

IHBA Housebuilding Summit

SPECIAL REPORT

With more than 450 delegates in attendance, this year's IHBA Housebuilding Summit was a hive of activity, with members representing all areas of the construction industry in attendance.

Welcoming the crowd to Croke Park on Wednesday, March 22, Ivan Yates, entrepreneur, broadcaster and summit chair, took the opportunity to highlight the problems the industry faces.

"There's more complexity in building a house," he said. "There's more cost, more uncertainty, and more delay... for all that effort and talk, it's becoming more difficult to provide what people need, which is more houses."

To begin, Darragh O'Brien, Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, gave his ministerial address via video.

Highlighting the government's progress in recent months – including nearly 30,000 homes built in 2022, over 40,000 granted planning permission, and nearly 27,000 commencements notices for new homes – O'Brien said that "there's more to do but we're on track."

"The state will play its part and is doing so," he said. "But any long-term solution needs the entire system to pull in the same direction to achieve housing for all."

Following this, Sean O'Neill, managing director (MD) of Park Developments and chair of the IHBA, highlighted in stark terms the biggest issue facing the housing crisis: time.

Highlighting the need for minimum targets for housing instead of maximum, he mentioned how crucial it was to have up-to-date population data for formulating housing policy.

"It's fair to say the industry is supportive of development, but if the plan is broken and fundamentally wrong, we need to fix it quickly," he said. "If we don't, this housing crisis is going to last us into perpetuity."

With the opening addresses out of the way, it was time to kick off the summit proper. It did so with a bang with Marian Finnegan, managing director-residential & advisory at Sherry Fitzgerald, giving an overview of the housing market.

On the optimistic side, the economy is very solid and has a fantastic growth level, yet the warnings were clear. The sheer lack of housing stock across the country is an obvious issue, with her stating that the country needs to build at least 52,000 per year to address the issue.

Highlighted by the fact that there were only 15,000 units on sale across the entire state, she described it as an emergency rather than a crisis.

"If we don't plan for the real figures, we're never going to get there," she said. "We don't have time for the government to catch up with the data."

"Everyone needs to get behind the belief that we need over 50,000 houses built every year, and then we'll start treating this as an emergency."

She then mentioned the phrase that would be echoed throughout the entire summit: "Today is all about time; we all know what we need to do, we just need to do it quicker."

Next up was Yates conversing with Stephen Garvey, the chief executive of housebuilder Glenveagh. Touching upon a number of the obstacles the industry faces, he highlighted how capital-intensive the industry is and how policy is the biggest pain point.

"It's making the housing crisis worse," he said. "[For the state], war is out of their control, supply chain and interest rates are out of their control, planning policy is within the state's control."

The day's first panel discussion continued that theme by focusing on the planning and development bill.

This featured Michael Kelleher, group operations director of O'Flynn Group, Phoebe Duvall, planning and environmental policy officer for An Taisce, John Downey, di-



L-R: Deborah Smyth, managing director, Tempo Housing UK & Ireland; Conor O'Connell, director of housing & planning, CIF and director, Irish Home Builders Association (IHBA); Sean O'Neill, chair, Irish Home Builders Association (IHBA) and managing director, Park Developments; Ivan Yates, conference host; Ronan McGrath, managing director, McGrath Quantity Surveyors; Marian Finnegan, managing director, Residential & Advisory, Sherry Fitzgerald; John Hannigan, chief executive, Circle Voluntary Housing Association and chair, The Housing Alliance; Heber McMahon, director of technical sales, Cygnus Building Offsite; Cian O'Mahony, head of operations, SIRO; Yvonne Harris, head of customer Operations and Connection Developer Services, Uisce Éireann and John Downey, director, Downey Planning

Pictures: Maura Hickey

Time is of the essence in delivering housing for all

Ireland is hitting an emergency when it comes to housing and while time is ticking away, the industry and stakeholders are rowing in together, writes **Quinton O'Reilly**



L-R: Gavin Whelan, director of construction & operations, Cairn Homes Plc.; Dara Deering, chief executive, Home Building Finance Ireland; Sean O'Neill, managing director, Park Developments and chair, IHBA and John Hannigan, chief executive, Circle Voluntary Housing Association



L-R: Tony Reddy, chairman, Reddy Architecture + Urbanism, director and former chair, Academy of Urbanism, director; James O'Halloran, head of new business, Clúid Housing; Bob Jordan, chief executive, The Housing Agency and Patsy Supple, director, Mavro Property Ltd



L-R: Michael Kelleher, group operations director, O'Flynn Group; Paul Hogan, acting assistant secretary, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage; John Downey, director, Downey Planning and Phoebe Duvall, planning and environmental Policy Officer, An Taisce



L-R: Vince Harney, commercial finance director, Quantum Group, vice chair of the Sustainability Working Group, SCSI; PJ Rudden, managing director, Aengus Consulting Ltd and chair, Innovation and Digital Adoption, Construction Sector Group (CSG), Department of Public Expenditure and Reform; Deborah Smyth, managing director, Tempo Housing UK & Ireland; Ivan Yates, conference host and Sean Downey, director, Specialist Contracting, CIF

rector of Downey Planning, and Paul Hogan, acting assistant secretary for the department of housing, local government and heritage.

Hogan described the bill as offering "clarity on what is mandatory and what is discretionary at every stage, that can be followed through then from development plan to making a decision."

While that's a positive, there are bottlenecks with Downey mentioning how more resources should be put into the planning system.

"The biggest thing we find is

getting pre-planning meetings," he mentioned. "Since Covid, we're not with the council, there's no communication as it's all done online. We've lost that link to the councils and have to go ahead and lodge an application without pre-planning which is shocking and bizarre."

Duvall addressed misconceptions about objectors delaying planning permissions.

"The vast majority of cases aren't stopping things from being built; the vast majority of submissions are suggesting improvement or

asking for further assessment," she said. "That's an important thing to debunk, and there's no evidence to suggest that submissions by the public are what's causing delays."

Managing density and zoning

After the morning break, Tony Reddy, chairman of Reddy Architecture, spoke about how a low-rise, medium-density approach is a more viable method of achieving urban growth.

Starting more than a hundred years ago with the Tudor Walters

report, he highlighted how much of the core of planning practice across the English-speaking world came from rules from 1908 and 1918.

As a source of inspiration for Ireland, he provided examples of places like Cambridge, Sweden and Amsterdam that have compact housing and described it as "almost like opening up Aladdin's cave with all the possibilities it has for Ireland".

This tied in with the following panel discussion on balancing rapid response to the housing shortage

with achieving desired outcomes.

Reddy stayed on for this and was joined by Patsy Supple, director of Mavro Property Ltd, James O'Halloran, head of new business at Clúid Housing, and Bob Jordan, chief executive of The Housing Agency.

When asked about the obstacles faced, Supple mentioned how time is a key component. The planning system is rigorous yet takes so long to get approval, with the delay ranging from weeks to months depending on the project.

Before the lunch break, there

was time for one more panel session on improving the effective delivery of infrastructure needed for housing featuring Yvonne Harris, head of customer operations and connection developer services at Uisce Éireann, Niall Morrissey, CEO of HISCo, and Cian O'Mahony, head of operations at SIRO.

Collaboration was the keyword for Harris, which saves time for all parties and echoed by both Morrissey and O'Mahony, who mentioned how crucial early engagement is and bringing all the different stakeholders together.

"One of our biggest challenges is we're constantly put in the middle of a blame game between the different stakeholders on site," Harris said. "If we could remove all the noise, we can focus on the real issues you have."

Money talks

After revitalising themselves with lunch, Yates welcomed the audience back for the final stretch, which shifted from public policy to cost, beginning with a chat with Ronan McGrath of McGrath Construction Consultants.

Giving attendees an analysis of cost inflation in building materials, he showed the price increases between September 2021 and February 2023. Cement went up by 33.7%, timber by 40% and fabricated material by 80.3%, a sign of the hyperinflation that was occurring before the war in Ukraine began.

The penultimate panel discussion looked at making housing construction viable. It included Dara Deering, chief executive of Home Building Finance Ireland, Gavin Whelan, director of construction & operations at Cairn Homes Plc., John Hannigan, chief executive of Circle Voluntary Housing Association, with O'Neill returning from his morning welcome. On the bright side, the banks and industry have learnt from past mistakes, with Deering mentioning how lending is more prudent than before. Yet unique challenges are faced, like how some sources of finance previously relied on by construction aren't available.

When asked what strategic liaison they would like with developers, Hannigan wanted a long-term commitment, saying it needs to be ten-years long and are working on developing those relationships.

After this, there was a discussion on offsite house building with Heber McMahon, director of technical sales for Cygnus Building Offsite. Peppered throughout the day, each short video showed the process behind the project.

When McMahon was discussing the project, a time-lapse of the day played behind showing how efficient the system is.

"The main advantage is the speed," explained McMahon. "The developers find that managing the site is much easier, health and safety is easier, [with warranties] we take care of the certification for them... the foremen have more time on site to look after their own job and manage the site properly."

The final panel discussion tied in with this by focusing on making offsite construction simple. It was a packed lineup with Vince Harney, commercial finance director of Quantum Group, PJ Rudden, MD of Aengus Consulting Ltd, Deborah Smyth, MD at Tempo Housing UK & Ireland, and Sean Downey, director of specialist contracting at CIF. Downey gave a call to action: "If the industry comes together and says this is what we need, then you're going to get scale, you're going to get other companies involved."

With another housebuilding summit done and dusted, the event closed with Conor O'Connell, the director of the IHBA, thanking those who brought the summit together, and providing his summary of the day.

"The theme we wanted you to walk away with is time," he said. "Time is everything; we can construct rapidly and erect a house in one day. The problems are before we get on site; once we've enough zoned land, infrastructure on that land and planning permissions, we will deliver."



L-R: Niall Morrissey, chief executive HISCO (Housing Infrastructure Services Co.); Yvonne Harris, head of customer operations and connection developer services, Uisce Éireann and Cian O'Mahony, head of operations, SIRO



L-R: Stephen Garvey, chief executive, Glenveagh and Ivan Yates, entrepreneur, broadcaster and conference host



Darragh O'Brien, Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, addressing delegates virtually at the IHBA Housebuilding Summit in Croke Park



Conor O'Connell, director of housing & planning, CIF and director, Irish Home Builders Association (IHBA)