

## **Meeting of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage**

**13 July 2023**

### **Opening Statement – Feargal Ó Coigligh, Assistant Secretary**

#### **Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage**

Thanks to the Committee for today's invitation to talk about the Defective Concrete Blocks Scheme.

I am Assistant Secretary in the Department's Housing Policy Legislation and Governance Division. In that role, I lead on housing remediation matters. I am accompanied by my colleagues, Principal Officer Derek Rafferty, Senior Adviser Building Standards John Wickham and Koen Verbruggen, Director of Geological Survey Ireland.

The new Enhanced Defective Concrete Blocks Scheme was launched two weeks ago. It provides financial support to affected homeowners in counties Donegal, Mayo, Limerick, and Clare whose dwellings were damaged by the use of defective concrete blocks in its construction.

The Scheme provides for grants of up to €420,000 for affected homeowners depending on the work required. The improved package of measures under this considerably enhanced Scheme should help to mark a new beginning for those who need to remediate their homes. The vast majority of those who need help will get all the financial assistance they need. It is important to remember that the defective concrete blocks grant scheme is not a compensation or redress scheme. Rather it is a grant scheme of last resort put in place by Government in order to voluntarily assist homeowners in a very difficult position with no other apparent options open to them to remediate actual damage to their homes.

Key features of the new Enhanced Scheme include:

- 100% grants subject to an overall maximum grant of €420,000 per dwelling,
- Grant rates in keeping with advice from SCSi,

- A government guarantee in the form of a second grant option if required for 40 years,
- A revised application process that removes the financial barrier to scheme entry,
- An independent appeals process for applicants,
- Alternative accommodation and storage costs and immediate repair works to a maximum value of €25,000,
- The expertise of the Housing Agency in assessing applications,
- The inclusion of RTB-registered rental properties,
- The inclusion of Clare and Limerick in the enhanced Scheme upon commencement and the option for other counties to enter the Scheme
- Exempt development status for like-for-like remediation works completed under the Scheme.

The Scheme is now open to new applications. Transitional arrangements for transferring applicants from the current Scheme (often called the 90/10 Scheme) are in place. Existing applicants to the original Scheme will also benefit retrospectively from the enhancements introduced under the new Scheme.

The enhanced Scheme has been legislated for following extensive consultation with all relevant stakeholders. The Minister, Departmental officials, and the relevant local councils worked closely with affected homeowners on the development of the enhanced Scheme. I would also like to thank John O'Connor, who acted as a liaison with local groups for his great assistance. This engagement continued over the past months as we worked to finalise the implementing regulations and accompanying guidelines. The Department appreciates the patience and diligence of all those involved in this final stage. Discussions were always open, helpful, and constructive. As a result, the Scheme now in place should deliver significant improvements for all concerned.

Furthermore, the positive working relationships developed during the process will hopefully be carried through to the Implementation Steering Group, comprised of officials from the relevant local authorities, the Department, the Housing Agency, and the Homeowner's Liaison Officer. Given the complex nature of the Scheme, it will be essential to keep the operation of the regulations and guidelines under review. This Group will meet in the coming weeks and help ensure the smooth and successful roll-out of the enhanced Scheme. It will be tasked with working through issues as they arise and making recommendations if further changes to the regulations or guidelines are needed. This Group will also prepare a first report within six months, on the operation of the Scheme as requested by the Minister.

I understand that a focus of concern for some has been technical issues around what precise standard should or should not apply as assessments are made in terms of eligibility for the Scheme.

The I.S. 465 assessment standard dealing with testing and categorisation of damaged buildings incorporating concrete blocks containing certain deleterious materials' is currently being reviewed by the National Standards Authority of Ireland – the NSAI. The Department is supporting the NSAI to deliver a wide range of research in support of this review.

An interagency Defective Concrete Blocks – Technical Matters Steering Group has been established to support and inform the NSAI Standardisation Program about technical issues. The steering group includes representatives from the Department, NSAI, Geological Survey Ireland (GSI), Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, and the Housing Agency. The Steering Group has agreed on a process to specify, procure, fund, and manage research projects.

The GSI has also established a procurement framework for the Provision of Laboratory Analysis Services to support Geological Survey Ireland's "Irish Construction Materials" Project: Concrete Products.

Research proposals developed by the relevant NSAI Technical Committees, including research to investigate pyrrhotite oxidation in concrete blocks and the potential impact of deleterious materials on foundations, have been commissioned and are making progress.

The Department and NSAI are also working closely with Construct Innovate - Ireland's National Research Centre for Construction Technology and Innovation on several research topics to inform the technical advancement of standards relevant to concrete blocks.

My colleagues and I will happily answer as many questions as possible today.

**ENDS**