

**Joint Committee on Housing, Planning,
and Local Government**

**Opening Statement by John O'Connor,
Chief Executive Officer, Housing Agency**

**In relation to the General Scheme of the
Land Development Agency Bill 2019**

Introduction

Chair, Members, we are pleased to be here this morning to assist the Committee in its Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the General Scheme of the Land Development Agency Bill 2019. I am accompanied by my colleagues Jim Baneham and Catriona Lawlor.

I wish to bring to the attention of the committee that I am currently a board member of the Land Development Agency. However, my comments this morning are from the perspective of my role as Chief Executive Officer of the Housing Agency.

The primary role of the Housing Agency is to support and provide services to the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government; local authorities, approved housing bodies and others in relation to the provision of housing and housing services.

I think it is important to clarify that the Land Development Agency (LDA) has been established as a non-commercial state body, under the Local Government (Corporate Bodies) Act. The purpose of the proposed legislation is to change the LDA to become a commercial state body. The Housing Agency is supportive of the role of the LDA as an agency with a clear objective of the development of appropriate state lands for housing and associated development.

In your considerations of the general scheme of the proposed legislation, I think that it is important to reflect on a number of land and housing matters in the context of the overall purpose of the LDA.

Three key relevant issues are:

- Use of Public Land
- Housing Supply and Affordability
- Climate Change

Use of Public Land

The primary function of the LDA is the use of public land, where that land is located in right place and that developing the land is appropriate. We need to consider the level of long-term ownership and control of housing and other facilities provided on public land. The Housing Agency will be transferring three sites initially to the LDA. These lands are in Skerries, Balbriggan and Naas. To date the principles applied by the Board of the Housing Agency in transfers of land have been on the basis of use of the land for public or community purposes. To date the uses approved by the Board are for use as social housing, affordable housing, schools or community use. It is the desire of the Housing Agency that land transferred to the LDA would be primarily used for public purposes and long-term control retained.

The LDA must be supported in being provided with the state lands that are needed for their mandate in the major towns and cities. It is important to ensure that the legislation clearly empowers the LDA in getting the support and assistance from existing owners and users of state land where appropriate and to ensure the cooperation of landowners generally.

Housing Supply and Affordability

A key objective of the LDA must be to deliver housing that is affordable to rent or buy and is affordable across a wide range of income groups. There is a balance needed between the provision of housing for rental and ownership. In relation to rental housing we need to provide a wider range of rental homes where people and families have long-term secure and affordable homes. Three important aspects of social rental and cost/affordable rental are that:

- Public land used is kept in public control
- Investment and funding can be provided to give certainty of delivery
- Cost rental at scale can reduce rents in the private market

Home ownership has the advantages of;

- Giving people a clear stake in a property and an equity interest
- Security in their home; particularly compared to the private rental market
- A long-term asset as any mortgage loan is repaid

Affordable home purchase should be part of the delivery on certain public lands. The new legislative arrangements provide for local authorities retaining an equity stake in homes purchased. Again, it is critical that the system is structured so that this equity

funding is recycled so that we can provide more affordable housing for purchase for future generations.

Climate Change

Ireland is facing a climate emergency and housing has a big role to play in addressing climate change. We need to provide homes that are warm, comfortable and produce less emissions, both during construction and over the lifetime of the homes.

The location of these homes is even more critical to addressing climate change. Providing more homes within the current built up areas of our towns and cities will increase population densities and allow us to provide more public infrastructure, public transport and facilitate more people to walk and cycle. Minimising car usage reduces costs and frees up space for other uses such as public spaces and community facilities.

We need to make good use of public lands by delivering housing, other facilities and building communities that meet the needs of our society in 10 years' time, 30 years' time and 60 years' time. A simple vision would be to consider a development in terms of how it would be perceived in 30 years' time.

As we all know there is a critical need to increase the supply of housing throughout the country. This needs to be in the context of the National Planning Framework where we focus on compact growth, concentrating the delivery of housing within the current built up areas of our towns and cities. Central to this is achieving sufficient population density; we need more people per square kilometre in our towns and cities.

Conclusion

In relation to the Land Development Agency, it is important to have an organisation focused on the development and coordination of state lands. We need to use this opportunity to ensure that we are developing sustainable housing.

The state owns land in our towns and cities which is close to infrastructure, public transport, schools, shops and amenities. This land should be utilised and developed effectively. Other land in state ownership may be best used for other purposes such as agricultural or amenity land.

Chair, thank you again for the invitation to this meeting. We are happy to answer any questions which Members may have, or to provide further details as required.

Thank you.