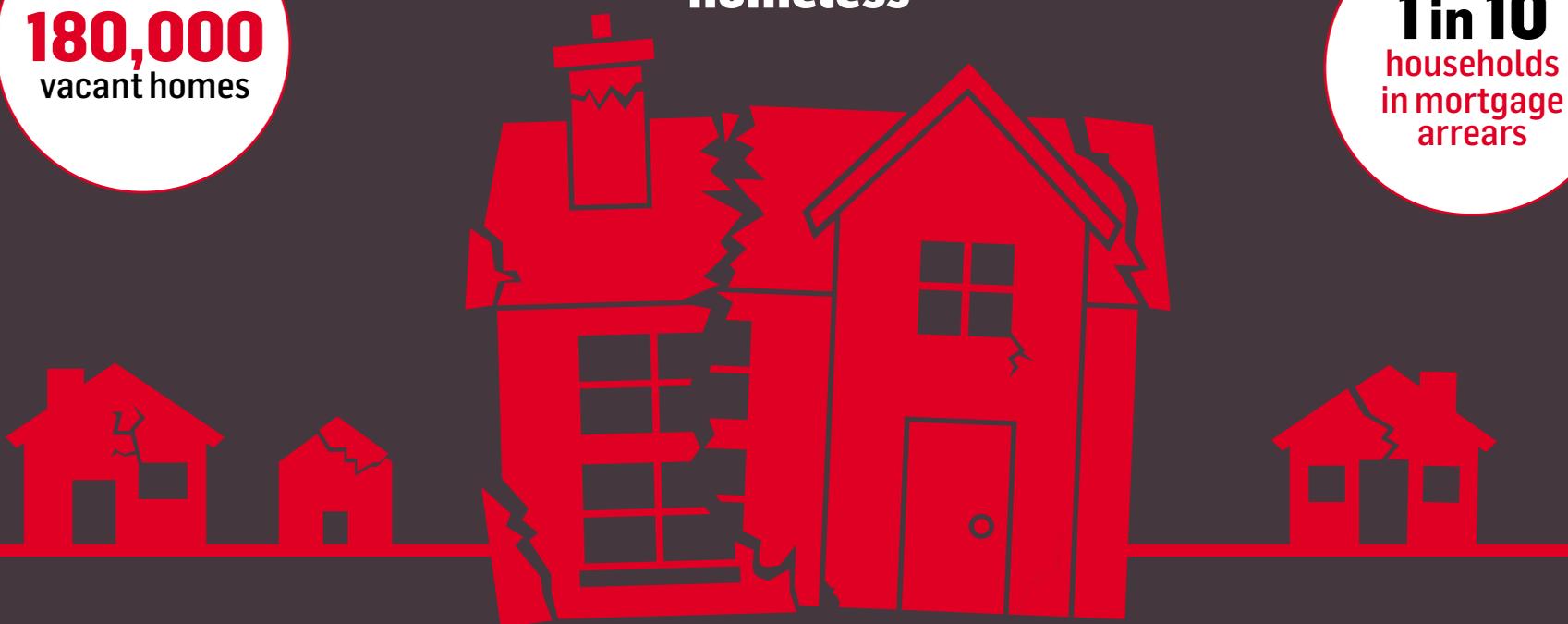


Review

180,000
vacant homes

8,000
people
homeless

1 in 10
households
in mortgage
arrears



How to fix the **housing crisis**

A blueprint by
DAN O'BRIEN

Analysis by **PAUL MELIA**

CULTURE
VIEW



INTERVIEW

Ulysses' great odyssey
to the national stage p12



MUSIC

Robert Forster of
The Go-Betweens p14



BOOKS

Alfie Byrne and his
seduction of Dublin p17

Get Ireland building again: can we reform our way out of crisis?

Ireland has plenty of land, but we're not building on it. Environment editor **PAUL MELIA** asks if restructuring the way we tax land and property could solve the housing crisis



In 1957, aged just 18, Galwegian Peter Walsh travelled with the first-ever Irish team to enter the WorldSkills competition in Madrid for skilled tradesmen.

The carpenter and joiner took first place, and was presented with his winning trophy by General Franco.

Over the following years, he received awards from the President of Italy and the UK's Prince Philip for his work, and in 1970 he established his housebuilding firm, Peter Walsh Construction.

Today, the 78-year-old works a 70-hour week. Despite his pedigree, and demand for homes, business has never been so bad.

"It's the worst it's ever been in Galway," he says. "We specialise in building on a person's own site. Until 2007, we used to build up to 10 houses a year, and then the world came to an end."

His firm builds anything from an extension to a bespoke home. It also offers four extendable house types, each with an A3 energy rating, solar panels and wood pellet stove. He is insured, tax compliant and on the Construction Industry Register.

But despite doing everything right, there's little business to be had.

"We can build a three-bedroom bungalow for €165,000, plus site works, but people don't have the money, it's as simple as that. We could price an extension, but the client can't get the money from the bank. We live in hope."

It seems perverse that in the midst of a housing crisis that a company with a track record like Peter's is struggling.

SCANT SUPPLY, SOARING PRICES

At least 25,000 new homes are needed every year to meet pent-up demand, and in 2016 just under 15,000 units were connected to the ESB network, the metric used to assess new supply coming on stream. Some 18,000 are forecast by year-end, but given the low rate of delivery over recent years, the real requirement is probably far higher.

Chair of the Housing Agency, Conor Skehan, says that a large part of the problem is the lack of homes coming on to the market.

"One of the things people aren't picking up on is the difference between a shortage of houses and a shortage of houses for sale. Transactions are impeded by negative equity, and that prevents churn, where people downsize and move and free up family homes. There's 20,000 to 30,000 transactions not taking place because of that."

He says the issue of mortgage arrears needs to be dealt with, to help people in difficult situations but also to free up homes.

The lack of supply — whether through new build, utilising existing stock or converting commercial units or older buildings for residential — has resulted in soaring prices.

The Central Statistics Office (CSO) says house prices have risen by 12.3pc in the year to July. National monthly rents now average €1,017, 14pc higher than the peak of the boom. That's an extra

€63 per month, more than €750 a year in after-tax income. But there are other issues too, and plenty of good ideas out there to help solve this crisis.

Among the concerns include the Government's take on the cost of a new home through VAT and development levies. Regulations around utilising commercial buildings play a part, as does the cost of finance.

But most agree that at the heart of the crisis is land.

There is no shortage. Some 17,434 hectares of zoned and serviced lands are available across the country, which could enable delivery of more than 410,000 homes.

THE HOARDING FACTOR

But there is nothing to force landowners to utilise their sites, despite the necessary services including power and water all being in place, and provided at the taxpayer's expense.

State bad bank NAMA has said that developers are hoarding, noting earlier this year it had sold sites capable of delivering 50,000 units. Only 3,000 are being built.

DIT housing lecturer Dr Lorcan SIRR says our attitude needs to change.

"Land is a finite resource, and the sooner we realise that owning it is a privilege and that holding it should be a liability then the sooner we'll be able to reform our dysfunctional system of housing delivery," he says.

The Government is planning to introduce a vacant site levy from January 2018, although the first bills won't be levied until 12 months later. It will oblige owners to pay an annual 3pc levy based on the market value of the site.

But head of social policy with approved housing body Respond!, Bríd McGrath, says this is unlikely to release new sites.

"You're still quids in with the vacant site levy at 3pc, because land is increasing in value well above 3pc. If it was an accumulator tax — if it was 2pc above rising values — it would make a difference," she says.

Most agree the solution is a complete restructuring of how we tax land and property.

THE SITE TAX SOLUTION

Chairman of O'Mahony Pike architects, James Pike, says a site-value tax is needed to replace commercial rates and the local property tax (LPT).

This idea was cited both in the Troika deal, and in the 2011 Programme for Government. But instead of introducing a system based on land values, a quick fix was decided upon — the LPT, based on the value of the house.

The Smart Taxes group, of which Pike is a member, says a site-value tax is fairer.

"If you get a block of land in a town or city centre, the land more or less has the same value, but valuing the buildings may be more difficult," he says.

"With taxing the land you incentivise use of vacant sites and you incentivise making maximum use of buildings. Existing residents who benefit



from, for example, a Luas line would pay, and not just new developments.

"That would spread the load but you also wouldn't need to charge development levies. Because the local authority would have guaranteed incomes, it could borrow long-term for infrastructure instead of charging upfront.

"It might take five years to get a better system, but it would be worth it."

ENGAGING THE STATE

Given the market's failure to deliver homes, many argue the State must now step into the breach, utilising its massive landbank.

Karl Deeter, of Irish Mortgage Brokers, suggests that sites be released for social and affordable housing schemes, or private homes, in return for equity. Developers would have little cause for complaint.

"On a vacant site (in Dublin city centre), you could build an eight-storey building with 75pc of the building rented at 20pc below market, and for the rest you have a guaranteed upward-only rent review of 2pc a year," he says.

"If we do it on a build to sell, or build to rent, we share the profits."

"We need to flood the land market. People want to talk about the law of the jungle, but you can't be a lion, and when a rhino comes along you complain."

Affordability is by far the biggest issue. Under Central Bank lending rules, to buy a home costing €350,000 — considered 'affordable' in the capital — an income of €90,000 a year is required.

Builders suggest that VAT adds around €40,000 to the cost, but if the rate fell from 13.5pc to 9pc, it would reduce the price per unit by €10,000. Development levies should also fall.

The concern from Government is that any cuts would not be passed on to buyers, but Con-

struction Industry Federation boss Tom Parlon says it must act.

"The Government has to ask if it can afford to take €40,000 (in VAT) from each unit? Can the local authority take €15,000 (in levies)? If Government swallowed the accusation they were bailing out developers, it would stop this from getting worse.

"A much bigger political hump will be this time next year, when the parties are going for election, and we have an increased number of homeless people and rents are going up."

But there are tax breaks and incentives which could be used to increase supply.

"We hear about under-occupancy of properties," says Karl Deeter. "If a lot of these houses had backyards, we could give a planning exemption to build a 70 square metre home provided it meets certain criteria. The owner could rent out the house under the rent-a-room system, where they would get €14,000-a-year tax free."

The Government plans to build 47,000 social houses by 2021 under a €5.35bn package outlined in its Rebuilding Ireland strategy announced last year. Housing bodies and others suggest the approvals process needs to be quicker, and warn that the cost of securing some social units is too high.

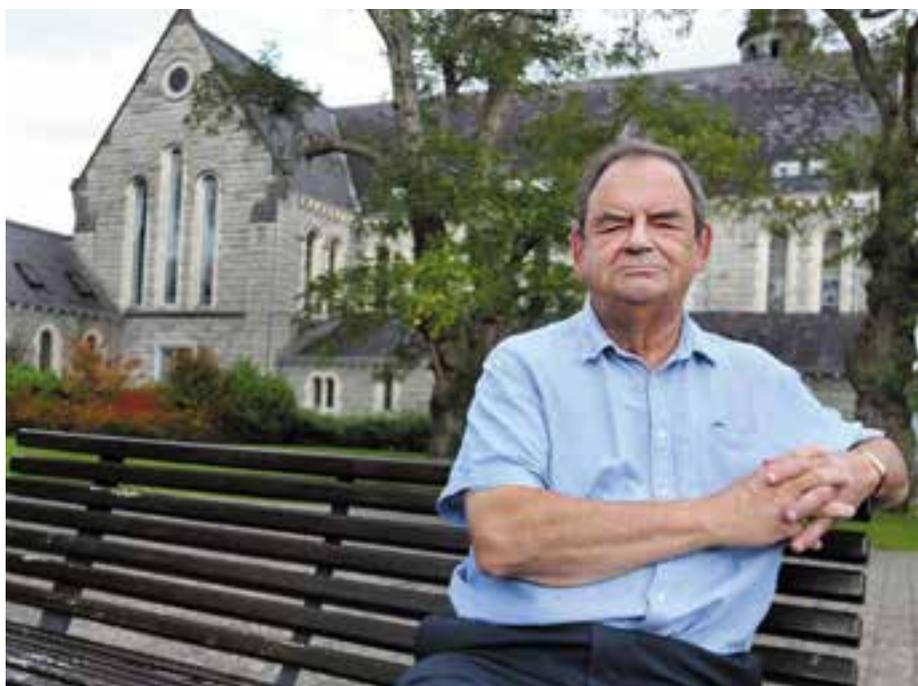
Under the Part V process, up to 10pc of units in a development must be offered to the local authority as social housing. In recent weeks, it emerged that Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council was told that a social apartment in a Dalkey scheme would cost €520,000.

"Instead of taking property, we should take land instead," Lorcan SIRR says. "And also, your planning permissions will expire if the land isn't handed over within six months. Why would you buy houses when you can build them yourself for €200,000? I think that could be a game-changer."

HOUSING THE SOLUTIONS 7



Clockwise from main: Bríd McGrath, head of social policy with housing body Respond!; Galway builder Peter Walsh, and architect James Pike. PHOTOS: JUSTIN FARRELLY/ANDREW DOWNES/STEVE HUMPHREYS



THE AFFORDABILITY QUESTION

The big gap is catering for families or individuals in the €35,000 to €75,000 income bracket who don't qualify for social housing, but struggle to secure reasonably-priced accommodation.

With assets of more than €13bn, there is a role for credit unions to finance housing, particularly affordable rental, and achieve a steady return over time. There is no logical reason why the garda credit union couldn't build homes for its members.

James Pike, who is also a board member of the Túath Housing Association, says it has proposed a 'rent and save' scheme. The State leases the land, and gets 10pc of rental income. Rents would be 80pc below market rates, and index-linked to provide certainty.

Because it would be low-cost, well-managed housing, it would also be occupied, providing certainty to investors. A small portion could be sold to fund development. Tenants could buy their units over time.

"Affordable homes will never be provided by the private sector. For a fund operating in a precarious stock market, it's a steady 3pc," he says.

Planner Tom Phillips, who is also chair of

Property Industry Ireland, says while there is a fast-track planning system in place for schemes of 100 units or more, other reforms are needed. "There is nothing in legislation which requires local authorities to respond (to the developer). It's open ended," Phillips says. "The local authority may never respond, despite the builder having tight timeframes, and that adds to costs."

In addition, standards are interpreted in different ways by different planning authorities, adding to delays.

Funding remains an issue, particularly for smaller builders keen to deliver 20 to 50 units a year. Action is needed on this. Banks also appear reluctant to lend for one-off homes or smaller projects, impacting on builders like Peter Walsh. With around two-thirds of houses in Dublin being suitable for families, higher densities are also needed.

But the low-hanging fruit, without doubt, are the 180,000 vacant homes dotted across the State. Even bringing 10pc on stream would have an impact.

Tom Phillips also points to the benefit of employing town architects, which has helped transform Westport in Mayo, and could be used in areas including Limerick city, Youghal and Boyle which have enormous potential to re-use existing buildings as homes.

The construction industry says the internal layout of protected buildings should be capable of being altered to provide homes, which is currently banned. There can also be too much red tape around converting commercial units to homes. There is potential for 4,000 units in Dublin alone, and a one-stop-shop for necessary approvals around planning, fire and disabled access is needed.

But there are also unexplored opportunities including worker housing for those employed

in a city for a number of days before returning home.

There's vocational housing, for nurses, gardaí and teachers, and housing for the aged which is largely ignored here. Delivering all three would help free up family-sized homes.

Conor Skehan says the most important thing now is not to get in the way of delivery by introducing new policies.

"We're at the classic year four of a five-year cycle. This is always when panic sets in. The reality on the ground is the long, slow slog of permissions is in and they are being built. Well-intentioned interventions create uncertainty, so don't change the goalposts. The recovery has started. The short-term solution is don't get in people's way."

Tom Phillips agrees. "There are plenty of policies, but it needs a bit ofumph to get it going."

@paulbmelia



Affordable homes will never be provided by the private sector. For a fund operating in a precarious stock market, it's a steady 3pc

It's hard to believe we have ended up like this...

David and Jennifer
Cork

David and Jennifer (their full names are withheld) believed a move from Dublin back to their native Cork would help them on to the next phase of their lives.

They planned to have their own home — a family. The hopes and aspirations of every young couple.

That was May 2015. More than two years later, they are still renting, still looking for a home — and so many aspects of their lives are still on hold.

David has worked as an accountant for the last 13 years, Jennifer is a teacher and they have pre-mortgage approval for a loan of €450,000.

"We've done everything we were supposed to in our lives. Studied hard, got our qualifications, got good jobs, didn't overextend ourselves and saved a bit... but still we can't find a home in Cork for a reasonable amount. We don't want to take out a massive mortgage but still would spend up to €340,000 on a home, perhaps a little more for the right place — but the limited supply means it's impossible to find anything suitable," says David.

Ideally, the couple want to buy in the general area where Jennifer's family live but as time moves on, the radius in which the couple are looking has expanded.

And on a number of occasions when they thought they'd finally secured their first home together — other factors robbed them of their dream.

"Initially we agreed to buy a plot of land if planning could be secured, but the planners told us the area was already too densely populated. We accepted that decision, but then four weeks later found out planning had been granted for 28 houses, costing around €670k each, just 200 metres down the road. We wasted six months on that process, and with house prices in Cork increasing by 12pc annually, that was valuable time down the drain," says David.

"Then we had sale agreed on a house only to find out at the 11th hour that it was in probate and there was a dispute within the family selling. Our solicitor told us to leave it as the dispute could drag on for months or years," he adds.

And there was more heartbreak, as David explains: "Last May we found out, on the day we were to sign a contract on another house, that the sellers didn't have full title for the land on which the house was built. You couldn't make it up."

The couple are renting in the suburb of Douglas. David admits the entire saga is taking its toll.

"Jennifer often cries herself to sleep at night. We're renting a third-floor apartment and feel that until we have our own home, we can't really start a family. It feels so desperately unfair and we've grown so disillusioned with the entire process. Like we're surrounded by land, and property developers are sitting on big land banks in Cork while people are paying ridiculous money for modest houses, taking on huge mortgages they'll be paying back for the rest of their lives."

And David feels estate agents sometimes fuel the irrational housing frenzy in the southern city.

"So desperate have people become that at a viewing last Friday, another couple bid for the house while we were looking at it — they bid right in front of the rest of us. In Cork, at the moment, a worrying merry-go-round has grown. The same people at every viewing, the same disappointment, the same hopes dashed time after time.

"It's so hard to believe we've ended up in this situation, not only as a couple — but as a city and a country."

— GRAHAM CLIFFORD



In next week's Irish Independent

Don't miss our week-long special focus on solutions to the housing crisis. Themes will include:

- Monday, September 25: The soaring cost of rent
- Tuesday: The mortgage arrears quandary
- Wednesday: Vacant sites
- Thursday: Funding for building
- Friday: Homelessness

Homes available at a fraction of headline costs, minister claims

■ Michael D'Arcy accused of downplaying crisis

Luke Byrne and Wayne O'Connor

A MINISTER sparked anger with claims that cheaper homes are available to rent “for a fraction” of the figures quoted in headlines.

Junior Finance Minister Michael D'Arcy said tenants trying to rent in Dublin should consider hunting for bargain accommodation in other parts of the city.

Rents in Dublin are now €4,500 a year more expensive than during the boom, yet Mr D'Arcy claimed cheaper options are available for those who look.

“I know everybody always quotes the high cost areas but there are other places that are available for rent for a fraction of what's being quoted in the headline figures,” he said.

“There's also different areas where rental isn't as expensive as it is a couple of streets towards the river and the other side of the river.”

A damning report by property website Daft yesterday showed rent prices were up 10.4pc last year and increased by 65pc compared with 2011.

Speaking at an event in Dublin yesterday, Mr D'Arcy added rent issues were not unique to Dublin and posed problems in other jurisdictions.

He said: “Every city I've been to there's a rental issue.

“The high end is expensive and it's expensive in Dublin, it's expensive in every other city that I go to, whether it's San Francisco, Singapore, Shanghai.”

However, Mr D'Arcy also said the rental crisis was an issue when it came to attracting jobs

and foreign direct investment: “It's a bigger issue for the people who are perhaps on higher pay. That's a difficulty we're trying to deal with.”

He also moved to promote the affordability housing platform for 1,000 units at 2.5pc fixed price for 30 years.

“That's a wonderful opportunity for anybody earning less than €50,000,” said Mr D'Arcy.

But Fianna Fáil housing spokesman Barry Cowen said the comments show the government is trying to normalise the housing crisis.

“It further feeds into the Fine Gael narrative and attempts to seek to normalise this crisis.

“This is truly remarkable and highlights the fact that a minister in Government is so out of touch and detached from reality.”

The *Irish Independent* asked



Housing Minister Eoghan Murphy

the Department of Finance for evidence of homes available in these areas for a fraction of prices quoted in reports, but no examples were provided.

Taoiseach Leo Varadkar was also grilled on the rental crisis in the Dáil yesterday as Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin pointed to a Department of Finance report published last September on the tax and fiscal treatment of rental accommodation.

It made 10 recommendations to address the housing crisis, including introducing tax relief measures for landlords.

“Housing targets by Government are not being met. It is a crisis in our cities by any yardstick,” Mr Martin added.

Mr Varadkar said he would like to remind himself of these recommendations before commenting on them.

He added the Government was aware of the impact rising rents prices has on people.

Mr Cowen said this was typical of the Government's approach to the housing crisis.

“During Leader's Questions the Taoiseach couldn't remember a report his own Government commissioned.

“The Government chose to disregard all 10 recommendations from its own report last September and then, in response to another damning report on the rental crisis, seeks to compare it to Shanghai, Singapore and San Francisco.

“When the minister is frequenting himself with the goings on in such locations, Irish citizens are being told that 50pc of income being spent on rent is normal. This is truly remarkable.”

If Mr D'Arcy knows where the cheap rental houses are, he should let us know

JUNIOR Finance Minister Michael D'Arcy appears to have information about a stash of cheap housing available for rent.

He should tell the Department of the Taoiseach, which has said the ongoing shortage of housing represents a strategic risk to the State, and let the responsible minister Eoghan Murphy know so he can declare that the crisis is over.

But is he right in saying that homes are available to rent for a “fraction” of the headline rental costs quoted by media? If by ‘fraction’, he means ‘a bit cheaper’... then yes, he is.

While not all rental properties are listed on Daft.ie, the website which highlighted how rents are continuing their upward rise, it's fair to say a proportion are. A search yesterday

Paul Melia



showed that, indeed, some properties for under the national ‘average’ of €1,227 were available.

In all, 3,144 properties were listed. Almost half were below the average. But if seeking a bargain, say half the average rent, there's just 491 – which is hardly an embarrassment of riches.

That broad view doesn't really tell us anything. It's better to look at the cost of

renting a specific type of property, for example, a three-bedroom home in Cork.

There are just nine three-bed homes available in the city. The average rent paid for this property type is €1,203, according to Daft. The cheapest available is €1,250 on Gardiners Hill, which is above the average.

But perhaps taking up Mr D'Arcy's suggestion and looking farther afield into one of the “different areas” where rental costs aren't as expensive might yield a different result. Erm, no.

There's one house in Passage West for under the average, at €1,150, and three in Cork commuter towns. The cheapest is €900 in Mallow, some 36km from Cork's City Hall. Travel costs alone would eat up the difference.

So his theory doesn't hold true in Cork, but what about Galway? Not much luck there.

New excess water charge system branded ‘unfair’

Cormac McQuinn
Political Correspondent

THE situation that sees households with water meters at greater risk of being charged for using excess water has been branded “entirely unfair”.

Labour TD Jan O'Sullivan also raised concern about potential legal challenges to attempts to bill unmetered homes for wasting water.

Irish Water can easily detect excessive use or leaks in homes fitted with meters – but the

process is more complicated for the more than 620,000 properties that don't have them.

This includes households that resisted the original roll-out of water meters, as well as around 250,000 apartments.

Irish Water will have to use district meters and acoustic technology to track down excessive use or leaks in unmetered homes.

Labour's housing spokesperson Ms O'Sullivan said the situation was “entirely unfair”.

“Our argument always has

been that we should have individual metering, because that's the way you identify people who wilfully waste water,” she said.

She said her party's position is there should be fair water allowance for families and people with medical needs but households that waste water should have to pay.

Ms O'Sullivan also raised concern that homeowners could challenge attempts to bill them for excessive use, suggesting that “a good lawyer” could cast doubt on the technology used

to detect overuse where a meter isn't fitted.

A spokesman for Housing Minister Eoghan Murphy insisted all households, whether metered or not, “will be treated in the same way and will be treated fairly”. He said the purpose of the excessive use charge is not to raise revenue but to incentivise conservation.

He said people with leaks were being helped to fix them and there were exemptions for people with medical needs and an allowance for large families.



Labour's Jan O'Sullivan is worried about legal challenges

Council warns of quick-fire action against ‘slum’ homes

Ryan Nugent

A NEW section in Dublin City Council (DCC) has been set up to crack down on slum conditions in private dwellings.

The task force will be responsible for inspecting

Backlash at Varadkar's divisive 'big reveal' over 'capital of the Midlands'

Kevin Doyle
Group Political Editor

TAOISEACH Leo Varadkar's 20-year plan for growth and investment around the country is on course to be one of the most divisive ever launched.

Opposition is mounting across the regions ahead of Friday's 'big reveal' of 'Project Ireland 2040', which includes a €115bn spending spree.

An expected Dáil vote on the final version of the National Planning Framework (NPF) has been shelved, with the Government now insisting this was never part of the deal with Fianna Fáil.

Towns in the Midlands are the latest to protest, after it emerged that Athlone is to be given special status and dubbed the 'capital of the Midlands'.

Tullamore's Chamber of Commerce has accused the Government of making a last-minute change "at a whim" in order to pacify Independent Alliance minister Kevin 'Boxer' Moran.

Similarly, Mullingar businesspeople believe "political grandstanding" is set to "benefit one town over a region".

Mr Moran said the accusations were "very unfair" because he "campaigns for the entire Midlands region".

He argued Athlone can be a "driver" for the entire Midlands due to its location, road infrastructure and education facilities.

"What's good for Athlone will be good for Tullamore, Mullingar, Roscommon and Longford," the minister said.

The *Irish Independent* has also learned the cross-party coalition against the NPF submitted a string of demands to Rural Affairs Minister Michael Ring earlier this week.

The three-page document, compiled by Éamon Ó Cuív (FF), Michael Fitzmaurice (Ind) and Alan Kelly (Labour), seeks upgrades for every national primary route (outside of the five main cities) to dual carriageway/motorway standard between now and 2040.

It also proposes a plan be drawn up to use the full potential of existing open and closed railway lines as commuter routes into the five urban cen-

Plan to create 'An Ireland For All' can never happen when politics is involved

IF Fianna Fáil hadn't already used it as an election slogan, the tagline for the Government's big announcement this week could be 'An Ireland For All'.

Taoiseach Leo Varadkar is investing huge political capital in 'Project Ireland 2040', which is intended to be a roadmap to our future.

The problem is that it involves very difficult choices. Get it wrong and Fine Gael TDs will lose seats. Get it right, and they are halfway to being re-elected.

Finance Minister Paschal Donohoe has spent months deciding how to allocate €115bn, while Housing Minister Eoghan Murphy has been working on the National Planning Framework (NPF), which sets out priorities for regional development.

Exactly a year ago, the *Irish Independent* highlighted how a draft version of the NPF showed Dublin was "eating" Ireland - but Leinster House has only just woken up to the problem. Now there is a last-minute battle of

Kevin Doyle



will be between politicians of all shades to ensure their region gets a suitable share of the spoils.

The draft version offered little to people living above the Dublin-Galway line on the map. Following much furore Sligo is now to be a 'regional centre' and the Cabinet will even launch the plan there on Friday.

That seemed to satisfy people in the north-west, but attention has shifted to the Midlands, which for the purposes of the plan has been attached to the east.

As a result, population growth towns such as Tullamore and Mullingar "should generally be 20-25pc"



Leo Varadkar

tres prioritised for development in the plan. These are Dublin, Cork, Galway, Waterford and Limerick.

Changes made to the plan since a draft version was published last year will see Sligo designated as a hub for the north-west, while Athlone will also get special status.

But former environment minister Mr Kelly, who initiated work on the NPF three years ago, accused the Taoiseach of being "wobbly and all

over the place" on the issue. He claimed a massive rewrite had taken place in recent weeks because of pressure from interested groups.

"How can the integrity of the thing be maintained if it can be rewritten in three weeks. They are having one for everyone in the audience," he said.

Mr Ó Cuív said it was "bulls***" if after three years, the document can be "radically changed".

In particular, he questioned

compared with 40pc in similar sized centres in the west.

News now emerges that Athlone is to be made the 'regional centre', sparking fears that it will grow at the expense of other towns in the region.

The Tullamore Chamber of Commerce yesterday expressed alarm at the move saying "no urban settlement" in the area is capable of achieving the critical mass to be considered a second-tier city to European norms. Yes, Athlone has the IT, but Tullamore has the hospital.

Tullamore argues that each of the towns are well placed to accommodate compact growth and "not simply become dormitory towns for Dublin commuters".

Tom Hyland, of Mullingar Chamber, made a similar point, saying that to pick any town over the other will "suck investment" in one direction.

It's clear that a plan to please everybody is never going to happen, especially when politics is involved.

But in any event they have signalled the NPF will no longer be put to a Dáil vote - meaning it will probably be torn up anyway whenever Fianna Fáil gets back into power.

the designation of growth limits for certain regions, saying if rural Ireland "fights back" then officials shouldn't stop a parish from prospering.

A spokesperson for Housing Minister Eoghan Murphy totally rejected suggestions of last-minute changes.

"The notion that it was heavily rewritten in a few weeks is nonsense," he said, adding that work has been ongoing since the original draft was published six months ago.



Junior Finance Minister Michael D'Arcy. Photo: Patrick Browne

Looking at a one-bedroom home, Daft.ie says the average cost is €815 and 13 are listed in total. There's one for under the average, at €650. The cheapest home available in a Galway commuter town is €550 at Newcastle, more than 5km outside Athenry. Athenry is itself 25km outside of Galway City. If people enjoy a 30km commute to work in the morning, it's ideal.

And then to Dublin city, looking for a two-bedroom house which ranges in price from €1,304 in north Co Dublin to €2,124 in Dublin 4.

In north Co Dublin, there are seven properties listed for under the average with the cheapest in Skerries at €1,250, and the most expensive at €2,950 in Malahide. Not many at a 'fraction' of the headline price.

Looking at Dublin 4, but

Dublin 2 and 6 as well because, as the minister says, we should compromise on location, there are only seven properties listed for under €2,150. There's just one for less than €1,700.

So where are the homes, minister? And if so many are available, why is everyone from the Department of the Taoiseach to homeless groups blathering on about a need to address the housing shortage, not to mention the 90,000-plus low-income households on council waiting lists?

The National Risk Assessment 2017, which sets out threats to the State ranging from climate change to terrorism, includes housing. In a post-Brexit world, the Government would no doubt love to remove one of those risks. If Mr D'Arcy has the answers, now is probably a good time to let his colleagues know.

rented homes with issues such as overcrowding, ventilation, dampness and pests.

It is understood that once a complaint is made, the council intends to inspect a property within 24 hours.

Other issues will include fire safety and excessive waste, though DCC says it is not confined to those listed. Residents and neighbours are being asked to report any such issues.

DCC says there are a number of different actionable powers it has to tackle problems.

If minor issues are noted,

an improvement letter can be sent to the landlord to carry out remedial works.

However, if major works are required, a statutory improvement notice will be issued to the landlord.

If the remedial works are still not carried out, then a prohibitive notice can be sent.

Continued non-compliance will result in legal action, the council confirmed.

"The primary aim of an initial site visit is to gain access to the property and undertake an inspection," a spokesperson said.

RTÉ to axe its Dáil report 'for insomniacs'

Kevin Doyle

RTÉ is to axe its late night round-up of events in the Dáil and Seanad which was famously once described by ex-minister Pat Rabbitte as a programme for "drunks and insomniacs".

Instead, 'Oireachtas Report' is to become an online offering operated "in real time".

At a private briefing to flag the move for TDs and senators, RTÉ News boss Jon Williams said the station wants to move to where the audience is going.

There will be no reduction in RTÉ's political staff, but they will work in a different format.

The 12.20am show was defended as vital public service broadcasting by some at yes-

terday's meeting, including Senator David Norris.

But Fianna Fáil's Timmy Dooley gave the switch to online a "cautious welcome".

A number of senators used the meeting to air grievances about RTÉ's political coverage, including Victor Boylan - who complained that the "same suspects" dominated the airwaves.



Senator David Norris

News Heatwave hits

System pushed to breaking point by staggering daily demand for water

IN A system creaking at the seams, every litre counts. This week has seen unprecedented stress on the water network as the lack of rainfall, coupled with heightened demand as the country enjoyed a heatwave, pushed the system to breaking point.

Clearly, the network is unable to cope when near-drought conditions strike. And in a world already affected by climate change and where hotter summers are forecast into the future, we will have to find new, sustainable sources of drinking water.

Daily demand is staggering. Irish Water treats around 1.7 billion litres of water in plants across the country ranging in scale from Ballymore Eustace in Kildare, the largest and which serves half the population of the Greater Dublin Area or 750,000 people, to small plants such

Sources nationwide are under stress as people fail to get leaks fixed, writes **Paul Melia**



as Creggacareen in Galway, which serves just 49.

But more than 40pc of all treated water is 'unaccounted' for, lost through leaks, illegal connections or for other reasons. The basic pipework is crumbling. But a big issue is also the fact that this water is produced by around 900 treatment plants, which draw raw water from 1,190 different sources, including rivers, lakes and aquifers.

It's this reliance on such a wide variety of sources and plants that forms a huge part of the problem.

Even modern facilities such as Ballymore Eustace

face pressures. It draws its water from the 5,000-acre Poulaphouca reservoir near Blessington, built in the 1940s. The River Liffey and King's River provide the raw water needed.

Normally, at this time of the year, it should hold 200 days supply. It's at 160 days, highlighting the extent of the shortage. Back in 2011, less than 100 days was held, but that was a time with 100,000 fewer people in its catchment and less economic activity.

If the most modern has an issue with sourcing the raw water needed to guarantee production throughout the year, what hope for the smaller ones?

Every hour, 13.2 million litres of water are drawn from the Poulaphouca reservoir 2km away through a 1.6-metre pipe into the plant's raw water manifold building.

Aluminium sulphate, a coagulant, is added to the raw water to form 'floc', or clumps of fine particles. The water then goes to sedimentation tanks, where it remains for up to two hours to allow the floc to stick to plastic plates, before the clearer water goes to filter tanks where a 1.2-metre layer of sand and gravel traps particles and polishes the

water. It is then disinfected with sodium hypochlorite, before lime is added to correct PH levels, and fluoride to protect teeth. It goes to the plant's reservoir, which holds around 55 million litres, where it remains for up to five hours before being fed through 1.6-metre pipes to reservoirs in Kilcullen and Naas, with the bulk going to the Saggart storage reservoir in south Dublin.

From here, it continues to the Belgard, Cookstown and Stillorgan reservoirs, before being sent through the

network to homes and businesses.

The plant is equipped with alarms to warn of problems. Each part of the treatment process is backed-up in case of equipment failure. But this is not the case in all of the 900 treatment plants across the State.

Dublin's supply is on a knife-edge, and even in periods of normal demand there is little headroom in the system.

Irish Water wants to draw 330 million litres a day from the Shannon to serve the capital and midlands, a move

subject to opposition, but it insists it has no other option.

Some 40pc of the River Liffey's waters are abstracted to provide drinking water, which is not sustainable. Replacing the 2,000km of cast-iron mains in Dublin would "paralyse" the city for up to a decade with works on the capital's streets.

But Dublin isn't the only problem. There are other vulnerable areas too. Restrictions have been imposed across 28 areas this week, with 128 areas being closely monitored.

By way of example,



Kate Gannon, corporate affairs manager for Irish water, at Ballymore Eustace water treatment plant. Photo: Damien Eagers



Margaret Massey (74) and Marie McDonald (78), from Dún Laoghaire. Photo: Justin Farrelly

Man in 50s arrested after driving ice cream van into doors of church before wielding a fake gun

Robin Schiller and Sinead Kelleher

A MAN in his 50s was arrested after an ice cream van rammed the doors of a church, causing huge damage.

Shortly after 9.30pm on Thursday, the van ploughed into the front door of St John's Catholic Church, Tralee, Co Kerry.

A significant amount of damage was caused and emergency

services were alerted to the incident.

The front door was damaged, but the most significant destruction was to the internal automatic doors, which were completely destroyed.

The van left the scene and fled from the area at speed. Gardaí briefly chased the ice cream van. A short distance away in the Gallowsfield area of the town, the suspect left the van and took out a fake gun.

He was quickly caught by gardaí and brought to Tralee garda station for questioning.

A Garda spokesman confirmed that a man, aged in his late 50s, was arrested in relation to the incident.

No injuries were reported, and the arrested man later underwent medical treatment.

A source praised gardaí for bringing the incident to a quick end and stressed that there was

no threat to gardaí during the incident.

No motive or reason for the bizarre incident is yet known, but the events have caused widespread shock in the parish.

Fr Bernard Healy, curate at St John's Parish, said that the parishioners were "astonished" at what happened.

"It is very upsetting. Thankfully nobody was injured and the artistic and cultural heritage was not damaged," he said.



Fr Bernard Healy shows some of the damage at St John's church in Tralee, Co Kerry. Photo: Sinead Kelleher