



2018

# Introduction

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## Recommended Citation

Sirr, L. (2018). Introduction. *Administration*, vol. 66, no. 2, pg's 1-5. doi: 10.2478/admin-2018-0015

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OPEN

*Administration*, vol. 66, no. 2 (2018), pp. 1–5  
doi: 10.2478/admin-2018-0015

## Introduction

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*Our house, in the middle of our street.* (Madness, 1982)

Over many decades, it has been rare for a week to pass without housing-related issues being close to, or at, the top of news and political agendas. As everybody has to live somewhere, housing – and its related elements of property, building, planning and finance – is a topic in which everybody has both a stake and an opinion. It is the most personal of subjects – in many respects, our housing shapes our lives. Where we live shapes how we live; how we live, and who we live with, helps shape our character. At the same time, housing frames our memories – the streets we grew up on – and assures our futures, ontologically, physically and often financially. Although entering an era of flux, the creation of housing, and our reliance on it, is the centrepiece of our socio-economic system, one which has influenced the direction of policies from various government departments since the foundation of the state. In common with many other countries, especially Catholic ones, home ownership has been a key feature of housing policy and practice – renting in its various guises has always played second fiddle. The goal of home ownership has been a driving force, guiding policies for housebuilding, the development of alternative tenures, financing for ownership and even the design of housing. Housing is at the epicentre of our social and economic highs and lows. It is therefore curious that housing in Ireland has received less academic attention than one would think it warrants. This special

edition of *Administration* aims to redress that in part. In curating this edition, I paid special attention to selecting topics either on the periphery of usual housing commentary – although still central to it – or entirely novel. This special edition features five articles and three forum pieces. Between them, the contributions cover technology, planning, private and public housebuilding, law, sociology and management.

The edition opens with Rory Hearne & Mary Murphy's findings from their research on homeless families' experiences of procuring houses in the private rental sector. There is a particular emphasis on the effect of marketisation on the families' right to access housing. The paper also reports on the experiences of families using new forms of housing, such as 'family hubs'. This research is the first time that such experiences have been recorded and assessed, and it is important in that it provides analysis from the coalface of experience (a 'bottom-up' approach, as the authors refer to it) and it includes the concept of ontological need – the relationship between housing and a sense of self – an often-overlooked component of many modern-day housing 'solutions'. Hearne & Murphy's paper finds that although private rental sector solutions do assist in accommodating families, there are considerable negative consequences, particularly around inequalities and insecurities. The authors also emphasise the potential benefits that a legislative provision for the right to housing would offer. In the context of an increasing reliance on the private market to house those families who would historically have been housed by the state, this paper is an important and novel evidence-based contribution to the, to date, limited discussion around the potential effects of such a reliance on those families.

Even those families who do not need direct state assistance in being housed find it challenging to purchase a permanent dwelling of their own. The typical aftermath of an economic recession in housing terms is the slow return to the supply of housing, and what housing is supplied tends to be out of the financial reach of the majority of those households seeking to buy a home: the most expensive housing comes on stream long before anything that may be regarded as being affordable. In light of this, Tom Healy & Paul Goldrick-Kelly propose the establishment of The Housing Company of Ireland to counteract the lack of affordable housing, something they refer to as 'a significant crisis for workers, families and communities'. The authors outline how a 'European cost rental' model could work in Ireland, which would also, they say, distribute the cost of new homes over a long period of

time and help develop a much stronger rental sector. This point is important given the move away from the traditional tenure norm of home ownership. They conclude that current public policy, with its reliance on the private sector, as seen in the previous paper, is wasteful and inefficient, and that the state itself needs to take a leading role.

Also providing solutions is Sergio Nasarre-Aznar, whose paper brings the concept of blockchain technology to the supply of housing, and particularly collaborative housing as seen in co-housing, for example, as well as other intermediate tenures. These types of tenures are something which the Irish market has not yet seen to any significant degree. The author examines the idea of the collaborative economy, and how it affects the provision of housing, which can arguably be seen as a 'shareable good'. The question for Nasarre-Aznar is the extent to which the collaborative economy will facilitate or constrain access to housing. This is a good point: for whereas the collaborative economy may bring greater competitiveness, sources of employment and wealth, and more flexible working arrangements, it has also blurred legal frameworks in areas such as consumer protection and labour law. This paper examines the degree to which blockchain can facilitate or contribute to helping households access sustainable housing through its capacity to reduce transaction costs and conveyancing timelines. It concludes that, although there are still legal issues, the role of blockchain is not something to be ignored.

Despite the perceived lack of sufficient supply for current demand levels, there are still ongoing legacy issues with our existing housing stock and the regulation of housebuilding in Ireland. Although the building control system was established in 1990, it has so far failed to prevent some of the worst examples of poor construction that have subsequently come to light. Despite the fact that safety and quality should follow from compliance with the national building regulations, Deirdre Ní Fhloinn presents evidence from original research that there is a very low level of formal enforcement of building control by the local authorities responsible. In an enlightened approach, the author compares enforcement policy and practice in the system of regulation of residential construction with that of food safety. Although the 'credible threat of enforcement' is a basic component of any regulatory regime, Ní Fhloinn's findings show that building control enforcement in Ireland is almost exclusively conducted on an informal basis with minimal resort to formal powers, although they are available. Comparison with food safety regulation and enforcement exposes a system which is a model of regulatory failure.

The rental sector, and indeed those renting in various forms, has long been neglected in Irish housing policy. In recent years, however, in recognition of the growing importance of renting as a tenure, some significant and positive changes have been made. However, although about one-fifth of households live as tenants in the private rental sector, there is also a significant cohort who live under licence arrangements such as the rent-a-room scheme, house-sharing or even living at home with parents. As Patricia Sheehy Skeffington's paper points out, licensees tend to exist as the unforeseen result of policy rather than because they were the focus of it. This is again a novel topic in Irish housing discourse, and in the paper the author describes the core characteristics of a licence (which is broadly a right to reside rather than affording any legal stake in land) and the most common forms of licence arrangement. The tenure status of licensees is precarious and their standards of accommodation are difficult to guarantee under the current regulations, and Sheehy Skeffington sets out routes to reform licensing arrangements and better protect those living under them.

In the first forum article, Adele McKeown & Lorcan Sirr examine an area of multi-unit living that will in the near future move from being an issue that can be conveniently ignored to one of immediate urgency: the collection of service charges in multi-unit developments. This is again an area that has received no research attention to date. An analysis of the accounts of fifty owner management companies (of which each property owner is a member) shows that there are serious issues with the collection of service charges and provision for sinking funds. Service charges fund day-to-day functions in the development, including management, insurance and items of current expenditure. The sinking fund, which is a legal requirement, funds capital expenditure such as replacing lifts or structural repairs. About half of all development accounts examined have no sinking fund in place, and methods of recovery of unpaid service charges are inadequate and cumbersome. The paper makes a series of recommendations for reform before the issue becomes large enough to affect the value of peoples' properties (for example, if banks stop lending for purchases in multi-unit developments if they feel the sinking fund is underfunded).

Brian Hughes' paper is focused on the guiding principle of demography being destiny – in other words, who we are, how many of us there are and where we are living should direct every planning and housing policy. He argues that end-use demand for housing, in

particular, is driven by demographic growth and that the only way strategic planning can be successful is if it is honest about how many of us there will be and where we will live. In this manner, planning for housing need will match where the demand will be. Hughes uses the examples of the defunct *National Spatial Strategy* and the new *National Planning Framework* to show how demography is, and is not, being used to frame planning strategies and the housing supply that will emerge from it. He also cites the case of Drogheda, which is now Ireland's sixth-largest city, ahead of Waterford, but still excluded from national strategic planning. Hughes concludes by calling for the re-emergence of a body like the former An Foras Forbartha to conduct and coordinate research in this field.

For the last paper, it was felt that a comparison with international experiences would be instructive, and Daniel Bentley contributes a forum article that looks at the UK model of housebuilding and the lure of demand stimulants. As with Ireland, since the 1970s, the UK has depended in the main on the private sector for its housing supply. Bentley makes the point that this type of system relies heavily on ever-rising effective demand. The pattern of such a system is that when prices fall in response to falling demand, housing output is cut back; but when prices rise, output remains insufficient to 'significantly reduce them'. As the UK Government now relies almost entirely on private housebuilders for national supply (as in Ireland), it is now in the 'perverse' position of trying to increase demand – usually through demand stimulants – in order to stimulate supply, even if this means rising house prices. There are lessons to be learned from Bentley's paper from the country whose systems we regularly copy, and not always wisely.

Finally, the editor would like to thank all those who contributed the papers in this edition – it is much appreciated that this took considerable time and effort. Also worthy of thanks are all the reviewers, who again took the time to give of their experience and knowledge. The publishing staff of the Institute of Public Administration, too, deserve praise for both their editorial support and also their wisdom in instigating a special housing edition in the first place.