Background

The seventh Social Partnership Agreement has recently been agreed. “Towards 2016” establishes the framework for the economic and social development of Ireland over the coming ten years as agreed by the Social Partners.

The Irish Council for Social Housing, a member of the Community & Voluntary Pillar of partnership, has been actively involved in pursuing the social housing agenda during the five months of negotiations. The purpose of this Bulletin is to highlight the social housing commitments which are now included in the new agreement and to identify the main issues for housing associations under the new agreement.

Main Commitments Sought

The main commitments we sought were as follows:

- A commitment to expand social housing in line with the NESC Housing in Ireland Report Recommendation of 73,000 units by prioritising housing under the NDP.
- Commitments to deal with the blockages in the system currently experienced by housing associations holding up output and expansion of the sector.
- Measures to provide the sector with local authority/state land which we identified as a major weakness in the expansion of the sector.
- Commitments on funding the sector to deliver additional units to that identified in Building Sustainable Communities.
- Commitments on sheltered housing to expand that sector.
- Implement the recommendations of the review of the homeless strategies, in particular a commitment on eliminating long term homelessness by 2010.
- A national housing strategy for people with disabilities. [In conjunction with DFI]
- Specific mention of the care dimension in special needs housing to draw in the Department of Health and Children.
Introduction to the Agreement
The overall goal for this new ten-year framework agreement covering the period 2006 – 2016 is to realise the NESC vision for Irish society by:

- Nurturing the complementary relationship between social policy and economic prosperity.
- Developing a vibrant, knowledge-based economy and stimulating enterprise and productivity.
- Re-inventing and repositioning Ireland’s social policies
- Integrating an island-of-Ireland economy, and
- Deepening capabilities, achieving higher social and economic participation rates and more successfully handling diversity, including immigration.

The Agreement is based on a ten-year timeframe as it is believed that this will be required to achieve this vision. In addition to the longer timeframe this Agreement also adopts a new social policy perspective which is built around the life cycle approach. The life cycle approach adopts the perspective of the citizen as the centrepiece of building a new social policy approach. The key lifecycle phases include children, people of working age, older people and people with disabilities. At each stage of the life cycle it is recognised that there are key services, income supports and activation measures required to meet the needs of people. Also underpinning this is the understanding that a range of infrastructural policy supports are required and these are set out in Chapter Two. It is in this Chapter Two where commitments in relation to overall social housing are made. There are also specific housing commitments made across each of the life cycle stages.

What is in the Agreement in relation to social housing?

The commitments in “Towards 2016” in relation to social housing fall into three main categories: supply of accommodation; infrastructural issues; addressing housing and care provision.

Principles underlying the NDP
Continuing to address the physical and social Infrastructure deficits, particularly in the transport, waste, energy, and communications sectors. Housing, healthcare, eldercare, childcare and people with disabilities (accessibility) are also areas which will receive particular attention.

Special recognition of housing within the next NDP. This is key for ensuring appropriate levels of finance over capital building programmes.

The Government and the Social Partners endorse the important principles set out in the Housing Policy Framework – Building Sustainable Communities which provides a vision of the kind of high quality, integrated sustainable communities that are worth building. This also aims to take into account other factors in the areas of balanced regional and rural development, planning, physical and social infrastructure and environmental sustainability and the development of social capital. The parties agree to work together toward the delivery of this vision over this ten-year framework agreement. A more detailed policy statement will issue during 2006, reflecting these principles and taking account of this Agreement. Working through the Housing Forum, the
Government and the Social Partners will focus on five main areas to achieve the objectives of creating sustainable communities:

- Continuing improvements in the quality of houses and neighbourhoods, including improvement of consumer information in relation to housing,
- Providing tailored housing services to those who cannot afford to meet their own housing needs, and in this way responding to the broad spectrum of housing need.
- Developing inter-agency cooperation where there is a care dimension.
- Maintaining the impetus for the delivery of housing at affordable prices to the market, including through State supported schemes, and other appropriate innovations, such as measures to support first time buyers.
- Progressing the social housing reform agenda set out in the Housing Policy Framework.
- Establishes principles of Building Sustainable Communities
- Commitment on care dimension

Also notes the social housing reform agenda -relates to issues like improvements in assessments and governance

The approach seeks to ensure that all housing is seen as being on an equal footing whether provided fully by the State or supported in some way. All parties have a role in developing this ethos, which makes no distinction between types of housing or tenure.

To advance these goals, a new means of assessment will be developed to provide a better basis for policy development and service delivery to ensure that all people can live with maximum independence within their community.

The parties acknowledge the view taken in the NESC report on housing that an additional 73,000 social housing units should be provided in the period 2004 to 2012. The parties consider this target as being of continuing relevance to the expected response under this ten-year framework agreement. Implementation of such an objective will be assessed in the light of work on the assessment of need, the emerging picture in relation to need, the evolution of the various housing programmes and the outputs achieved under these, and the resources available.

Key areas for development under the first phase of this ten-year framework agreement include new means of assessing need and enhancing delivery of social and affordable housing. The Government are committed to expanding the social and affordable housing options over the coming years and have indicated that increased investment will meet the needs of some 50,000 households over the three years to 2008, through the existing range of social and affordable housing options. Further households will benefit from the Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS).

The Government is committed to providing additional investment over the period 2007-2009, which will provide an expanded range of housing options to households who cannot afford to provide for their accommodation needs from their own resources. This will include:
The commencement/acquisition of an additional 4,000 new housing units over the period 2007 to 2009 for such households [through a combination of local authority (2,000), voluntary and co-operative housing (1,000), and RAS long-term contractual arrangements for new supply (1,000)]. This will bring the total number of new commencements/acquisitions in the period to 27,000 units.

In addition, further households will benefit from full implementation of the Rental Accommodation Scheme, involving contractual arrangements with landlords, for existing properties transferring from rent supplement.

Implementation of the Local Authority Traveller accommodation programmes.

As a result of the various social and affordable housing measures the accommodation needs of some 60,000 new households will be addressed over the period 2007-2009. The multi-annual action plans in place at local authority level, supported by active land management strategies announced by the Government last year are key instruments in delivering this ambitious programme. These will be bolstered by the following measures:

- Active engagement with the voluntary and co-operative housing sector to increase their role in delivering on needs, through a rationalisation, early in the first phase of the agreement, of administrative and approval arrangements to ensure the earliest possible delivery of suitable quality projects, improvement in funding arrangements and measures to enhance governance of the sector and an expanding role for the sector under the Rental Accommodation Scheme.

- To further assist the voluntary and co-operative sector in the context of the programme outlined at 2.53, the Government will arrange through local authorities for additional land/units to be provided under this Agreement for the purpose of meeting identified housing need. It will be expected that units/sites sufficient to supply some 3,000 dwellings will be identified and made available over the period 2007-2009.

- The National Building Agency, which has considerable experience in area of regeneration and remedial works, will establish with immediate effect a dedicated unit to support local authorities in undertaking regeneration and remedial programmes as part of a programme to bring all social housing accommodation up to the best possible standard.

Minimum standards regulations for the private rented sector will be updated by the Dept of Environment, Heritage and local Government and effectively enforced by Local Authorities.

The Housing Forum will play an important role in inputting to policy development and evaluating outcomes over the period of the ten-year framework agreement. This will include housing issues in both the urban and rural environments. Progress will be reviewed following the first phase (during 2008) of the ten-year framework agreement. This will inform the delivery under the next series of multi-annual housing action plans, taking account of market developments and capacity.
In many areas, the outcomes for individuals will be critically dependent on the inter-linkages of services as described under the key lifecycle phases set out in Chapter 3.

- Advancing particular actions to assist people with special housing needs. Actions relating to older people and people with a disability are specifically referred to in sections XX and YY respectively. Ensuring improved outcomes for all people with special housing needs will require greater inter-agency co-operation, so that a combined approach to the accommodation and care dimensions is taken.
- In the case of homeless people, it is proposed to amalgamate and update the Government’s Integrated and Preventative Homeless Strategies taking on board the recommendations of the recent independent review of the strategies. The situation of homeless persons who are currently in long-term emergency accommodation is of particular concern. The revised strategies will have as an underlying objective the elimination of such homelessness by 2010\(^1\). Particular emphasis will also be placed on improved co-ordination of service provision through the extension of joint agency approaches at local level to facilitate the development of a holistic response to the needs of homeless person. This will be achieved through the further development of a case management approach, based on individual needs assessment with provision for access to multiple services by all the statutory agencies involved. The involvement of the voluntary and cooperative housing sector will be strengthened through the establishment of a National Homelessness Consultative Committee including representatives of the social partnership C&V Pillar under the aegis of the Housing Forum.

**Long Term Care Services for Older People**

The continued development of sheltered housing options, with varying degrees of care support will be encouraged.

**Housing and accommodation**

Good quality housing is important to supporting the independence of older people. In some instances, housing and care services delivered in an integrated manner are essential to allowing older people to live at home for as long as possible. In other cases, older people may need to move to alternative accommodation, including sheltered housing with varying levels of support. Therefore, the range of responses include:

The availability of a mix of dwelling types of good design across all tenures. Details of investment proposals are included in Chapter Two.

For older people on lower incomes, the availability of:

- disabled Persons and Essential Repairs Grants Schemes and the Special Scheme of Housing Aid for the Elderly, which allow people to remain in their own homes;
- the provision of social housing including through downsizing schemes, and;

\(^1\) Recognising that this involves addressing the needs of up to 500 households.
Future actions will include:

- Ensuring that future Housing Action Plans address special needs in a more strategic manner and specify, in particular, the role of the voluntary and co-operative housing sector in meeting the associated accommodation requirements;

- Developing and implementing new protocols for inter-agency co-operation where there is a care dimension additional to accommodation needs;

- Reforming the grant schemes for older people in private housing to improve equity and targeting. This reform will build on the experience of a number of local authorities that have been able to prioritise spending through targeting of priority clients and standardised costs. The new arrangements will be more streamlined, cutting down on administration to make the schemes more accessible and provide a more seamless set of responses to the needs of people with a disability and older people.

- Services to provide enhanced home security, energy conservation and other measures for vulnerable older people will continue to be a priority activity within the Community Services Programme.

- Sustainable Energy Ireland and the Combat Poverty Agency are undertaking an action research project to improve heating systems and insulation in selected older private dwellings and to monitor the outcomes in terms of improved cost efficiency and household comfort and health levels. The results of this project will assist with the development of future policy in this area and may also be of relevance to the ongoing development of existing housing grant schemes to assist older people and people with a disability.

A cross-departmental team on sheltered housing is being established by the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government to oversee progress in that area. There will be provision for consultation with social partners through the Housing Forum.

Evolving building standards and the potential for advancements in design in the future should lead to general improvements in the accessibility of the Irish housing stock over time. However, it is recognised that people with a disability often have fewer choices in terms of providing for their housing and accommodation needs.

To bring a new focus to addressing these needs, a National Housing Strategy for People with Disabilities will be developed as recommended in the NESC ‘Housing in Ireland’ Report in order to support the provision of tailored housing and housing support to people with disabilities. This would have particular regard to adults with significant disabilities and people who experience mental illness. This will be progressed through the establishment of a National Group under the aegis of the Housing Forum, headed by the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, and involving the Department of Health and Children, the Health Service Executive, social partners and other relevant stakeholders.
In addition to the current affordable housing measures which will deliver some 17,000 units over the period 2007 to 2009 through a more streamlined approach currently under development, the Affordable Homes Partnership is undertaking initiatives to increase the supply of affordable housing in the Greater Dublin Area. A key instrument is their role in bringing forward additional land for housing development. It is understood that the Partnership is at an advanced stage in selecting suitable sites from its first call for proposals, which subject to planning, could deliver a substantial affordable housing yield. Other innovative means of increasing the supply of affordable housing will also be explored during the first phase of this agreement. Throughout the period of agreement there will an emphasis on innovation and joint policy approaches with the social partners to accelerate delivery, including affordable rental and shared equity options.

**Next Steps**

The Government will require ratification from parties to the Agreement.

Following this the most significant short term issue is implementing the commitment on dealing with the system blockage issues.

The other commitments will be considered by the ICSH Board of Management in the context of future implementation, impact on the sector and on the ICSH.