cost of housing substantially
- **Legislate to stop land hoarding** by introducing an effective specific tax, by closing all loopholes and by eliminating all tax breaks for REITS and 'Cuckoo' Funds
- **Eradicating homelessness** in the lifetime of the next Dáil through a Housing First strategy
- Introducing legislation to reserve **20% of housing in private developments for affordable housing to buy or rent**, in addition to the current 10% social housing

Building on Public Land

Central to delivering housing supply is **prioritising the use of public land to build affordable and social housing**. We believe exploiting public land-banks should be the absolute priority of the next Dáil.

Time and again we have seen that **the market cannot be relied upon to deliver housing**. Instead the State should, and indeed must, step in. Developing public land banks is the only certain way in the short to medium term of delivering housing faster and at affordable prices. The next Government must take the housing crisis by the horns and deal with it directly.

We will:

- Begin an **unprecedented programme of house building**, with the Land Development Agency being set a delivery target of 20,000 homes a year with as much front-loading as possible based on capacity. **This would deliver 100,000 homes over the lifetime of the next Dáil**. As outlined in our Alternative Budget 2020, we will increase capital spending to match this ambitious target.
- **On publicly owned land, we would build one third affordable purchase homes; one third affordable rent and one third social homes** to ensure sustainable communities and strong tenancy mix. This division will be kept under review to ensure those most in need of housing have a home.
- Contract builders to build on publicly controlled land to deliver social and affordable homes (for both purchase and rent) in socially mixed communities on **sites that are developed to a masterplan with prices set in advance by the State using a Housing Delivery Agency**. This gives much greater control of the timing and price of new housing supply.
- **Deliver affordability by driving down the costs of building on public land** by tendering for new housing at scale to take advantage of economies-of-scale, ensuring advanced planning permission, and having funding streams in place.
- These steps in place means that a multiplicity of builders can build on sites rather than developers, keeping costs low.

Delivering Affordability

The Social Democrats would introduce a new **Affordable Housing Scheme**.

- We would use the **extensive residentially zoned public land that is available to public authorities to build homes** that are affordable to rent or buy. The O’Cualann model in north Dublin remains an excellent example of what can be done with the right kind of focus.
- We would like to see far greater commitment to affordable for-purchase housing schemes alongside **cost-rental projects** in the vein of the Vienna Model.
- We will also strengthen the hands of Local Authorities when negotiating the cost of Part V housing (both social and affordable) by providing that where developers are stalling in negotiations the local authority will acquire land from within that development from the developer within a specified time period.
- We would also introduce legislation to reform Part V of the Planning Acts to **reserve 20% of housing in private developments for affordable housing (in addition to the current 10% social housing)**. This will ensure a stronger social mix in private developments by updating legislation and Ministerial guidelines to ensure pepper-potting.
- This new scheme would also provide clear guidance for local authorities and Approved Housing Bodies as to **how cost rental and affordable purchase schemes should be allocated**, particularly in regard to how we assess what people can afford

What is ‘Affordability’?

The Social Democrats believe any new system should take into account peoples’ individual circumstances by considering factors such as differences in the cost of living in different parts of the country.

That is why we propose that, as well as opening up social and affordable housing to a broader tranche of the population, that we need to **radically rethink how we define affordability**.

The Social Democrats propose that alternative methods, particularly ‘**residual**’ **income**, be used as the desired starting point for assessing housing assistance needs.

Residual income essentially refers to the amount of money that a household has left over once they have met all of their essential needs. For example, what would be left for a couple with young children once they have paid for reasonable prices for childcare, healthcare, the cost of disability, education expenses other essentials?

This far more holistic approach to assessing affordability would allow Ireland to better take account of the tens of thousands of people who appear to be in a sufficiently strong financial positions, but in reality struggle to make ends meet every month.

Not only would this system be fairer, it would also allow the state to increase investment in social and affordable housing, whilst still fully complying with state aid rules regarding public investment in housing being targeted at particular groups, as residual income provides a stronger basis than gross income for justifying the need for public investment in housing.

We would investigate a comprehensive affordability test, based on this approach, which would be evidence based and would have new strict criteria to determine affordability fairly.

Ending Homelessness

The current homelessness crisis is an entirely predictable emergency. Yet it is within the power of the next Dáil to put an end to it once and for all. We believe the next Dáil must have the political will and courage to do whatever is necessary to eliminate homelessness within its lifetime.

- International best practice shows that the **Housing First** approach is key to tackling the problem. We are committed to ensuring far greater roll out of 'Housing First' system to provide safety and stability to the most vulnerable homeless people in Ireland.
- We would allow greater discretion to front-line workers in terms of rental support where there is a risk of homelessness/eviction, by **extending Homeless HAP to the whole country** and by ensuring the HAP scheme can provide **discretionary uplifts**.
- We will develop a **targeted strategy to end the scandal of families living in hotels and family hubs for long periods**, and to ensure the a proper housing solution is available.
- We would **increase funding for homelessness spending and services**, including investment in family case managers, and reform of welfare laws in relation to under 25s experiencing homelessness.
- Many people are effectively homeless, for example couch surfing with friends or in other precarious situations, but not presenting to services. We must **establish the levels of hidden homelessness and take steps to ensure their housing needs are met**.
- In the last five years the number of 18-24 years olds in homelessness has doubled. There is an urgent need for a **dedicated Youth Homelessness Strategy** to tackle this shameful statistic. The Strategy would be specifically tasked with establishing the levels of homelessness among **vulnerable young people**, in particular the levels of homelessness among **LGBT+ young people**, among **people leaving institutional care** and in others who may be particularly vulnerable to homelessness, as both national and international research and experience shows.

Protecting Renters

In recent years, private rent prices have increased to an astronomical degree. The most recent figures from the Residential Tenancies Board show that the standard rental property in Ireland now costs €1,243 per month, a 67% increase from their recent low of €745 in early 2012 (€498 difference). At the same time, average weekly earnings only increased by 10% over the same period, from €699 to €768 (€69 difference, or €296 in a month).

The Social Democrats propose, **a complete freeze on all residential rents.**

The current rent cap of 4% per annum is too high. It is five times the rate of inflation. It does not apply across the whole country and it has been too easily evaded by some landlords. Above all else, it hasn't worked. Rents remain at record levels and are rising by more than 4%, even in rent pressure zones. There is no justification for any further increases. A complete rent freeze will be easier to implement, and it will be key to stopping the flow of family homelessness.

Other measures to ensure greater protection for renters:

- The Social Democrats would legislate to provide for **indefinite contracts**, so that tenancies can't simply be ended at the end of each 6-year cycle. Furthermore, we would introduce the **Deposit Protection Scheme** and a new legal definition of deposit to mean one month's rent.
- The Residential Tenancies Board must work for both renters and landlords if the rental sector is to be a functioning sector. There are many good landlords, but we would **strengthen the Residential Tenancies Board** so that it is in a much better position to regulate the rental sector. Too often tenants have found themselves turfed out of their homes at a whim of a landlord. We need **far better enforcement of the law in relation to rents and security of tenure**, better information for both tenants and landlords, and a far more efficient dispute resolution process to serve tenants and landlords fairly.
- We would **limit the sale of property as a grounds for terminating a tenancy** by

amending Section 34 of the Residential Tenancies Acts and update legislation to ensure that tenants of Buy-to-Let properties in receivership are transferred to the receiver and then on to a new landlord.

- We would **ban all sales of properties to vulture funds**, legislate to ensure that **no families can be evicted into homelessness**, and change the legal definition of a legal definition of landlord to include banks and receivers
- We would significantly **increase penalties for rogue landlords and rogue tenants**.
- Examine legislating to afford **greater protections to licensees** in tenancy situations.
- At present, tenants in home share situations where the total rent is above €2,500 face stamp duty on top of their rental bill. As rents rise, more and more renters will fall into this

category. This is a grossly unfair tax and only makes a bad situation worse. We will **scrap this stamp duty**.

- **Establish a Rent Register** as proposed in our Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Bill 2018.
- Review of the **inspection system** to ensure good quality accommodation is available to rent.
- We will clarify the law to prohibit the practice of landlords who ask prospective tenants to bid on rents and introduce much clearer penalties for people soliciting bids on rents.
- We would **limit ancillary charges that landlords can apply** - such as bin collection and car parking that in some cases are being used by landlords to side-step current rent caps. We would also ban the taking of deposits to view properties for rent.

End Land Hoarding

It has been clear for some time that land-hoarding has been a significant part of the housing crisis. Land is being held back from development while its value increases. Sites are being flipped from one speculator to another. It is particularly galling to see sites formerly controlled by NAMA or other state entities being traded in this “pass-the-parcel” process with little supply at the end of it. Therefore, the Social Democrats propose to put an end to this by legislating for much stronger anti-hoarding measures.

We will:

- Replace the vacant site levy with an **effective specific tax on land-hoarding, in the form of a site value tax** (with appropriate but limited exemptions) that is variable by local authorities but is set at an annual rate that exceeds inflation in land values in that local authority.
- Bring more transparency to the system, by legislating to **record and publish statistics on land price inflation**, and introducing a **price and ownership register for all land** so that the extent of land oligopolies can be properly tracked and responded to

End the preferential tax treatment of so-called ‘Cuckoo’ funds:

It is scandalous that a phenomenon that is driving up the cost of housing in Ireland is supported with special tax-breaks from the State. It is time for the tax break introduced for REITs in 2013 be repealed.

Challenge our Relationship with Land

We have seen two housing crises in the past decade. If we want to prevent more, then we need to engineer a wholesale change in our relationship with land.

Since the Kenny report of 1973 we have stopped short of significant land reform in Ireland. That report set the State a challenge of very significant changes to the way in which the land market worked in Ireland. Some of the key issues of concern were never addressed. The Social Democrats believe we should be looking again at very radical change in this area where the State defends the public interest by having a far more prominent role in land banking, concentration of ownership and land pricing. This will almost inevitably mean significant Constitutional reform.

To this end, we are committed to a referendum to reform Article 43 of the Constitution to better reflect the common good so that issues in relation to both private rented accommodation and upward only rent reviews on commercial property can be addressed.

The Scottish Government has recently established the Scottish Land Commission. It is examining all aspects of land policy in that country and specifically looking at issues such as concentration of ownership, community ownership, vacant units, compulsory sales orders etc. It is recognising land as the key resource that it is and looking at how to get the best out of Scottish land. We would build upon this model, by tasking our proposed Housing Delivery Agency to undertake a complete review of land policy and charge it with bringing forward clear recommendations and an implementation strategy within 18 months - with legislative and constitutional changes to be made within two years.

This review would examine:

- Concentration of ownership.
- Windfall taxes from land rezoning.
- Land value capture.
- Compulsory purchase and compulsory sale.
- A workable land-use site levy and land-hoarding taxes.

- Public land-banking.
- Commercial upward only rents.
- How we could provide a right to housing/shelter.
- The relationship between banks and property.
- Barriers to the introduction of alternative tenure options, for example temporal ownership, and co-operative housing
- Restricting the right of ownership in certain cases - such as foreign ownership, and how all of this fits into Constitutional Reform on property rights and the public good.

Since the Famine, indeed long before, land has been at the heart of so many of Ireland's ills. The single biggest gift we could give to the next generation would be to once and for all resolve our issues with land that serve to undermine social rights and public provision, and that fuel the high cost of living and impact the long-term competitiveness of our country. Finally, we could show that Ireland can actually learn from the mistakes of the past.

Constitutional Change

Right to a Home

We believe that everyone should have a right to a place to call home. This right to housing should be enshrined in the Constitution in a way that would place a significant responsibility on the Government to vindicate this right through its actions – laws, policy and services. **We would hold a referendum which seeks to put this right to a home in the Constitution.**

Rebalance Article 43

Article 43 of the Constitution seeks to balance private property rights with the common good. The problem is that, too often, the common good loses out. This holds us back on issues such as nationwide rent caps, rent certainty and addressing upward-only rent reviews.

Successive governments hid behind a conservative interpretation of this provision to avoid taking the radical steps needed to deal with our

dysfunctional housing sector. If we are to put the common good at the heart of our efforts to bring the housing crisis to an end, we need certainty around Article 43. In the absence of a challenge through legal action, **we would favour bringing forward a referendum to let the people decide if the balance should be weighted more towards the common good.**

Properly establish the Land Development Agency

Its current output targets are too low, its ongoing budget is unclear and the legislation for the Agency has still not been passed.

As we have said for some years, we need a proper housing delivery agency that takes a hands-on approach to ensure the delivery of affordable supply and engages extensively in public land-banking so that we can start to move away from a reliance on development that is led by the private sector. We would **reestablish the weak Land Development Agency as a proper powerful Housing Delivery Agency with teeth and targets to deliver on an ambitious home building programme to deliver 100,000 homes over the lifetime of the next Dáil.**

This body would also be task it with establishing the appropriate forum to develop a **long term housing strategy for Ireland.**

Older People's Housing.

Most older people wish to stay in their communities. However, there often comes a point when many find their homes are no longer suitable for their needs yet there are no alternative options for them within their local community. As a result, it is not uncommon for older couples or single people to continue living in three- or four-bedroom houses.

By providing better housing options to older people, they could continue living independently for longer, enjoy better health, and stay in local communities among friends and family. In turn, the existing stock of family homes that are larger than needed, expensive to maintain or ill-suited to changing mobility needs could be freed up for the thousands of families searching for a suitable home.

We will introduce a range of new measures to provide these options:

Designate housing for older people:

Designated developments for older people could be built on many of the small infill sites in our cities and towns, while new estates could include a mix of older people's homes. This would enable people to move to more suitable, affordable accommodation within the same neighbourhood or even estate.

There are some models of dedicated housing schemes in Ireland, but there is no standard, consistent model in place. However in Germany, housing estates designate 10 percent of their stock for older people, which makes it

easy for empty-nesters to downsize within their own estates. Close to a third of older people would feel positively about moving if it better suited their needs. Purpose-built, designated homes would address mobility challenges and safety concerns, as well as enable longer independent living and better social inclusion.

We will meet the clear demand by **introducing such a designation for purpose-built homes for older people by reforming the planning law to ensure that older persons housing is provided as part of every new development** and improve the

supply of privately built step-down housing.

Renewed Step-Down Housing Scheme:

The models for both sheltered housing and the Financial Contribution Scheme already exist in Ireland, and they could be easily resumed. Both have the added advantage of freeing up family homes for council use, which could be refurbished and let to families on the housing waiting lists.

We would **activate and extend the Financial Contribution Scheme for Older Persons so that older people who want step-down housing in a sheltered housing setting can do so** - currently several hundred people

are on a waiting list for such a scheme in Dublin.

Revise Fair Deal Scheme:

The Fair Deal Scheme provides financial support to help pay for the cost of care in a nursing home. Right now, there are over 13,000 homeowners on the scheme but only 740 of them lease their home. Some properties are occupied by partners or family, but that still leaves thousands of vacant houses. More often than not, they are left empty because rental income is assessed as part of the means test for the scheme.

We will **introduce new legislation to reform to remove the barriers to letting a vacant home, if one wishes.**

Additional Housing Priorities

There are a range of other actions which the Social Democrats would prioritise to ensure that we had a functioning, effecting housing system that was fair, accessible and affordable. These include:

New Measures to free up Vacant Homes

At a time of crisis, it is unacceptable that thousands of homes lie vacant, often for years, that would be suitable for long term renting, for no legitimate reason. The Social Democrats would:

- Introduce a **vacant housing levy** for vacant homes (duration to be set by each local authority with appropriate but limited exemptions applying) and set down a higher levy the longer the home remains vacant;
- **Reform the Fair Deal Scheme to remove financial barriers to letting a vacant home;**
- Recruit a **vacant homes officer in each local authority** where there is a housing shortage to work with home owners to get vacant stock back into use as quickly as possible.

Assisting AHBs

Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) are crucial partners in building homes that are affordable to buy or rent and social homes, at the scale that they are now needed. One of the key difficulties they encounter is raising the funds necessary to build at the scale they would like to. Borrowing of the main AHBs is considered by the EU as part of Government borrowing. This must be addressed urgently.

We will work towards reclassification of Tier 3 AHBs to ‘off balance sheet’ status to enable additional funding to be raised by AHBs for the delivery of homes.

HAP & Rent Supplement:

HAP needs to be thought of as a short-term measure – a very costly measure - that has to be phased out by an ambitious home building programme. In the immediate term we would **improve HAP and Rent**

Supplement levels, improve tenancy sustainment interventions and make Homeless HAP available nationwide.

However, while these income supplements are necessary to support people in accessing housing during the current crisis, we recognize that the system of paying public money to private landlords is unacceptable. Our proposal for a nationwide rent freeze in conjunction a vastly increased delivery of social and affordable homes will remove the need to rely on the private rental market.

Additionally, there are significant delays in accessing and processing HAP. These delays are unfair on both tenants and landlords. We would **resource Local Authorities to ensure they have the adequate resources to process new HAP payments speedily.**

Fire Safety

The Social Democrats wish to see several measures to improve fire safety standards for existing and future housing stock:

We commit to the re-instatement of a rigorous independent building control inspection system by local authorities - this system can be self-financing as is the case in the UK and can arguably reduce the costs of construction by reducing the BCAR costs.

We further commit to a national audit of social housing stock to ensure compliance with Part (B) of the fire safety regulations - this should be risk based with a particular emphasis on higher density developments built over the last 10-15 years including timber frame estates.

Taking estates in Charge

There remains a very significant problem across the country with housing estates not yet taken in charge by the local authority at all, or in a timely manner. There is a job of catching up to do, as a legacy of the crash which needs to be addressed. Resources need to be allocated to local authorities to deal with these estates.

Ensure the housing needs of people with disabilities are met.

We commit to ensuring a minimum of 7% of social housing to meet universal design standards and ensure that every social housing pipeline project demonstrates at Capital Appraisal Stage the inclusion of a minimum 7 % of fully wheelchair accessible housing with higher percentages applying for areas of higher need.

We will promote the uptake of adaptation and mobility aids grants to enable independent living for persons with disabilities as too many Councils don't spend their full allocation.

Apartment and Estate Management

We will undertake a review of apartment and estate management, and work to develop a sustainable model.

Spend funds on Traveller Housing

We will seek to ensure that funding allocated for Traveller housing is spent by Local Authorities, and implement the report of the Traveller Accommodation Expert Review Group.

Review Social Housing Income Limits

We will review income limits applied to social housing so that more people can qualify, and ensure they are reviewed in line with inflation.

Please see our other General Election documents for other proposals on delivering housing solutions to the current crisis.

The background of the page is a complex, abstract pattern of overlapping triangles and polygons in various shades of purple, ranging from light lavender to deep, dark indigo. The shapes are irregular and create a sense of depth and movement.

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A solid purple horizontal bar at the bottom of the page, featuring a subtle geometric pattern of overlapping triangles and polygons, similar to the main background, but in a uniform dark purple color.