

Norris, M; (2003) 'Housing' In: ed. M Callanan and J Keogan (eds). *Local Government in Ireland: Inside Out*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration. , pp.165-189

“In the public mind housing stands in the forefront of local services. There are cogent reasons for this - its strong social and community significance, an economic significance deriving from the heavy capital investment it involves and its prominence in the building industry and as an employer ... It is hardly surprising then that housing performance has been an abiding issue in local and even national politics.” (Roche, 1982, p. 220).

The two decades since the publication of *Local Government in Ireland* have been characterised by radical change in the local authority housing function, the extent of which is such that, by the late 1980s, Desmond Roche’s observations regarding the traditional importance of this service must have appeared completely at variance with the tone of national policy. By this time, the rate of new public house building had reduced to the extent that some commentators raised doubts as to whether local authorities would continue to be involved directly in housing provision (Lord Mayor’s Commission on Housing, 1993). By the late 1990s however, the wheel had turned almost full circle and housing has regained the position of importance within local authority services attributed to it by Roche. However, the focus of the service has changed significantly from its traditional role. Although, in the face of rapid growth in housing waiting lists, new public house building has increased from the historic low levels of the late 1980s, a more dramatic expansion has occurred in local authority’s housing functions. They now hold important new responsibilities in relation to enabling the development of housing by other agencies such as housing associations and co-operatives, building affordable houses for sale, and in planning for the implementation of national housing policy at the local level.

This chapter aims to map the main trends in the development of the local authority housing function since the beginning of local government involvement in this area in the mid 1800s, until modern times. This sweeping review focuses in particular on the contribution which local authorities have made to addressing housing need and on the principal items of legislation, relevant to the local authority housing service, which were introduced in this period. In the second part of the chapter, a more in-depth examination of the recent development of the housing function is presented. This concentrates mainly on the changing focus of the service over the last two decades, which was highlighted above. On the basis of this discussion, the conclusions to the chapter will examine whether local authorities will rise to meet the challenges associated with these new strategic functions.

Laying the Foundations: Local Authority Housing in the Pre-independence Period

The local authority housing service in Ireland is as almost as old as local authorities themselves. Its roots can be traced back to the period of the foundation of the modern local government system in the mid 1800s. At this time, in many European countries growing concern about the housing conditions of the low income population - inspired by a range of interests including: philanthropists and social reformers; the emerging labour movement and a belief that housing conditions in urban slums were creating

public health problems and fostering social unrest – led to the creation of systems of State subsidised housing for rent to low income and disadvantaged groups which is known as social housing (Harloe, 1995). Ireland was no different in this regard, with the important caveat that its status as part of the United Kingdom until 1922, meant that the early development of its social housing was shaped by UK legislation, which has bequeathed both countries an atypical system of social housing provision in the wider European context. In addition, the distinctive political concerns of Ireland at that time meant that the early development of social housing in this country also has some unusual features which differentiate it from Britain, and have influenced its evolution over the long term.

The foundations of local authority involvement in the provision of urban social housing in both Britain and Ireland lie in two policy developments – the gradual extension of slum clearance legislation throughout the latter half of the 19th Century which empowered local authorities to identify, close and clear unfit dwellings, and in legislation requiring the licensing and inspection of common lodging houses, beginning with the Common Lodging Houses Act, 1851, which established the principle of State involvement in enforcing minimum housing standards. The advent of State subsidisation of housing provision to ensure higher standards was a logical extension of these provisions. Subsidies of this type were originally introduced in Ireland under the 1866 Labouring Classes (Lodging Houses and Dwellings) Act, which provided low cost public loans over 40 years to private companies and urban local authorities, for up to half the cost of a housing scheme. Although, this initial housing legislation produced relatively modest outcomes, social house building increased significantly under its successor - the 1875 Artisan's and Labourers Dwellings Improvement Act, which provided low cost public loans to the larger urban local authorities for the clearance of unsanitary sites, which could then be used for new house building.

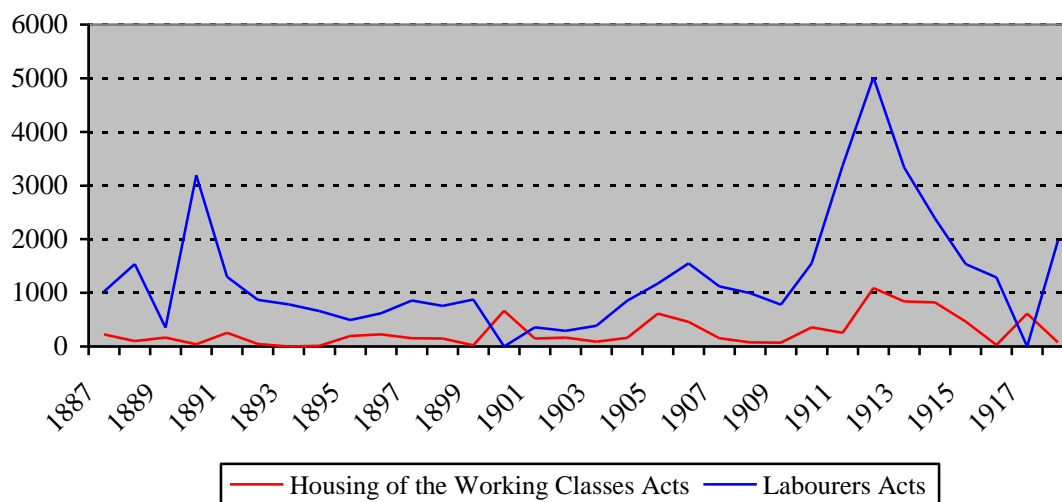
It is important to note that the majority of output under the early social housing legislation was not by local authorities. In fact, the 1875 Act allowed local authorities to build dwellings only if no alternative provider could be found. Instead dwellings were provided by philanthropic bodies such as the Guinness Trust (now called the Iveagh Trust), which was founded in 1890 and semi-philanthropic organisations such as the Dublin Artisans Dwellings Company, which was established in 1876 and run as a business paying a modest dividend of between 4 and 5% to shareholders. With the aid of the low cost loans provided under the housing legislation, together with grant aid from Dublin Corporation (now Dublin City Council), organisations of this type had built 4,500 dwellings, accounting for approximately 15% of Dublin's housing stock, by the outbreak of World War I (Fraser, 1996). These dwellings were generally high density in design, they took the form of either four or five storey flats such as the Iveagh buildings in Dublin's south inner city which was built by the Iveagh Trust, or of terraced housing such as the Oxmanstown Road area in Stoneybatter, Dublin which was built by the Dublin Artisans Dwellings Company.

In contrast, local authority provision in towns and cities was slower to get off the ground. Ireland's first urban local authority housing scheme was completed in 1879 by Waterford Corporation (now Waterford City Council) in Green Street, Ballybricken, but Fraser (1996) estimates that urban authorities completed a total of

only 570 dwellings in the decade which followed. As Figure 1 below demonstrates, urban local authority building began to increase after the introduction of the 1890

Figure 1

Local Authority Dwellings Built Under the Housing of the Working Classes Acts and the Labourers Acts, 1887-1918



Source: Minister for Local Government (1964)

Housing of the Working Classes Act, which provided for central government loans on more attractive terms, and for the first time allowed social house building on green field sites to meet general housing need, as well as in slum clearance areas. However, it expanded significantly subsequent to the 1908 Housing Act, which introduced even better loan terms and established an Irish Housing Fund which financed the first direct exchequer subsidy for urban housing, and, in contrast to the norm in countries such as Germany, Denmark and Sweden, from this period onwards local authorities took over from non statutory bodies as the main providers of social housing for rent in Ireland.

In the case of the semi-philanthropic companies the reasons for this turn of events are straightforward – the main providers including the Dublin Artisans Dwellings Company were forced out of business by the pre World War I economic slump. The story of why a significant philanthropic housing movement did not emerge in Ireland at this stage is more complex however. Power (1993, p. 321) emphasises that the Artisans Dwellings Company and the Iveagh Trust were owned by the Protestant elite and argues that “... it was inevitable therefore that Dublin Corporation, with its Catholic voters and Nationalist councillors would feel forced to do something about the problems of the very poor”. In contrast, Fraser’s (1996) account of the period stresses that these religious divisions frustrated the development of a philanthropic housing movement large enough to resolve the chronic housing problems of Ireland’s urban poor, and that the voluntary agencies which did emerge concentrated on housing the better off sections of the working class such as skilled artisans and tradespeople. Thus, he argues that the increasingly more generous housing subsidies introduced during the late 1800s and early 1900s, allowed urban local authorities to build dwellings of increasingly high standard at lower rents, which encouraged them to expand their housing provision to meet the needs of the poorest sections of society.

An unusual aspect of the early development of local authority housing in Ireland in comparison with Britain, is the heavy emphasis which was placed on provision for low income workers in rural areas. Initiatives in this regard, began with the Dwellings for the Labouring Classes (Ireland) Act, 1860, which allowed landlords to borrow from the Public Works Loans Commission for the purpose of building cottages for their tenants. Although, as a result of disinterest from landlords, this initiative was largely unsuccessful, it was followed by a series of increasingly more radical rural housing schemes which granted subsidies which were significantly more generous than their urban counterparts, starting with the Labourers (Ireland) Act, 1883 (as amended in 1885), which enabled Boards of Guardians to provide cheap housing for rent to farm labourers, subsidised out of local rates and low cost loans from central government. As is detailed in Figure 1 above, this initiative, together with the 1886 Labourers Act, which extended housing eligibility to anyone working part-time as an agricultural labourer, resulted in the completion by rural local authorities of 3,191 labourers cottages in 1890 alone. Output over the following decade averaged at 700 dwellings per year, but it rose dramatically after the introduction of the Labourers (Ireland) Act, 1906. This Act established a dedicated Labourers Cottage Fund to provide low interest loans for rural local authority house building, and most significantly, sanctioned that 36% of the loan payments would be met by central government.

Fahey (1998) links the advent and expansion of the labourers cottage programme with the campaign for the redistribution of land from landlords to tenant farmers which was one of the main preoccupations of Parnell's Irish Parliamentary Party during the late 19th and early 20th Century. He characterises the labourers cottage programme as a "consolation prize" for the farm labourers who were excluded from the process of land reform, but were numerous enough to warrant the attention of the Irish Parliamentary Party. His argument in this regard, is supported by the fact that each of the Labourers Acts referred to above was introduced immediately following a Land Act which provided subsidised loans to allow tenant farmers to purchase their farms, and subsidies for house building under the Labourers Acts were strikingly similar to the land purchase subsidies.

The combination of World War I, the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence obstructed any further significant development of local authority housing in the pre independence period, even though the 1919 Housing (Ireland) Act, offered more substantial State subsidies for urban local authority house building it had relatively little impact before 1922. However by the foundation of the State, the main focus of the housing service which would be provided by local authorities for much of the rest of the Century had already been determined. Local authorities, rather than the non statutory sector would be the main providers of social housing for rent, and beginning with the Small Dwellings Acquisition Act, 1899, which empowered county councils and urban authorities to provide loans to aid occupants to buy private rented dwellings from their landlords, they would also play a significant role in extending home ownership. Furthermore, the combination of the various Housing of the Working Classes Acts and the Labourers Acts bequeathed the infant Irish State a very sizeable local authority housing stock, albeit one which would prove inadequate to meet the needs of the urban poor. Before 1914, Irish local authorities had completed approximately 44,701 dwellings, in comparison with only 24,000 council dwellings built in Great Britain during the same period (Malpass and Murie, 1999). By

independence 50,862 local authority dwellings had been built in Ireland, 41,653 of which were constructed under the terms of the Labourers Acts, and accounted for about 10% of the total rural housing stock, while only 8,861 dwellings has been completed by urban authorities (Fahey, 1998). This geographical pattern of provision was the opposite of that which prevailed in Britain, where Fraser (1996) estimates 98% of pre World War I local authority housing was in urban areas.

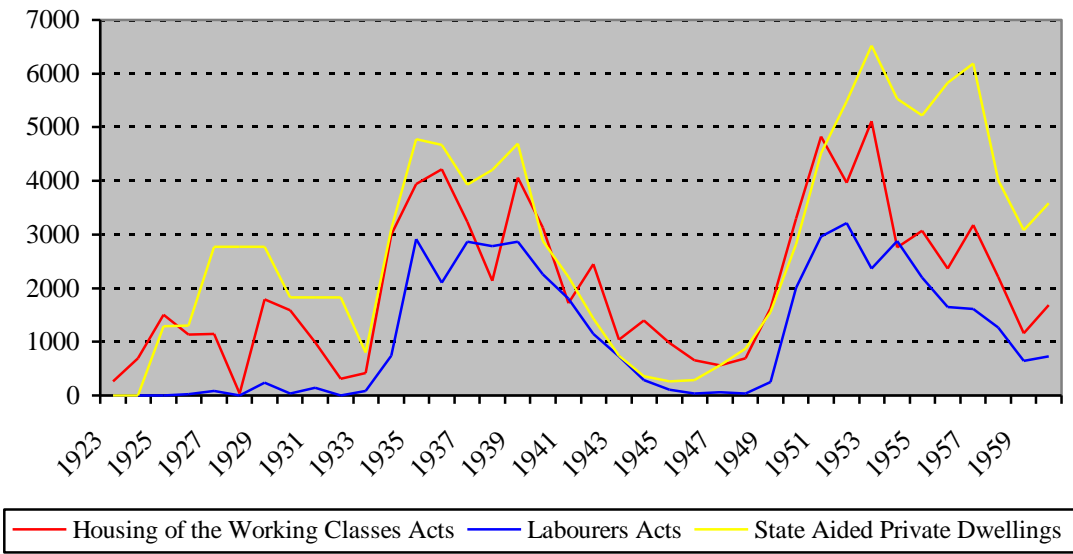
Housing in Independent Ireland, 1922 -1960

In the years immediately following independence housing remained at the top of the agenda of the new administration. Although the labourer's cottages schemes had more or less satisfied housing need in rural areas, housing conditions among the low income population in towns and cities were still very poor. In order to address this problem an imaginative "Million Pound Scheme" was launched, which as its name implies, provided one million pounds for local authority house building – 50% of which came from central government, 12.5% from local authority rates and the remainder from short term bank loans. The Scheme achieved an immediate response, and Figure 2 below demonstrates that, by the time of its completion at the end of 1924, 959 dwellings had been built, all of which were in urban areas. From the architectural and planning perspective the most significant development built under the auspices of the Scheme was at Marino in Dublin where 1262 houses were constructed in an innovative design whereby they were laid out on streets which radiated from two circular greens in the manner of the spokes of a bicycle wheel. This design was influenced by the British 'Garden City' architectural movement which endeavoured to combine the virtues of urban and rural life by building suburbs with layouts akin to traditional country villages (Murray, 1996).

However by the mid 1920s the political agenda shifted away from public housing provision, as the new Cumman na nGael government focussed on increasing private output. The result was the Housing (Building Facilities) Act, 1924 which introduced substantial private house building grants of £100 (€127) for serviced dwellings and £90 (€114.3) for unserviced dwellings, enough to cover approximately one sixth of the usual building cost at the time. As Figure 2 below illustrates, these grants

Figure 2

Local Authority Dwellings Built Under the Housing of the Working Classes Acts and the Labourers Acts, and Private Dwellings Built with State Aid, 1923-1960



Source: Minister for Local Government (1964)

triggered a dramatic increase in private building, and the vast majority of new private dwellings built after 1924 availed of the grants (Minister for Local Government, 1964).

Local authorities were not denied a role in this new policy departure – they could supplement the grants with loans, free or cheap sites and remission of rates – but their house building programme was reined in as central government proved unwilling to continue the programme of long-term subsidisation of public house building initiated under the 1906 Labourers (Ireland) Act, and the 1908 Housing Act, or even to treat public housing more favourably than private construction. Instead, the Housing (Building Facilitates) (Amendment) Act, 1924 offered amounts similar to private grants for urban local authority house building, although the 1925 Housing Act tilted the balance in favour of local authorities by reducing private grants to a maximum of £75 (€95.2) while maintaining the standard grants (of up to £100 (€127) a house) for urban authorities and extending this subsidy to include labourers cottage schemes. However, difficulties in raising bank loans combined with the high cost of this source of finance, inhibited local authorities from undertaking large-scale building programmes, and output only began to increase significantly in 1929, when the government decided to restore the practice, suspended since 1922, of helping local authorities with state capital. The local loans fund was revived by the Minister for Finance and low interest loans were made available for public house building. As a result, output of urban local authority dwellings rose to 1,789 in 1929, although building under the Labourers Acts remained low and only 385 dwellings were completed by rural local authorities between 1923 and 1930.

However, even this expanded level of output proved insufficient to meet housing need in the towns and cities. Surveys undertaken by urban authorities in 1929 estimated total housing need at 40,000 dwellings, and this finding spurred central government into radical action. In 1931 they introduced the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act which replaced the slum clearance provisions of the Housing of the Working Classes Act, 1890 with new, more effective procedures and also terminated the policy of State assistance to public house building by means of lump sum grants which had prevailed throughout the 1920s, with annual subsidies towards loan charges, which Roche (1982, p. 224) assesses as “... generous for those depression times”. The Act also sought to enable further expansion of owner occupation by enlarging the scope of the Small Dwellings Acquisition Act to authorise local authorities to lend to persons intending to build, as well as to private sector tenants who wished to purchase the dwelling which they rented and increasing the cost-limit for houses financed under the Act.

Although the 1931 Act laid the foundation for the radical expansion of public house building over the rest of the decade, several of its provisions never came into effect. They were superseded by the Housing (Financial and Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 1932, introduced by the first Fianna Fáil government which took office that year with the support of the Labour Party. The 1932 Act further increased the central government subsidies to loan charges for public house building introduced by its predecessor. As Figure 2 above demonstrates, these subsidies resulted in a dramatic increase in public house building. Output under the Housing of the Working Classes Acts rose to a pre World War II high in 1936 when 4,215 dwellings were completed and building of Labourers Acts schemes was also revived and peaked in 1939 which

saw the completion of 2,867 rural dwellings. A total of 48,875 public rented dwellings were constructed between 1933 and 1943, as compared to the 9,994 units completed in the previous decade. Although public sector output began to slow in the late 1930s and early 1940s as a result of government concerns about capital expenditure and the impact of World War II, in comparison with private sector output during the war years it still remained relatively buoyant. In fact, 1933 to 1943 was the only decade in the history of the state in which house building by the local authority sector exceeded private sector output.

It is interesting to note that almost one third of the public rented dwellings built during the 1930s and 1940s were constructed by Dublin Corporation (now Dublin City Council) as part a massive clearance programme which targeted inner city slums. Between 1932 and 1948 the Dublin Corporation Housing Architect Herbert Simms built 17,000 dwelling units in the inner city. Since the construction of the Marino estate referred to earlier in this chapter a lively debate had raged in architectural circles in Ireland concerning the propriety of suburban or urban locations for social house building. Simms was firmly in the latter camp, and as a result the vast majority of the dwellings constructed during his tenure in the Corporation were located in inner city areas, including: Pearse Street, Cuffe Street, James Street and Marrowbone Land. These dwellings were constructed as four storey blocks of flats, the perimeter of which respected the existing street pattern with communal courtyards at the rear which provided access, play space, clothes drying areas and storage. After Simms death the urban design ethos was replaced by stripped down suburban development by Dublin Corporation, which bore little resemblance to the garden suburbs advocated in the 1920s. The result was large low density estates or similar design with little or no landscaping such as Crumlin, Drimnagh, Donnycarney, Cabra and Ballyfermot.

From the perspective of the local authority housing service, the 1930s are also notable for the introduction of a universal right of purchase for tenants of labourers cottages, replacing the previous system whereby local authorities could at their own discretion, apply to the Department of Local Government to establish sale schemes. This reform was initiated on the recommendation of a commission of enquiry on the subject which reported in 1933, and legislated for in the 1936 Labourers Act, which obliged all county councils to prepare sale schemes for their labourers cottages. The dwellings would be sold by means of fixed term annuity payments, which were originally set at 75% of the rent, but were reduced to only 50% in 1951. Like many other distinctive aspects of public housing policy in this country, the impetus behind the introduction of rural tenant purchase, three decades before this scheme was extended to include urban tenants, and some 45 years before the British government introduced a similar universal right to buy for all council tenants, lie in the land reform movement. Fahey (1998) argues that the de Valera government was finally forced to concede to the sale of labourers cottages – after many years of lobbying from tenants, because its 1933 Land Act had made significant reductions in the annuities payable by tenant farmers who purchased their holdings. Furthermore, he contends that the way in which “land reform continued to influence the substance of housing policy ... gave Irish public housing a character that in some respects was unique in Europe” (Fahey, 1998, p. 10). As was mentioned earlier in this Chapter, the influence of land reform during the 19th Century had conferred the Irish public housing system with a uniquely rural character. In the 20th Century, the land reform inspired advent of tenant purchase, would contribute in the long run to the reduction of the social rented stock in this country to

a level which is low in comparison with most other northern European countries. As this scheme was initially confined to labourers cottages, this contraction impacted first on rural areas. By 1964 approximately 80% of the 86,931 labourers cottages built by that date had been tenant purchased, in contrast to only 6,393 urban dwellings sold by then (Minister for Local Government, 1964).

Despite this high level of sales however, in absolute terms the number of local authority dwellings available for letting did not decline during the next decade, as the rate of new building remained high. The 1948 White Paper *Housing: A Review of Past Operations And Immediate Requirements*, estimated that 100,000 new dwellings were needed – 60,000 of which should be provided by local authorities and 40,000 by the private sector (Department of Local Government, 1948). In order to achieve this the rates of subsidy for local authority house building fixed in 1932 were not amended. Instead, the 1948 Housing (Amendment) Act, extended the loan repayment and subsidy periods and in addition direct central government capital grants were introduced in order to compensate local authorities for increased building costs, together with extra grant aid to maintain the effective interest rate on loans for public house building at 2.5%. As a result, new local authority house completions increased more than tenfold between 1948 and 1954, and although they declined somewhat towards the end of the 1950s, output for the 10 years 1950 to 1959 totalled 52,767 dwellings – more than double what had been achieved during the previous decade. Notwithstanding this impressive level of construction however, in relative terms the share of total housing output contributed by local authorities fell in the 1950s. This is because, contrary to the predictions of the 1948 White Paper, private building increased even faster than public sector output. By the time local authorities had reached their target of 60,000 new dwellings in 1963, just over 68,000 private sector dwellings had been completed – over twice as many as had been envisaged in 1948. This development, which was largely a consequence of a series of Housing Acts offering ever higher subsidies to private builders, marked the start of a long-term trend which has not only persisted, but has accelerated in the decades since the 1950s.

Housing Modern Ireland, 1961-1979

Sociologists identify the 1960s as the period in which Irish society and economy modernised, as from this time the number of people employed in agriculture began to fall, the pace of industrial development quickened and widespread social change meant that society became less traditional in terms of religious observance and family structures (Breen *et al*, 1990). In common with wider Irish society, during the 1960s the local authority housing service also modernised in a number of respects. For instance, housing law was reformed, rationalised and updated and local authorities began to utilise modern building techniques in their housing developments. More significantly, during the 1960s and 1970s the public rented tenure contracted in size for the first time in the history of the State, and it became apparent that local authorities would play a more modest role in housing the population of modern Ireland than they had in the past.

The rationalisation of the public housing legislation was achieved at a single stroke by means of the 1966 Housing Act. This act replaced more than fifty earlier legislative provisions with a simple statement of powers enabling housing authorities to deal with unfit dwellings and districts within their operational areas; requiring them to assess local housing needs at least every five years; to develop a programme of

building dwellings for people unable to adequately house themselves on this basis; to allocate these dwellings according to a scheme of letting priorities which should give preference to households in greatest need of housing and enabling them to manage these dwellings and to sell them to tenants. Indeed such is the extensive scope of the Act that to this day, most aspects of local authority housing administration still fall under its remit. The 1966 Act also had an important modernising function, as it encompassed all levels of local government and thus marked the end of the tradition of separate legislation governing urban and rural public housing which had prevailed since the foundation of the service in the 1800s. Although, this aspect of the Act is not as innovative as it ostensibly appears. Rather it is the culmination of a thirty year long trend whereby new housing laws tended to make identical provisions for urban and rural areas, the extent of which was such that by 1966 only three significant outstanding differences between the two codes remained for the Housing Act to abolish. These are: the lack of a universal right of purchase for urban tenants, minor divergences in land acquisition procedure and procedures for the repossession of dwellings (Minister for Local Government, 1964). As well as rationalising and modernising the public housing legislation, the 1966 Act instituted a number of reforms to the service, the most important of which relate to rent setting. The Act empowered the Minister to make State subsidies for public housing conditional on the dwellings being let on rents which vary according to the tenant's family income, and since 1967 rents of all new public housing tenancies have been set using this 'differential rent' system.

Another interesting reform introduced in the 1966 Housing Act is the provision of additional state subsidy to housing authorities constructing blocks of flats of six or more storeys. This subsidy was part of a series of initiatives introduced by the Department of Local Government during the 1960s and 1970s to encourage the use of modern building techniques, which it was envisaged would help to rapidly expand housing output to meet the demand created by the growing population and the economic boom at that time (Minister for Local Government, 1964). Many housing schemes constructed using these modern methods were built by local authorities. A semi-prefabricated or 'system' building technique was used in the construction of mixed estates of houses and three storey flats at Mayfield, the Glen and Togher for Cork City Council, while Dublin City Council employed a similar system of pre-cast concrete panels to build Ireland's only high rise estate at Ballymun. They were aided in this work by the National Building Agency Ltd, which was established in 1961, with the object of building houses for key State and industrial workers, but soon adopted a broader role of advising local authorities on house construction and building schemes on their behalf. In comparative terms, Irish local authorities' embrace of modern building methods was belated - these techniques were in common use in other European countries since the end of World War II, especially among exponents of the modernist architectural movement. Furthermore, it was short lived - ironically Ballymun was completed in 1969 just seven months before the collapse of the Ronan Point tower block in London signalled the beginning of the end of the high-rise experiment in Europe. However, in the public imagination these system built public sector dwellings have assumed an importance which is disproportionate to their modest numbers. In Ireland, as in Britain and many other EU countries, the unpopularity of high-rise estates among tenants, and the well-publicised structural problems of many system built dwellings, have contributed to the "delegitimation" of the social rented tenure as a whole. In the public mind local authority housing was no

longer seen the best solution to poor housing conditions, and was increasingly seen as the cause of them (Dunleavy, 1981).

The 1960s are also significant in the history of the local authority housing service, as from this period local authorities became more involved in providing accommodation for members of the Travelling Community. The importance of their involvement in this area was heavily promoted by the Commission on Itinerancy. Its 1963 report on the problems faced by this section of the community was predicated on the argument that:

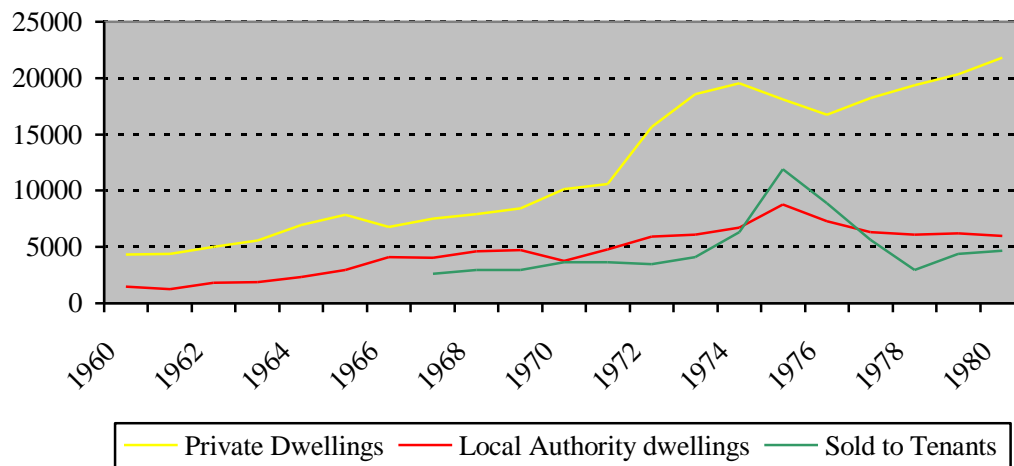
“All efforts directed at improving the lot of itinerants and at dealing with the problems created by them, and all schemes drawn up for these purposes must have as their aim the eventual absorption of the itinerants into the general community. (Commission on Itinerancy, 1963, p. 106).

Furthermore, the Commission concluded that setting Travellers in conventional housing would be the most effective method of achieving this objective and it envisaged that most of this housing would be provided by local authorities. The argument that providing adequate accommodation is key to improving the living conditions of Travellers was reiterated in the next major government review of this issue, which was produced in 1983 by the Travelling People Review Body. This report also envisaged that local authorities would be the main providers of accommodation for Travellers, but unlike its predecessor this report recognised that this section of the population should be offered a number of accommodation options. This differentiates between:

- “Families who wish to live in standard housing among settle people.
- Families who wish to live in a house but situated among their own people, i.e.: group housing.
- Families who wish to remain living in a caravan in a place on which they are entitled to part but with the benefit of amenities.
- Families who wish to continue travelling but who would avail of authorised serviced sites on which they can remain as long as they wish”. (Travelling People Review Body, 1983, p. 103)

Finally, as was mentioned above during the 1960s and 1970s the percentage of the national housing stock rented from local authorities fell from 18.4% in 1961, to 16% in 1971 and to 12.5% in 1981 (Central Statistics Office, Various Years). As Figure 3 below demonstrates, to some extent this phenomenon is due to the continued fall in the relative contribution of public sector building to total housing output during these decades. Like the 1950s, in absolute terms the number of public rented dwellings completed rose during the 1960s and 1970s, but private sector completions grew at a much faster rate. However, a more significant factor in the decline of the tenure, is the steady rise in the level of tenant purchase of dwellings after the introduction of the 1966 Housing Act. As was mentioned above, this Act bestowed a common power of sale of dwellings on both urban and rural local authorities, and in addition it streamlined tenant purchase procedures by removing the requirement for specific Ministerial consent to individual sales, and empowering the Minister to lay down minimum terms of sale instead. The sale terms initially set by the Minister were generous, purchasers were offered a reduction on the sale price for every year of residency subject to a maximum discount of 30% in urban areas and 45% in rural areas and not surprisingly sales rose steadily, with this increase being particularly

*Figure 3
Local Authority Dwellings and Private Dwellings Completed and Local Authority Dwellings Sold to Tenants, 1960-1980*



Source: Department of Local Government (Various years), *Department of Local Government Report*, and DoELG (Various Years), *Annual Housing Statistics Bulletin*.

Note: No figures are available on sales before 1967; figures from 1967 to 1970 both Labourers Act dwellings sold and all dwellings sold under the 1966 Housing Act; figures from 1970 onwards include dwellings sold under the 1966 Housing Act, only. Details of dwellings which were sold in urban areas at the discretion of local authorities after the enactment of the 1966 Housing Act are not included in this graph, therefore it slightly underestimates the true level of sales.

marked in urban areas, where the lack of a universal right-to-buy had created some pent-up demand. Figure 3 below also points up a sharp rise in sales between 1973 to 1979 and during part of this period, tenant purchase of dwellings outstripped new building. This is due to the introduction of a new tenant purchase scheme in 1973, which offered buyers the same maximum discount off the sale price as the previous scheme, but calculated the sale price on the basis of the initial cost of providing the dwelling updated to current monetary values, rather than the market value. As a result, dwellings were sold for approximately 19% less than under the preceding tenant purchase scheme (An Foras Forbartha, 1978).

From Residualisation to Regeneration, 1980-2002

The introduction to this chapter suggested that the last two decades have, more than any other since the foundation of the State, been characterised by radical change in the local authority housing function. The title of this section encapsulates this turbulent period as a progression from the residualisation of the tenure during the 1980s and early 1990s, to the regeneration of the local authority housing service in more recent years.

Residualisation refers to the phenomenon whereby "... council housing has increasingly become the tenure of the least well off" (Malpass and Muire, 1999, p. 22). The concept was first used in British housing research in the late 1970s, to explain the increasing level of poverty in the public rented tenure in the UK, which until the 1940s, had been dominated by skilled manual workers and lower middle class families. In contrast to their British counterparts, Irish local authorities have always tended to charge low rents and to let to disadvantaged groups, and therefore it is reasonable to assume that since its foundation, the public rented tenure in Ireland has been more or less residualised (Fraser, 1996). However, in common with the UK,

the available evidence indicates that the level of residualisation of public housing in this country has worsened considerably over the last two decades. This evidence is set out in Table 1 below, which demonstrates that, between 1987 and 1994, as the number of public renting households with incomes below 60% of the national average grew from 59.1% to 74.6%.

The reasons for this development are twofold. They are related to the broader socio-economic environment of the time, and to housing policy. In relation to the former of these issues, there is little doubt that the economic crisis of the 1980s had a strong negative impact on local authority tenants, who tend to have low educational qualifications, work in unskilled manual jobs and therefore are at high risk of becoming unemployed and falling into poverty (Nolan and Whelan, 1999). However, the reasons why poverty among local authority tenants continued to increase during the 1990s, despite the improved economic environment, is due to the influence of housing policy. For instance as Figure 4 below demonstrates, from the mid 1980s, the number of new local authority dwellings built fell steadily, to a post World War II low

Table 1

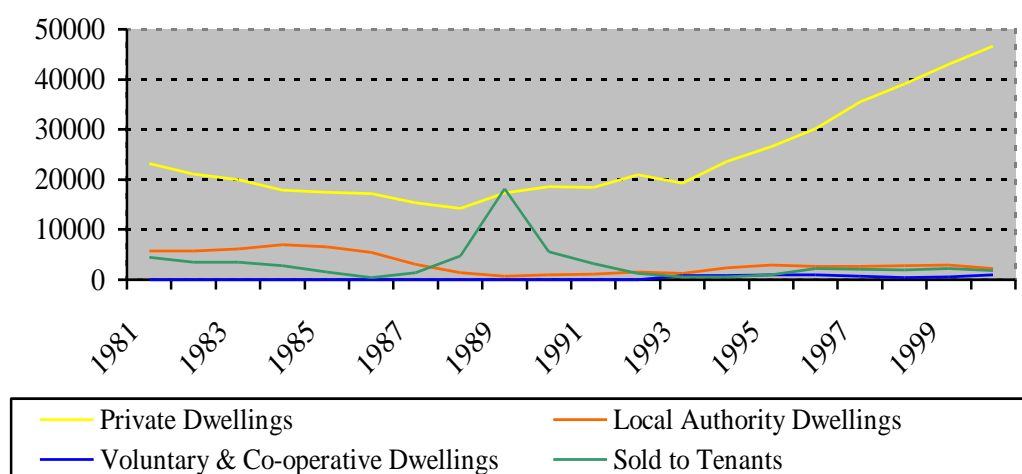
Income Poverty Among Households in the Republic of Ireland by Tenure, 1987, 1994.

	% of Households with Incomes Below 40% of Average		% of Households with Incomes Below 60% of Average	
	1987	1994	1987	1994
Owned Outright	16.8	18.1	30.0	37.8
Owned with a Mortgage	6.7	8.7	2.5	14.6
Local Authority Tenant Purchased	17.8	21.8	27.5	41.6
Local Authority Rented	37.4	49.8	59.1	74.6
Other Rented	14.4	15.1	27.7	34.0
All Households	17.0	18.8	29.1	34.6

Source: adapted from Nolan *et al*, 1998, p. 24

Figure 4

Local Authority Dwellings, Voluntary and Co-operative Dwellings and Private Dwellings Completed and Local Authority Dwellings Sold to Tenants, 1981-2000



Source: DoELG (Various Years), *Annual Housing Statistics Bulletin*.

in 1989 when only 768 units were completed. Although output increased to between 2,000 and 3,000 dwellings during the 1990s, it has remained well below 10% of total new house construction, which is significantly lower than in the period 1930 to 1980 when the public housing comprised an average of 20% to 30% of total output (Fahey and O'Connell, 1999). Low levels of building reduced the number of dwellings available for letting, and because local authority dwellings are allocated on the basis of need, it is reasonable to assume that only the most disadvantaged households have secured tenancies during the last 20 years. Figure 4 also reveals that the level of tenant purchase of dwellings increased substantially between 1987 and 1991, spurred on by extra discounts for buyers introduced in 1986 and 1988. This trend is important because sales have an acute residualising effect. By reducing the number of dwellings available for letting they stimulate an influx of disadvantaged people into the tenure. Furthermore, as Table 1 above demonstrates, because tenant purchasers tend to be wealthier than public renting households (although they are still poorer than other owner occupiers) sales also promote an exodus of better off households. In addition the process of residualisation was exacerbated by the advent of the "Surrender Grant" scheme in October 1984. This scheme, which allocated £5,000 (€6,349) to local authority tenants and tenant purchasers who were prepared to surrender their dwelling and to buy a home in the private sector, was intended to free up dwellings for letting without incurring the cost of new building. Blackwell (1988) reports that by the time the scheme was abolished in March 1987 a total of 7,700 surrender grants were paid out – accounting for 6.5% of the entire public renting population at the time. A study of the effects of the grant in the Dublin area, which was carried out by the housing advice agency Threshold (1987), confirms that practically 100% of the families who took advantage of the scheme were in employment, and the residualising effects associated with the departure of these households from public sector estates were compounded by the fact that many of those who moved into the dwellings vacated under the scheme were lone parents or single unemployed men.

On a more positive note, as is alluded to in the title of this section, by the mid 1980s growing central government concern about social problems and poor living conditions in acutely residualised public sector estates, inspired the instigation of a number of measures intended to regenerate these areas, mainly by means of refurbishing the built environment. The first of these estate improvement schemes – the Remedial Works Scheme which was established in 1985, funds improvements to dwellings and to public space in run down estates, and targets in particular estates built before 1940 and the system built estates of the 1960s and 1970s which were mentioned earlier in this chapter. Remedial Works funding has been exploited with considerable enthusiasm by local authorities, and in the period 1985–1999 a total of 16,520 local authority dwellings, accounting for approximately 16.6% of the current national public housing stock, were refurbished under its auspices (Norris, 2001). In more recent years efforts have also been made to attract private sector funding for regeneration projects, by making investment in designated local authority estates eligible for tax relief under the 1998 Urban Renewal Act. The best known application of this mechanism in practice is in Ballymun, where Dublin City Council has set up a designated company called Ballymun Regeneration Ltd, which is tasked with planning for and managing the demolition of all of the tower blocks and their replacement with conventional housing and low rise apartments, organised around a new town centre, which will contain private rented dwellings, shops, offices and a hotel (see Ballymun Regeneration Ltd, 1998a and 1998b). The rebuilding of the local

authority dwellings in the estate will be funded directly by central government, but it is envisaged that most of the town centre will be developed by the private sector.

By the 1990s the attention of policy makers shifted from the regeneration of individual local authority estates, to the reform and renewal of the entire local authority housing service, and indeed of the social rented tenure in general. The advent of this new policy agenda was first signalled in the 1991 housing White Paper - *A Plan for Social Housing* - a slim document, whose modest looks belie the fact that it marked a watershed in the development of housing policy in Ireland (DoE, 1991). The policy statements which preceded were mainly concerned with estimating the numbers of people in need of social housing and making provision for this demand to be met, principally by means of local authority building. *A Plan for Social Housing* advanced beyond this and also presented a strategic analysis of all potential methods of accommodating low income households – by the private sector, local authorities and the voluntary and co-operative sector. Furthermore, on the basis of this analysis, *A Plan for Social Housing* proposed a number of reforms to mechanisms for housing these groups, which it admitted “imply significant changes in the traditional role played by local authorities” (DoE, 1991, p. 30).

The most significant of these changes involved widening the traditional role of the local authority housing service, beyond building dwellings for rent. *A Plan for Social Housing* explained: “While this wider remit will, of course continue to include the traditional functions, it will also require of local authorities a new facilitating and promotional role aimed at improving and speeding up access to housing” (DoE, 1991 p. 30). The policy statement emphasises that a key aspect of this new enabling role will be encouraging higher levels of building by voluntary housing associations and co-operatives. As was mentioned earlier in this chapter, agencies of this type had built a large number of dwellings in the late 1880s, but for a number of reasons they did not emerge as major social housing providers for most of the 20th Century. However, Figure 4 above demonstrates that this began to change in the late 1980s when voluntary sector output, particularly of accommodation for special needs groups such as elderly, disabled or homeless people began to increase from its traditionally low base, stimulated by the establishment of the capital assistance scheme in 1984, which was the first designated funding scheme for housing associations. *A Plan for Social Housing* announced the limits for funding under the capital assistance scheme up to 95% of the cost of dwellings; the introduction of a new scheme to fund the provision of communal facilities in voluntary sector estates and the establishment of a rental subsidy scheme, which provides an ongoing management and maintenance allowance to housing associations for each dwelling provided together with capital funding towards the costs of construction. As is outlined in Figure 4 above, as a result of these reforms voluntary sector house building increased further during the late 1990s, with output of general needs family-type accommodation growing especially quickly. In addition to rental housing, *A Plan for Social Housing*, also announced a series of new measures which local authorities can utilise to enable low to middle income households to buy a home of their own. For instance the maxima for local authority housing loans were increased, as were the income limits for borrowers; extra incentives were introduced to encourage local authorities to provide low cost housing sites on which families could construct their own dwellings; a mortgage allowance of €4,190 payable over five years, was made available to local authority tenants or tenant purchasers who bought a private house and a new “shared ownership” scheme was

established which enables low income aspirant home owners to acquire at least 50% in the equity of a private sector dwelling of their choice, and rent the remainder from their local authority, until they can afford to buy out the entire property.

As well as examining alternative social housing providers, *A Plan for Social Housing* also cast a critical eye over the quality of the service provided by local authorities to their own tenants and recommended a number of reforms. For instance it highlights "... the need to avoid building large local authority housing estates which have, in the past, reinforced social segregation", and suggests that as an alternative, local authorities should build smaller schemes and consider purchasing existing houses to add to their stock (DoE, 1991, p. 11). In more recent years, local authorities have been given extra powers to combat social segregation by the Planning and Development Act, 2000 which allows them to designate up to 20% of new private sector developments for use as social housing. *A Plan for Social Housing* also raises a number of concerns about the management and maintenance of local authority estates, albeit in a rather low-key fashion, as it argues that the quality of these service must be improved if public investment in public house building and refurbishment is to be protected. However, a more detailed analysis of the standard of public housing management appeared soon after this, in a 1993 memorandum from the Department of the Environment to local authorities on the preparation of the statements of policy on housing management which they are obliged to produce under the terms of 1992 Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act. The introductory section of this memorandum, sets out what O'Connell (1999, p. 60) terms a "devastating catalogue of weaknesses common in local authority housing management", the most significant of which are: lack of long and medium term planning which is compounded by inadequate management information and insufficient monitoring of the information which is available; over centralised management structures which prioritise administrative issues over communication with tenants; inadequate co-ordination of different housing management functions; prioritisation of cost reduction over value for money and customer service; over reliance on the Remedial Works Scheme as a solution to the problems of unpopular estates and chronic inefficiencies in the maintenance service.

Central government's concern about the quality of public housing management inspired the introduction of a range of ameliorative measures during the late 1990s, some of which had an enabling orientation, insofar as they aimed to assist local authorities to improve their housing management performance through the provision of guidance, training and targeted grant aid, while others can be categorised as enforcement tools, which set benchmarks of required performance and established systems to monitor local authority housing management performance. The Housing Management Initiatives Grants Scheme, which was established in 1995, was the first of the enabling measures to be introduced. It provides grant aid towards the cost of practical pilot projects intended to improve housing management and since its establishment it has funded over 130 projects most of which are concerned with involving local authority tenants in housing management, and decentralising housing management to focus more on the needs of individual estates and communities rather than solely on the administration of the housing stock as a whole (Brooke and Norris, 2002). Soon afterwards, three further significant enabling measures were initiated by the Department of the Environment - the Housing Management Group which produced two reports setting out the broad framework which the reform of public

housing management should follow; the Housing Unit which was set up in order to provide social housing management guidance, information and training and the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 1997 which gives local authorities additional powers to deal with tenants and squatters in public sector dwellings who are committing anti-social behaviour (Housing Management Group, 1996, 1998). Examples of the enforcement measures introduced during the past decade include: the Department of the Environment and Local Government (2000) circular *LG 9/00* which instructs local authorities to monitor their performance in specified aspects of housing management and to publish this information in their annual reports, and a range of reforms to the Remedial Works Scheme which made funding conditional on detailed monitoring and evaluation of projects.

Finally, during the last decade the process of reform and expansion of the local authority housing service has been further extended as local authorities have gained important new responsibilities in relation to planning for the implementation of national housing policy at the local level. The advent of this new remit is of course linked to the wider programme of local government reform mapped out in the 1996 policy statement, *Better Local Government: A Programme for Change* (DoE, 1996), which has resulted in the establishment of Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs) within each local authority, made up of councillors and local business and community representatives, which are responsible for initiating and developing policy for the different local government functional areas, including housing. Furthermore, from the perspective of the housing service, it is also a logical progression of the local authority's other work in facilitating the provision of housing by other agencies, as the experience on the ground indicates that local planning is vital for the effective operation of this enabling function. For instance, the 1988 Housing Act requires local authorities to carry out tri-annual assessments of housing need in their operational area which should include homeless people and empowers them to make necessary arrangements with voluntary bodies to accommodate homeless people, but the available evidence indicates that these provisions have had a limited impact on this problem (Harvey, 1995). In order to rectify this problem, all local authorities are now required to establish a homeless forum made up of the statutory and voluntary agencies dealing with homelessness in their operational areas, which will draw up an integrated strategy to combat homelessness (DoELG, 2000). Similarly despite the recommendations made by the Commission on Itinerancy in 1963 and the Travelling People Review Body in 1983, the latest government analysis of the situation of Irish Travellers – the *Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community* concluded that local authorities have largely failed to provide adequate accommodation for this section of the population (Task Force on the Travelling Community, 1995). As a result, under the terms of the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act, 1998 local authorities are required to produce five-year Traveller accommodation strategies. Finally, another notable example of local level planning is the housing strategies which local authorities must prepare under the Planning and Development Act, 2000 which was mentioned earlier in this chapter. These strategies comprise estimates of the housing need which will arise in their operational areas over a six year period, together with details of how these needs will be met by the private sector, local authorities and the voluntary and co-operative sector. Although in most cases the production of these plans has been managed by planning rather than housing departments, housing staff would have helped to produce the estimates of future social housing need using information from housing waiting lists, and the housing

service will also play a key role in implementing the housing strategies by constructing local authority rented dwellings, enabling the provision of social rented housing by the voluntary and co-operative housing sector and also by operating the new affordable housing scheme which was introduced to address spiralling house prices of recent years and allows them to build dwellings for sale at a reduced cost to low income households.

Concluding Comments

This chapter has reviewed the development of the local authority housing service from its foundation until today. It has demonstrated that, for most of its history the service was mainly concerned with the direct provision of dwellings for rent to low income households. However in recent years, its focus has broadened and as well as building social rented accommodation, local authorities now devote greater attention to the management and maintenance of their housing stock and have gained important new responsibilities in relation to enabling the provision of social housing by other agencies and planning for the implementation of national housing policy at the local level.

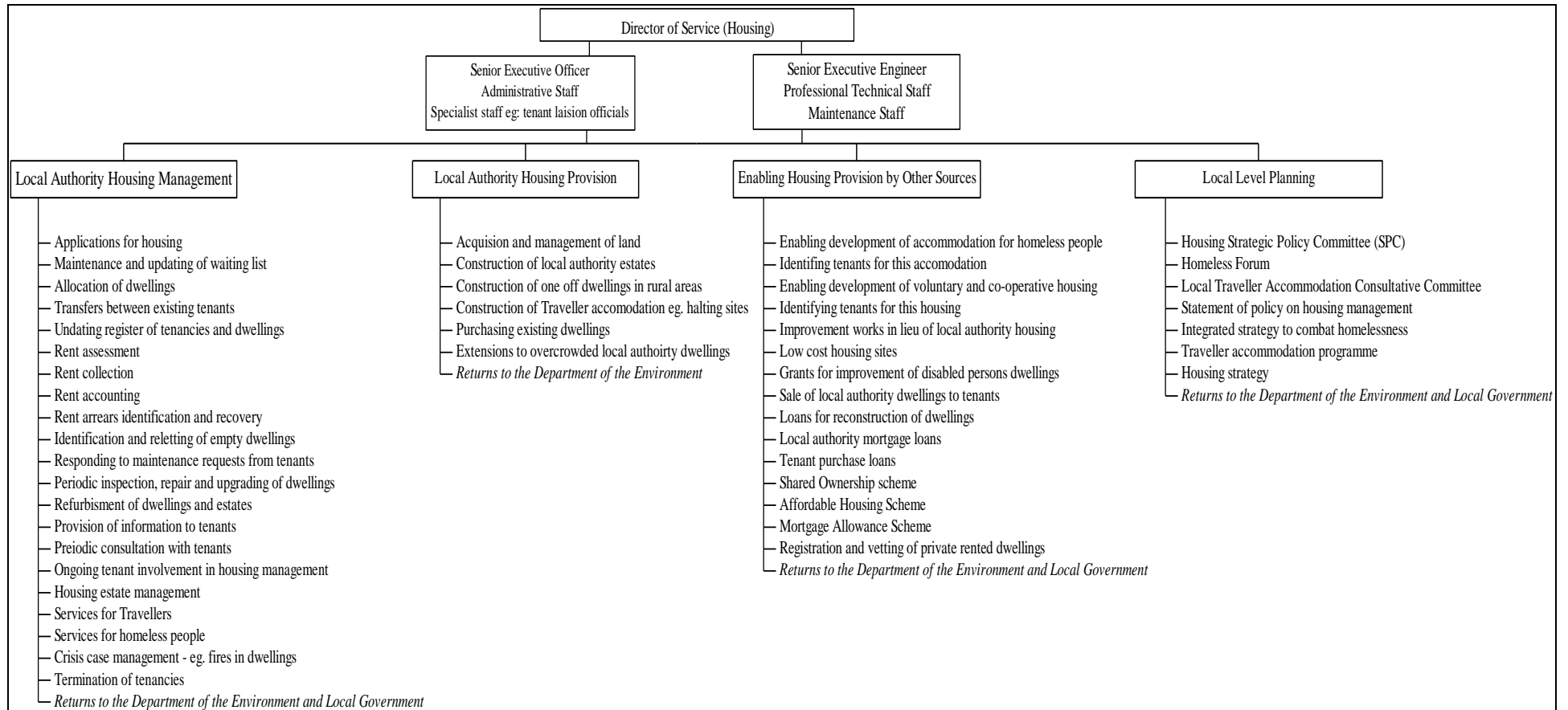
As a result of high levels of sales of local authority dwellings since the 1930s, the outcome of the house building programme on which local authorities have concentrated their efforts for most of their history, may not appear very impressive to contemporary eyes. The 1991 census indicates that only 9.7% of all housing in Ireland is rented from local authorities, this is considerably less than the tenure's peak in 1961 when it accounted for 18.4% of the national housing stock and although including voluntary and co-operative dwellings would raise the total number of social rented dwellings in Ireland to 10% of stock, this is far smaller than the norm in other northern European nations such as Denmark, the UK and the Netherlands for instance where 17%, 25% and 38% respectively, of all housing is rented from social landlords (European Union, 2001). Furthermore, as was mentioned earlier in this chapter the remaining local authority tenure in Ireland is acutely residualised, and it is fair to say that due to a combination of social problems and negative media attention, some local authority estates are also stigmatised.

Despite these problems however, the local authority house building programme has made an important and largely underestimated contribution to Irish society. Fahey's (ed.)(1999) recent study of seven diverse local authority housing estates in different parts of the country reaches largely positive findings about the quality of life enjoyed by the residents of these areas. On this basis he concludes that: "... local authorities have made a fundamental contribution to social progress and social cohesion in Irish society through the expansion of housing provision and the raising of minimum standards of housing among the less well-off", and he seeks to quantify the full extent of this contribution:

“Local authorities have been providing housing in Ireland since they came into existence a hundred years ago. Over that time they have built some 330,000 dwellings, which amounts to over 30 per cent of the present housing stock in Ireland. These dwellings provided accommodation of reasonable quality to successive generations of low-income households at a cost those households could afford. Local authority housing has also played a major but little recognised role in promoting home ownership. Of the 330,000 dwellings constructed ... some 230,000 have been sold to tenants through the longstanding tradition of tenant purchase ... These privatised local authority dwellings now account for about one-in-four of the owner occupied homes in Ireland, and are a major reason why the overall level of owner occupation in this country (at 80% of total housing) is so high by European standards.” (Fahey, 1999 p. 3-4).

As was mentioned above, in more recent years the focus of the local authority housing service broadened, as local authorities have taken on a number of new strategic functions, in addition to their traditional role of direct provision of social housing for rent. Figure 5 below sketches out the results of expansion process and it demonstrates that the typical local authority housing department is now responsible for up to 50 separate functions, in addition to their often overlooked obligation to make detailed annual or multi-annual returns to the Department of the Environment and Local Government on their execution of these responsibilities. There is no doubt that the delegation of these new functions has the potential to regenerate the housing service and by restoring it to its traditional position of importance within the local government system. However, this regeneration will only be achieved if local authorities can rise to meet the challenges associated with these new strategic functions, and shortcomings of the local authority housing management and maintenance service which were highlighted in this chapter would raise some concerns about the prospects of doing so - although the barriers which stand in the way of their effective performance in this area are not insurmountable. For instance, the recent reforms to the staffing structure of local authorities, which were first proposed in *Better Local Government: A Programme for Change* will certainly improve local authorities prospects of coping with the challenges associated with their new strategic mandate. This document provides for the appointment of Directors of Service in all local authorities, who are tasked with the management and strategic development of each of the local government functional areas, including housing, and with the development and implementation of each authority’s housing policy in conjunction with the Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs). The appointment of the Directors of Housing, together with the establishment of a range of new middle management grades, will not only help to fill the strategic management and policy making vacuum which has previously existed in the local authority housing service, it will also provide staff who are interested in specialising in housing with a viable career path in this service, while still having the option to transfer to other departments of the authority if they wish. However the problems of local authority housing service are not caused solely by factors internal to the local government system, and addressing them will also require change on the part of central government. Appropriate reforms include: changing the traditional relationship between central and local government to achieve less emphasis on auditing the activities of local authorities, and more emphasis on providing more in-depth guidance for housing departments on the operation of their new functions, and extra

Figure 5
 Typical Structure and Functions of Local Authority Housing Departments, 2002.



funding for staff training and education and research within local authority housing departments to enable them to perform their traditional and new housing functions more effectively.

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