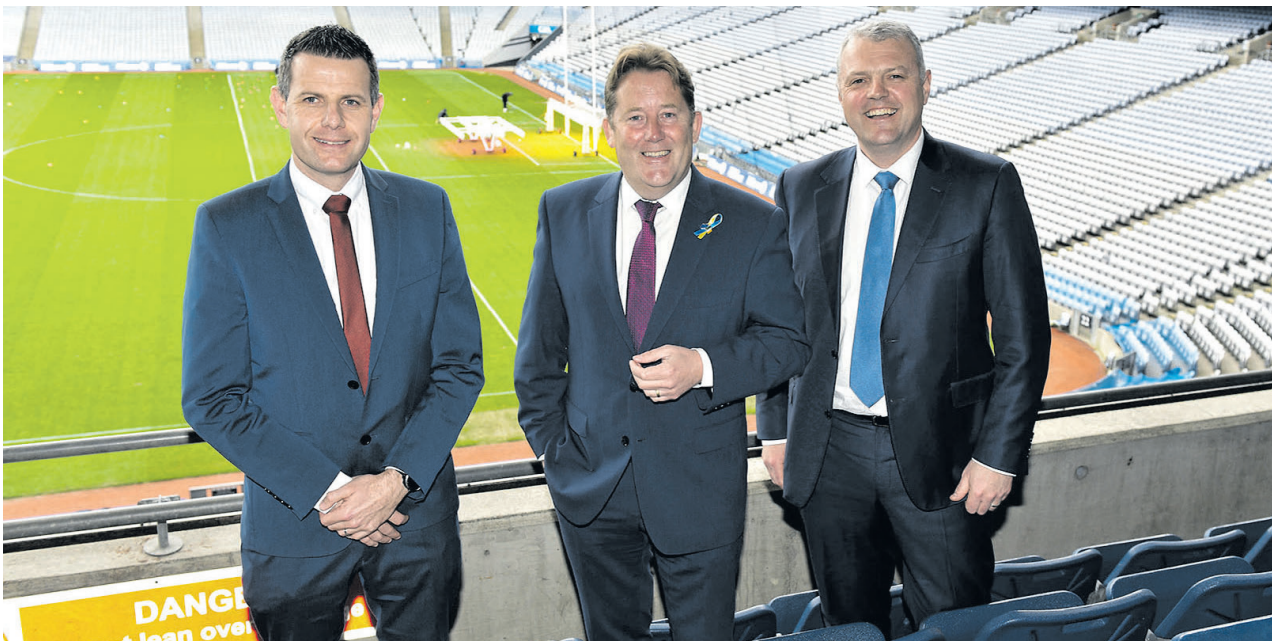


Housebuilding Summit

SPECIAL REPORT



James Benson, director, Housing, Planning and Development Services, CIF; Darragh O'Brien, Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage and Sean O'Neill, managing director, Park Developments and chair of IHBA



Cian O'Mahony, head of operations, SIRO; Ivan Gaine, managing director - Sherry FitzGerald New Homes; James Benson, director, Housing, Planning and Development Services, CIF; John Downey, director, Downey Planning; Nico Van Der Merwe, VP of Home and Distribution, Schneider Electric and Fiona Cormican, new business director, Clúid Housing
Pictures: Maura Hickey

Old challenges bringing new opportunities to construction

The latest IHBA Housebuilding Summit highlighted the long road to meeting Ireland's housing shortage, but in a time of great change comes great opportunities, **Quinton O'Reilly** reports

The second IHBA (Irish Home Builder Associations) Housebuilding Summit, which took place in Croke Park on Tuesday April 5, was an important one. Getting major stakeholders together, from the construction industry and the wider social and policy spheres, in the same room was a crucial step in solving a problem that has seeped into all facets of society.

The opening discussions and chats set the tone for the entire day, starting with the welcome from Ivan Yates, the chair of the day's summit. He was direct about the challenges facing those in a packed assembly hall.

"This is a very important conference because not only is housing the most important issue to you, but the number one national issue socially," he set out. "[It's important] in terms of the housing crisis... the affordability gap for those trying to get their first home, and the knowledge crisis as well because... where the jobs are, rent is going up in double digits every year and becoming unaffordable."

Similarly, the tone of the entire summit was set by Sean O'Neill, managing director for Park Developments and Chair at IHBA, who from the outset mentioned the two words that would appear regularly throughout the summit: affordability and viability.

That did shift to positivity with Darragh O'Brien, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, giving a wide-ranging talk on the challenges faced and the measures the government has taken to address the issue and how strong the construction industry is.

"The government's approach to housing is underpinned by the fundamental principle that everyone should have access to affordable homes that offer a high quality of life," he said.

"Two years of the pandemic [has shown] the sector is agile and adaptable

... the outlook is bright in relation to production and we are seeing significant increases in commencements, particularly in new planning permissions."

Some of the measures taken include the Housing for All plan, with capital of €4 billion a year in public sector funding which will bring about a further €8 billion in private funding.

Others include the first home shared equity scheme which will launch on July 1, and the attorney general is carrying out a full review of the national planning framework, which is expected to be completed in September.

The first section of the summit concerned building the homes and neighbourhoods of the future, with the first panel being of particular interest. The panel - containing Fiona Cormican, new business director of Clúid Housing, Eoin Ó Broin, Sinn Féin spokesperson for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and Michael O'Flynn, chairman and chief executive, O'Flynn Group - discussed a number of topics including communication and collaboration.

"I would say the biggest problem this country has is that there are decisions being made by people in local authorities and departments, very good people who work hard, who are not listening to the industry and that's a critical mistake," said Cormican.

"I'm asking the Minister for Housing to listen to the industry because there are fantastic ideas out there and people who really understand the issues."

These ideas will be crucial for easing the pressure on the residential market. In her overview, Marian Finnegan, managing director for residential and advisory at Sherry FitzGerald, showed that while the economy has been resilient, the trends are seeing lower-value properties seeing price inflation. This has resulted in housing prices in rural Ireland rising rapidly.

The capacity is there, as James Benson, director of housing, planning and

development services at CIF, mentioned in his panel discussion on fast tracking planning and while there are challenges like the shortage of skills and labour, as found in all industries, there's great opportunities in finding efficiencies. "The issue is that there's so much happening outside the control of the builder,"



John Myers, founder, YIMBY Alliance



Tom Rabbette, assistant director of planning at An Bord Pleanála

he said. "While it can take up to a decade to move through zoning, investing in infrastructure, planning, procurement, commencement and completion, with that comes opportunity to reduce costs and make homes more affordable. If we create certainty and speed in our plan-

ning system we can bring efficiencies into the system to reduce costs."

Keeping things sustainable

The target of increasing new housing and supply by 33,000 per year between now and 2030 was a key statistic throughout the summit and that brings up challenges concerning skillsets, knowledge and policy.

Much talk surrounded updating existing concepts to make them more efficient and flexible to achieve viability and flexibility. One example of this came up during the panel discussion of turning NIMBYs into YIMBYs where John Downey, director of Downey Planning, mentioned an issue that has been around for years.

"I worked with the same planning act in 2000 which [was around] when I started my career in Fingal county council and it's the same act that's been amended so many times," he said.

"It's so difficult and that has to be rewritten because it's been around 22 years."

As touched upon at the beginning of the summit, the building of houses isn't just about giving people homes, but also empowering them for a new world of work and living. This was best represented by Cian O'Mahony, head of operations at SIRO, who spoke about the overlap between broadband and construction.

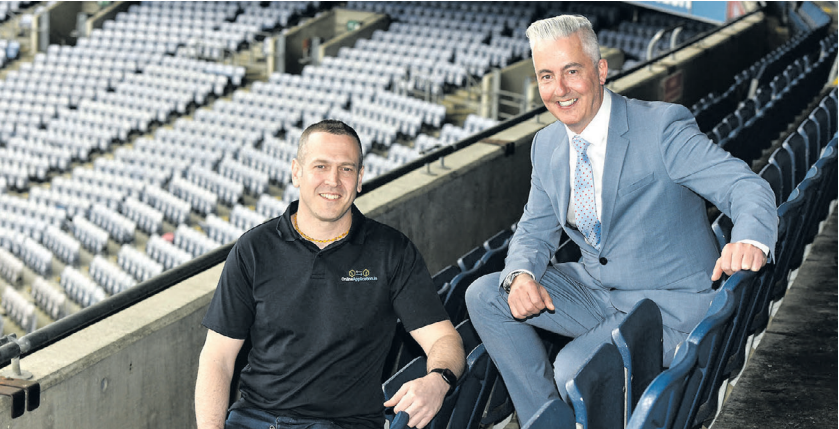
In short, housing should provide the digital framework for businesses and individuals to thrive. The earlier the construction industry has those conversations to build it in from the start, the better.

"We want to encourage the [construction] community to get involved, when you've stakeholders in your operations who have different views to bring it to SIRO," he said.

"It is a complicated space... we're not here to be a silver bullet to fix your ailments or challenges; we're looking to



Eoin Ó Broin, TD, Sinn Féin spokesperson for Housing, Local Government and Heritage; Fiona Cormican, new business director, Clúid Housing and Michael O'Flynn, chairman and chief executive of O'Flynn Group



Karl Deeter, mortgage broker, commentator and broadcaster and John Downey, director, Downey Planning

make sure that you're aware that we're open to conversation."

Similarly, this was touched upon with the homes of the future panel later in the afternoon. It featured Paula Carroll, associate professor at the UCD School of Business, Nico van der Merwe, VP of home and distribution at Schneider Electric, Paul Kelly, director of real estate finance at AIB, and Claire Pomroy, director at Development Hines Real Estate Ireland Limited. In the case of electricity, data is quickly becoming a key component of its service as it allows for greater efficiency, a key factor as energy efficiency becomes a more significant topic.

"We focus on data and digitalisation because electricity is becoming digitalised," said van der Merwe. "The benefit of our involvement is we make it more energy productive so you can do more with the same or even more with less, and make it as resilient as possible." "The whole topic of sustainability is new or relatively new - we used to call it efficient a few years ago - and it's an exciting topic. Everyone is learning and there's a whole fraternity like electricians and contractors that needs to be reskilled [to meet this demand]."

When asked about redesigning apartment blocks and meeting energy-efficient ratings, Pomroy mentioned the importance of taking a long-term view of the market as "when the product comes to market, the technology that we install might already be primitive."

Similarly, the talk of newer building methods like modular housing and new materials like timber is also a point of interest. There will be significant challenges in meeting demand during a time where global issues like the war in Ukraine have a significant impact.

Yet those challenges are also opportunities to make significant long-lasting

change and the final panel of the day on boosting the use of modern construction methods featured PJ Rudden, managing director of Aengus Consulting Ltd, Avril Behan, project director of Build Digital Project at TU Dublin, and Dan O'Brien, co-founder and managing director of Lidan Designs, had the best summary of it.

"We have to have confidence in what we build because we only build it once," said Rudden. "We've a once in a generation chance to do this as we have a confluence of good things and a crisis is the time to do it."

In his closing remarks, Frank Kelly, president of CIF, mentioned that there is much more that can be achieved and the adjustments need to be made as mentioned throughout the day, the ultimate takeaway is that action needs to be taken now, lest we look back on these years with regret.

"For that to be achieved, the right steps need to be taken to deliver the right conditions now," he said. "Otherwise this won't be a decade of delivery, it will be one spent asking where the funding has gone and why our ambitions did not become reality."

Summing up, James Benson said: "The summit provided a great opportunity for home builders and all those who want to make Housing for All a reality to meet, discuss and challenge what needs to be done."

"We wholly welcome the commitment by the minister to complete a review of the National Planning Framework. This policy sets out what type of homes are built and where they are built."

"Unless we review the current policy and take account of the most current confirmed data in respect of population figures and land availability the aspirations of these plans will remain just aspirations."



Ivan Yates, entrepreneur and broadcaster; Marian Finnegan, managing director - residential and advisory, Sherry FitzGerald and James Benson, director, Housing, Planning and Development Services, CIF



Rob Nicholson, principal officer - housing delivery, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage; Robert Burns, director for housing and community development, Fingal County Council; David O'Connor, member of the housing commission, chair of the commission sub-committee on housing demand, supply and delivery and Conor O'Connell, director - Southern region, CIF



Paul Kelly, director in Real Estate Finance, AIB; Paula Carroll, associate professor, UCD School of Business; Nico Van Der Merwe, VP of home and distribution, Schneider Electric and Claire Pomroy, director - development, Hines Real Estate Ireland Limited



Dan O'Brien, co-founder and managing director, Lidan Designs; Avril Behan, project director, Build Digital Project, TU Dublin and PJ Rudden, managing director, Aengus Consulting Ltd and chair, Innovation and Digital Adoption, Construction Sector Group (CSG), Department of Public Expenditure and Reform



Hubert Fitzpatrick, chief operations officer, CIF; Frank Kelly, president, CIF; PJ Rudden, managing director, Aengus Consulting Ltd and chair, Innovation and Digital Adoption, Construction Sector Group, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and Tom Parlon, director general, CIF