

One-off Housing fritters €5.6bn (on Broadband provision)

If you don't plan to optimise the social, environmental and economic effects of your policies, quality of life suffers and everyone pays



By Suzie Mélange

There were 442,669 one-off houses at the time of the last census in 2016, representing 26 per cent of all occupied dwellings in the State.

Almost 40 per cent of all homes constructed between 2011 and 2016 were one-off houses (detached houses with individual sewerage systems), suggesting no lessons had been learnt. Despite the pretence of difficulty obtaining permissions, remarkably in 17 counties one-off housing comprised over half of all dwellings built since 2011.

Over 60 per cent of households in County Galway, for example, were one-off houses, the highest in the country. Roscommon (56%) and Leitrim (52%) weren't far behind.

After 2016 there was an improvement as more apartments were built.

5481, 5622 and 5292 one-off houses were built in 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021 respectively – representing respective 19%, 14%, 12% and 23% of the total dwellings including apartments built and adding more than 1% to the stock of one-off houses annually.

Reflecting the Covid-driven increase in one-off-house building (which is less regulated than say apartment building), in December 2021 Property Industry Ireland (PII), an Ibec front, said “Given the National Planning Framework and the Climate Action Plan objective of more compact living it is concerning to see the growth in permission for one-off housing relative to multi-development housing and apartments”.

Despite a Green component the Programme for Government is silent on one-off housing. Though individual Green Party members are typically concerned about planning, its elected members don't like to be seen to say No. They're happy to champion a 'Town Centre first' policy but would sooner manage a McDonald's than oppose one-off housing or even sprawl, in case someone scream 'God gave me the land' or 'Housing Crisis' at them. The media and public have entirely failed to register that for the modern Green TD planning is very *yesterday*.

The 2018 National Planning Framework guides the whole framework. Those oxymorons are important – it is mostly flouted and intended to be flouted, on one-off housing. Officials pontificate about planning while one-off housing builders get on with the business of breaching the policy because of the Third Secret of Fatima of Irish Planning: local authorities don't have to follow their own plans.

In a part-EU-law-driven departure from the 2005 Rural Housing Guidelines, the NPF mooted the concept of “*demonstrable economic need*” as an alternative to the current “*local housing need*” as the relevant criterion for one-off rural housing in the commuter hinterlands of all cities and towns. Meanwhile the actual guidelines promised for January 2021 have been delayed because the Greens are too embarrassed to face up to another climbdown, for a while. Junior (anti-)Planning Minister Fine Gael's Peter Burke is plotting more of the same.

Remember the more stuff is mooted the more the Greens can avoid taking any responsibility for what is *actually happening*.

Of course the problems with one-off housing are long-documented and long-ignored. They are rooted in the fact that non-planning is unsustainable i.e. doesn't balance economic with social and environmental imperatives (though of course all of these agendas are swept aside to meet the housing deficit, itself caused by long-term deference to the market).

The fabulous thing about one-off housing for the nouveau-peasant anti-ideologues is that it is shit on all of these agendas, perhaps most of all economic.

The social problems of isolation and de-energised



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towns and villages; and the environmental problems of water pollution and car-pollution dependency are very serious.

But economically one-off housing is extravagant. Dense communities serve society well as they can be served with public transport and good facilities and infrastructure. They benefit from something that economists rate highly – economies of scale. For example a terraced community has fewer walls, can be more easily heated and of course is more easily served by postal, electricity, gas, water, waste and other services. And by broadband.

All the while we have a National Broadband Plan (NBP) which, according to Eoin Burke-Kennedy writing in the *Irish Times* “promises what no country on the planet has done – to connect a scattergram of remote cottages and out-of-the-way holiday homes, to a state-of-the-art broadband network, bypassing 50 years of bad or zero planning. The cost? A whopping €5½ billion, including a €2.6 billion State subsidy and without ownership of the end product”.

He notes that the rollout has been “mired in delays and difficulties to do with the complex terrain and dilapidated condition of existing infrastructure – poles and ducts”.

This was all predictable. “Other countries have made similar promises but for example Boris Johnson's Conservative party recently ditched its £5 billion election manifesto pledge to give all homes across the UK superfast broadband by 2025. Leinster House, underpinned by a strong rural lobby, has written a blank cheque to fix the problem. Due diligence and cost-benefit analysis were shoved to one side”.

The Department of Public Expenditure said precisely this in a 2019 letter to the Minister for Finance, recommending against the plan on grounds of affordability, risk and value for money.

When you don't plan – when you ignore the social, economic and environmental costs of major policies, everyone loses. **L**

