

Waiting on the housing list

Patricia McCarthy

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THERE ARE 30,000 families on the housing waiting lists of the local authorities throughout the country at the moment. 3,500 households are waiting for housing in Dublin. The average wait for a local authority house in Dublin is now two years and rising. For single people, there is virtually no chance of housing unless they are seriously ill and even then they will only be offered hard to let flats in the inner city.

The speed and extent of the housing crisis has taken a lot of people by surprise but it shouldn't have. All of the indicators of a serious housing crisis have been there for anyone to see. There are two reasons for the housing crisis — the first is the dramatic decline in the house building programme especially in Dublin in the years between 1985 and 1990 as the following table shows:

1985	1,358
1986	1,150
1987	446
1988	145
1989	6
1990	35

New Dwellings built by Dublin Corporation by year

A house building programme was announced this year but it will be a long time before it starts to make an impact on the waiting lists. The second reason is the tenant purchase scheme which has been pushed hard over the last five years by the local authorities. These two reasons have left a critical shortage of public housing in the country.

Five years ago there were 400 empty flats in Ballymun and dozens of empty flats in the inner city. Single people could get flats quite easily. Now there is a waiting list for Ballymun and the inner city. Vulnerable people who could be easily intimidated and robbed like lone parents, ex-psychiatric patients, ex-hostel dwellers and people who are H.I.V. positive are often offered flats in the inner city because they qualify for priority on the waiting lists under the 1988 Housing Act and because there is nothing else available.

An official of Dublin Corporation's Housing Department has gone on record as saying that the Corpo could really only house single people who were tough, local and male no matter what

their priority might be. Homeless organisations like the Simon Community campaigned long and hard for the 1988 Housing Act, seeing it as an answer to the needs of the homeless. But the reality is that the priority accorded the homeless under this Act is useless in practice because of the almost total lack of available accommodation for single people.

The Eastern Health's homeless unit is now spending 3,000 pounds a month on B+B accommodation. Women with children in B+B have to leave it every day and walk the streets with their children even babies until they are let back into the B+B at night. Cafes catering for the homeless like Focus Point are full every day of tired women and frantic children bored from lack of play space and play facilities. There are no hostels catering for couples – couples who are homeless have to split up into separate hostels or else try for B+B but that will only be for a few weeks at best.

Last winter, four homeless people froze to death in Dublin over the Christmas period. All the hostels were full and they are again this year. The Government called in the army to open another hostel in the grounds of St Brendan's hospital after the four people died. This was supposed to be a temporary arrangement. Now even this hostel is always full and it has now been taken over by the Salvation Army. The Simon Community recently said that all of the Dublin hostels are so full because of the housing crisis that they are all booked out every day by 4 pm. Young kids as young as 13 or 14 are sleeping rough every night because the hostels for homeless kids have nothing like enough beds to cater for the need.

There was plenty of warnings given that a serious housing crisis was building up. The Government choose to ignore these warnings and to accuse groups like Simon of hyping up the figures of homeless people.

The lack of house building also caused a major slump in the building trade. At one stage, the housing construction departments of Dublin Corporation and Dublin County Council were threatened with complete closure. To add insult to injury local authority rents have taken a huge hike over the past five years. Some people on the dole are paying £25 a week and there is no rent allowance for local authority rents. Maintenance too is virtually non-existent because the local authorities let so many of their craft workers and labourers go.

Agitation around housing issues is still very sporadic and localised and unfortunately sometimes takes the form of scapegoating vulnerable tenants like Travellers and forcing them out of their houses. This has already happened this year in Tallaght and Clondalkin. Even with such a housing crisis, people are still being evicted because of rent arrears. People then end up in hostels and won't be housed again until they clear their arrears.

Housing is an issue that has been neglected by the left since the agitation of the Dublin Housing Action Committee of the late 1960s. Linking up the housing issue with other struggles, especially union struggles, is essential. A start can be made by developing contacts between tenants' associations and trade unionists in the depots & offices, by supporting each other in their struggles.

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