

Focus Ireland Analysis of Party Manifestos: General Election 2020

What are the parties saying?

In the run up to the General Election, Focus Ireland put forward five proposals which we believe should form a framework for responding to the housing and homeless crisis, and which we asked each party to include in their Election Manifesto. This document reviews the manifestos of the seven largest parties to see to what extent these issues are addressed.

We did not ask about overall ambition in relation to ending homelessness but it is worth starting the analysis by recording how each of the parties have approached this issue. It is worth noting that in 2008, under '[The Way Home](#)' strategy, there was cross-party consensus that 'the need to sleep rough' and long-term homelessness could be brought to an end.

Ambitions on homelessness:

- **Fine Gael:** A commitment to 'do everything that is possible to tackle homelessness' and 'to further reduce rough sleeping in many areas of the country', but no specific commitment to see homeless levels fall or end any aspect of homelessness.
- **Fianna Fail:** Includes a commitment to 'An end to long-term homelessness' by 2025 and states that 'Ending the rough sleeping of homeless people on our streets is a moral and social imperative' but gives no timescale.
- **Sinn Féin:** 'in consultation with Local Authorities and the homeless NGO sector, set a date for ending long term homelessness and the need to sleep rough.'
- **Labour:** 'ending long-term homelessness' appears as a heading, but no timescale is indicated.
- **Social Democrats:** includes a commitment to 'Eradicating homelessness in the lifetime of the next Dáil through a Housing First strategy'
- **Green Party:** no mention.
- **People Before Profit:** Immediately declare a housing emergency.

Focus Ireland Ask 1: Build More Homes, including Social housing

Focus Ireland believes that we need to build 35,000 new homes each year - 10,000 of which are public homes - in order to reduce the number of people in homelessness and at risk of homelessness. The target of 35,000 is based on independent [research](#) by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and the Central Bank.

Each of the seven parties has made commitments of some kind to increasing the supply of homes, including social housing. Different language is used in the manifestos, switching between social/public homes, social/affordable homes, and affordable rent/cost rental.

Confusion about the specific meaning of commitments was one of the weaknesses of Rebuilding Ireland and the divergence in language and meaning in the manifestos continues this confusion and dispute, which can frequently lead to inertia in policymaking. In order to kick-start a dramatic

increase in the number of homes being built, we need to see consensus forming around what a programme of construction would actually look like. In the context of a coalition, this may well end in compromise but this deep into a housing crisis, compromise might be better than inertia. A National Housing Commission (see further below) may be one way to reach a transparent, national consensus which would address the long-term vision for our housing market.

Housing supply

- **Fine Gael:** is the only party which indicate the total housing need – accepting that 35,000-40,000 ‘new homes are needed’ each year. They say they ‘will work to achieve and maintain this level’, which would give a five-year total of between 175,000 and 200,000. They commit to grow the ‘social housing stock’ by 60,000 (12,000 per year) but this may include existing private rented stock under HAP – they note that 75% of the increase in social housing stock in 2019 was ‘newly built’ - a term that includes not only units built by Local Authorities and AHBs but also acquisitions, leases and HAP arrangements on new dwellings.
- **Fianna Fail:** commit to building a total of 200,000 new homes over five years – 50,000 each year of Government, half of these will be ‘new private homes’ while 25% will be ‘affordable for sale’ and 25% will be social housing.
- **Sinn Féin:** doesn’t give any figure for the total number of homes that will be built overall but commit to 100,000 homes built on public land (an unspecified mix of social, affordable rental and affordable for sale)
- **Labour:** doesn’t give any figure for the total number of homes that will be built overall but commit to 80,000 homes built on public land (an unspecified mix of social, affordable rental and affordable for sale)
- **Social Democrats:** doesn’t give any figure for the total number of homes that will be built overall but commit to 100,000 homes built on public land (an equal mix of social, affordable rental and affordable for sale)
- **Green Party:** doesn’t give any figure for the total number of homes or social housing that will be built overall, and commit to ‘Urgently build public houses on public land to alleviate the housing crisis’ without giving any specific figures.
- **People Before Profit:** 100,000 council houses over five years and create a national construction company

In addition, all parties include commitments to new, better financed or ‘reinvigorated’ approaches to bringing vacant homes and land back into use.

Part V

During the first decade of the century, Part V has been a key element of strategies to deliver social and affordable housing, and if private development accelerates to the levels required, Part V will re-emerge as a key factor in the next few years. The parties take different approaches to this.

Position on Part V

- **Fine Gael:** will ‘explore allowing local authorities to increase Part V provisions to 30% for social and affordable homes within new housing developments, depending on local need and social mix. This could include designating up to 20% as cost rental’.
- **Fianna Fail:** no mention
- **Sinn Féin:** increase Part V to 25% of private developments

- **Labour:** no mention
- **Social Democrats:** would reform Part V to “reserve 20% of housing in private developments for affordable housing (in addition to the current 10% social housing).
- **Green Party:** no mention
- **People Before Profit:** no mention

The private rental sector

Focus Ireland [research](#) shows that almost 70% of families experiencing homelessness have come from the private rental sector. This means that the lack of affordable accommodation in the private rental sector is a major cause of families and children becoming homeless. The private rental sector – which is fuelling the family homelessness crisis – will not end it. HAP tenancies aren’t permanent social homes. To end this crisis, we need to increase the number of public homes being built.

Position on HAP

One of the most significant, controversial and expensive measure in housing policy in recent years has been the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) scheme, which provides rent subsidies in the private rental sector for tenants eligible for social housing.

- **Fine Gael:** No mention
- **Fianna Fail:** Increase Rent supplement levels by 10% nationally. “Rent and Housing Assistance Payments must be regularly reviewed to ensure they reflect the rental market reality.”
- **Sinn Féin:** Rent subsidy payment designated as short-term, allowing recipients to remain on the social housing waiting list. “A year on year reduction in the number of private rental tenancies used for social housing tenants via HAS, RAS and HAP”
- **Labour:** No mention
- **Social Democrats:** HAP to be speeded up, but seen as ‘as short-term measure’...’to be phased out by an ambitious home building programme’
- **Green Party:** No mention
- **People Before Profit:** No mention

Focus Ireland Ask 2: Referendum on the Right to Housing

Focus Ireland believes that a rebalancing of the Constitution to better reflect the right to housing would be an important element in solving the housing and homeless crisis. This would require a referendum on the right to housing to be held and we are working with [Home for Good](#) to see that the next Government puts this important question to the people of Ireland.

Which parties support a right to housing in their manifesto?

The Green Party, Labour, People Before Profit, Sinn Féin, and the Social Democrats have all pledged support for a right to housing. Neither Fine Gael nor Fianna Fáil have mentioned the right to housing in their manifestos, but depending on how important this issue is for their potential coalition parties, they may be led in this direction in the event of a coalition and a commitment to a right to housing could feature in a future Programme for Government.

FOCUS Ireland

There are small differences between the parties on how they have worded their commitments on the right to housing.

- **Fine Gael:** No mention.
- **Fianna Fail:** No mention.
- **Sinn Féin:** Commitment to a referendum on the right to a home within one year of going into Government.
- **Labour:** Constitutional convention to look at recognition of the right to housing in the context of a fully revised Constitution which will be put to the people in an omnibus referendum.
- **Social Democrats:** Commitment to a right to housing which “should be enshrined in the Constitution in a way that would place a significant responsibility on the Government to vindicate this right through its actions – laws, policy and services”
- **Green Party:** Calling for a referendum on the right to housing.
- **People Before Profit:** hold a referendum to enshrine a right to housing in the constitution.

Focus Ireland Ask 3: Dedicated Youth Homelessness Strategy

The number of young adults (18-24) becoming homeless in Ireland has more than doubled in the last four years. [According to the OECD](#), homelessness has increased by 82% for those aged between 15-29 (page 6). The experience of homelessness is having an enormous impact on young people in Ireland and, to date, there is no policy response which looks specifically at this grouping. Focus Ireland’s work on Housing First for Youth shows the enormous potential of programmes designed to provide young people with homes and the supports they need to give them every chance of success in life. Based on our experience working with young people, we know that a dedicated youth homelessness strategy is urgently needed to properly address the specific needs of young adults aged 18-24.

What do the parties say in their manifesto about youth homelessness?

A number of the parties have made a commitment to a national Youth Homelessness Strategy including, Fianna Fail, Labour and the Social Democrats. While this is very welcome, it is disappointing that the urgent need to recognise and respond to youth homelessness did not feature in other parties’ manifestos. While the youth vote is often overlooked by traditional politics and youth-focused policies often treated as less important, the housing and homelessness crisis may yet change the usual voting dynamics.

- **Fine Gael:** No mention
- **Fianna Fail:** Commitment to dedicated youth strategy
- **Sinn Féin:** No mention
- **Labour:** Launching a homeless youth strategy within 100 days of coming into office
- **Social Democrats:** Commitment to a dedicated youth strategy
- **Green Party:** No mention
- **People Before Profit:** No mention

Focus Ireland Ask 4: Dedicated Family Homelessness Strategy

The scale of family homelessness we face now is unprecedented. With almost 4,000 children now homeless and many more at risk, the effects of this homelessness crisis will be felt long into the future. Homelessness is an adverse childhood experience which contributes to serious problems with physical and mental health, as well as a child's social and emotional development. It makes it more difficult for children to participate at school, to develop friendships, and to fully and meaningfully develop as young people.

Every family has their own specific needs and their own story, but they are all united by the enormous challenge of experiencing homelessness with their children.

The very particular experience of family homelessness is not adequately acknowledged in our policies. The lack of leadership at a high-level means that schools are struggling to cope with a new experience of young children arriving to class tired after long commutes, hungry, without clean clothing, and suffering the stigma of living in a hotel. Our hospitals have identified many of the adverse physical and mental health experiences suffered by children, but there has been no specific policy response to ensure that the urgent needs of these children are addressed. The shortcomings for families have been detailed in reports from the Children's Ombudsman, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government, and the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children and Youth Affairs, among others. Yet there has been no coherent, cohesive policy response to allow us to implement changes which will limit the damage being done to families and children. A family homelessness strategy would require coordination, input, and implementation across departments and agencies and would better encompass the varied needs of homeless families.

What do the parties say in their manifesto about families experiencing homelessness?

None of the parties have specifically committed to a family homelessness strategy, although some have identified families as a category within the homeless population and made specific pledges to address specific needs. If implemented, these measures would be very welcome, but they remain only part of a broader, urgent response needed to ensure that the experiences of families and children do not trap them into homelessness long-term.

While there is broad recognition of the almost 4,000 children experiencing homelessness now, even if the crisis ended tomorrow, the scars of a childhood experience of homelessness will be carried into later life. We need to ensure that the State is prepared to meet this challenge and prevent cycles of homelessness from occurring by designing and implementing a strategy to tackle the consequences of family homelessness.

- **Fine Gael:** National Quality Standards for Family Hubs by July 2020, more Family Hubs and shorter stays (unspecified) in emergency accommodation.
- **Fianna Fail:** Launch a Housing First for Families pilot project within Homeless funding
- **Sinn Féin:** implement the recommendations of the [report](#) on Child and Family Homelessness published by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government.
- **Labour:** require local authorities to have regard to the needs of children and families who are homeless, by enacting Labour's Housing (Homeless Families) Bill

FOCUS Ireland

- **Social Democrats:** ‘We will develop a targeted strategy to end the scandal of families living in hotels and family hubs for long periods’ and increased funding of family case managers.
- **Green Party:** No mention
- **People Before Profit:** No mention

Focus Ireland Ask 5: Establish a National Commission on Housing

While the next Government will need to act urgently to address the crisis levels of homelessness and the severely dysfunctional housing and rental market we’re currently experiencing, there is a deeper and enduring crisis at the heart of Irish housing policy which must be tackled if we are to end the boom and bust cycle of housing.

A settled, long-term, view is critical in relation to housing. This is because there is a long lead time between the planning, funding and completion of housing. Housing policy initiatives require legislation, infrastructure, provision of vital public services and institutional change. The impact of housing policy endures over political and economic cycles.

The establishment of a National Commission on Housing would allow policymakers and experts in housing and planning to come together and map out a long-term strategy for our housing market. In particular, it would remove the politics and focus on a vision for a future Ireland. With sufficient buy-in from stakeholders and a commitment to implementation, such a plan would outlive Government cycles and general election noise, providing certainty for purchasers, developers, lenders, landlords and renters. It would stabilise the housing market and help insulate it from boom, bust, and economic shocks. Focus Ireland has worked with a group of experts to draft a document calling for the establishment of a [Commission on Housing in Ireland](#).

What do the parties say?

None of the parties have committed to the idea of a national commission on housing, with most of the focus in manifestos on the immediate crisis, and an assumed 5-year term in office. In the context of an election and the pressures to win voters, that might be understandable. But a failure to recognise the importance of consensus-building around a policy response would be deeply concerning if it continues past election day. The last five years of this crisis have been plagued by disagreements over the best strategy and approach, and the last 20 years has been characterised by repeated flip-flops.

In the area of housing policy, indecision and policy changes – no matter how well-intentioned – carry a cost. The nature of housing as a sector is that it requires certainty, both in the short-term and over the long-term. Consequently, a shared understanding on the thrust of public policy is immensely valuable in ensuring that housing strategy can endure over economic, political and planning cycles.

- **Fine Gael:** No mention
- **Fianna Fail:** No mention
- **Sinn Féin:** No mention
- **Labour:** No mention
- **Social Democrats:** No mention
- **Green Party:** No mention
- **People Before Profit:** No mention