

REFLECTION: DELVING INTO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PLANNING AND HOUSING IN IRELAND



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There are a number of dominant features, and key differences, apparent in housing and planning systems in the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. In the Republic of Ireland recent decades have been characterised by ongoing high levels of owner-occupation (75% in 2008 (DoEHLGa, 2009); a booming housing market followed by a destructive bust; over-zoning of development lands; low average refusal rates on planning permission (for example, 16% in the last quarter of 2008 (DoEHLGb, 2009); an expansion of the planning system and structures through the adoption of more coherent legislation and policies (Creamer et al, 2010); the lack of adequate follow-through in the local, day-to-day operations of development management; and the symptomatic failure of the planning regime exemplified by so called 'ghost estates'.

In Northern Ireland a parallel picture has emerged. Over the same period as the rapid housing boom in the South, economic buoyancy gave rise to a more dynamic housing market than in previous decades, but without the same dramatic increases in prices as experienced in the Republic of Ireland (average house prices in Northern Ireland fell by 28% from the third quarter of 2007 to the third quarter of 2008 (NIHE, 2009). The combination of a less dynamic employment base than in the Republic of Ireland, higher rates of long-term unemployment and lower average wages results in a different but equally

complex housing market, and has knock-on effects for the planning authorities involved in the provision of housing – in particular the Planning Service and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE). Although house prices never rose to the same extent as those in the Republic, the economic downturn continues to have a negative impact on affordability and first-time buyer access (NIHE, 2009).

Housing Provision and Affordability

Examining housing provision North and South could be like trying to compare apples and oranges given the different structures that manage social housing and the historically higher levels of social housing in Northern Ireland. In 2006 over 16% of Northern Ireland's tenure was represented by social housing (NIHE, 2009). The Republic of Ireland, on the other hand, has one of the lowest levels in Europe (7% of all housing tenure in 2008 (DoEHLGa, 2009). The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) has played a very influential role in housing provision and access since its establishment in 1971. Prior to the centralisation of planning and housing decision making in Northern Ireland, and particularly in the post-World War II period, housing conditions in the region were well below the standard of its counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom. The NIHE has contributed significantly by raising the standard of living conditions in social housing to the point now where it has some of the best standards in the UK (McPeake, 2001).

Since 1998 – the year of the signing of the Belfast/ Good Friday Agreement – much of the responsibility for supplying social housing has shifted from the NIHE to housing associations (Paris et al, 2002). The number of new build starts by the Executive decreased rapidly during the period from the mid-1990s to the early-2000s following a major housing policy review (see DoENI, 1996): from 1,245 project starts in 1994-95 to just 76 in 1999-2000 (Paris, 2001). At present, with the increased number



of actors involved in social housing provision in Northern Ireland, this category still accounts for 16% of total tenure (NIHE, 2009).

In the Republic of Ireland the provision of social and affordable housing has been much less coherent, and overall the impact of social housing provision in the tenure profile has had a minimal effect. Public social housing provision is managed by local authorities with guidelines and directives from the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DoEHLG). As in Northern Ireland, additional social housing supply is provided by voluntary housing associations.

A number of interventions have been put in place over recent decades to attempt to increase the integration of social and affordable housing with the dominant tenure type of owner occupancy. Most notable in the context of planning was the introduction of Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000, which required all developments of more than four dwellings in zoned areas to have up to 20% social and / or affordable housing. In 2008 a total of 4,518 housing units (1,437 social and 3,081 affordable) were acquired under Part V agreements with developers; with over 12,000 homes being delivered under Part V to date (DoEHLG, 2009). However, given the overall house completions, even in a year such as 2008 when there was a slowdown in output, the contribution of social and affordable housing to the tenure mix remains low – comprising 8.7% of total house completions in 2008 (DoEHLG, 2009).

Planning Approaches

The supply of housing is determined by a number of factors, one of the most overlooked of which is the day-to-day planning decisions that are made and how these impact on supply and demand accumulatively (Whitehead, 2007). Indeed, for the Republic of Ireland it has been the accumulative effect of non-strategic development management decisions that has led to an over-supply of housing of over 2,700 housing estates (see DoEHLG, 2010),

estimated in some cases to account for up to 300,000 empty or incomplete homes (Kitchin et al, 2010). Northern Ireland has historically operated a more restrictive planning regime than that practiced in the Republic of Ireland. It is in the two key areas of development planning (long-term planning for an administrative area: a county or city in the Republic of Ireland; a local government district area in Northern Ireland) and development management (formerly known as development control) that the most influential decisions on housing supply are made.

There are striking structural and systematic differences in planning between the two Irish jurisdictions. Changes that had been proposed on either side of the border had the potential to align and better mirror planning policy implementation and decision making, but due to the stalling of the Review of Public Administration (RPA) in the North and the financial and economic crisis in the South, these proposed reforms have not yet come to fruition (for detailed analyses of planning and local government reform on the island of Ireland see Creamer et al, 2010). Key changes proposed in Northern Ireland included the devolution of planning powers to the local government level for the first time since the 1972 centralisation, and the allowance for local interpretation of spatial policies and the inclusion of elected representatives in development management decision-making.

What next? Housing Indicators for the island of Ireland

The ever shifting economic situation, a need for more strategic information on the impacts of planning decisions on housing supply and demand, and proposed transformations to planning and local government structures in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland require an all-island examination of planning and housing processes. The International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) is currently developing island of Ireland housing indicators. The key focus of these indicators, which it is hoped will become an annual housing report,

will be the relationship between planning and housing provision in both jurisdictions on the island; comparing how the two jurisdictions operate and the potential regional and islandwide impacts of two different planning systems. The first ICLRD annual housing report is scheduled for publication in autumn 2011.

In the United States there are good examples of how research organisations have developed annual thematic reports integrating key indicators with pressing national and local development issues, which support a policy dialogue and action among a wide range of stakeholders. Two examples from the Boston area include:

- the Harvard Joint Centre for Housing Studies (<http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/>) which publishes an annual housing report, and
- the Boston Foundation which publishes its Boston Indicators report every two years (<http://www.bostonindicators.org/>).

The importance of understanding how everyday local government and planning decisions impact upon access to housing, the housing markets, quality of housing, and the growth of residential areas in our cities, towns and villages, needs to be

explored. There is useful but limited research into the relationship between planning and housing across the island of Ireland, with housing researchers tending to focus on housing provision as a separate issue to planning. The ICLRD believes that the integral relationship between the two sectors needs to be examined in greater detail in order to better understand the role planning can and does play in ensuring adequate housing supply and equity of access to all tenure types. The regional impacts of the Irish border area, where there is a noteworthy movement of housing, population and employment, leading to significant effects on settlement patterns and the housing market, provide an additional layer of interest to the ICLRD.

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Endnote

At the time of going to print, the Department of Environment (NI) announced that a Planning Bill was to be tabled in early December 2010 on the return of planning powers to local councils, based on an eleven 'council cluster' model, in 2012. This would follow the role-out of a pilot scheme in 2011 (see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-11874550?print=true> accessed 30 November 2010).

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