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Reform and policymaking: Theory and practice in the Irish housing context

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Abstract

It is often a crisis that is the necessary catalyst for change, and the financial crash provided the stimulus for the recent raft of public sector reforms since 2010. A new decade provides an opportunity to assess the reforms, and to question where the reform around housing sits in relation to theoretical approaches to the policy process. The Irish public policy process is the result of a historical mix of ideological and cultural practice, social policy and political process, and it is this complexity which provides its uniqueness. However, theories of the policy process aid effective analysis of policy landscapes, and the use of elements from a range of approaches enables a fuller understanding of that complexity. By offering a theoretical perspective, and providing the reader with a different outlook, we explore the drivers for, and outcomes of, change in the Irish housing context. We find that the reform agenda is itself a means of maintaining the current, as it is unlikely that the reforms implemented since 2010 will address the structural flaws evident in the housing crisis. Instead, a more likely outcome is that the reforms are a necessary change so as to maintain the status quo.

Keywords: Reform, policy process, theory, policymaking, housing

Introduction

Much has been written about Ireland's experience of the financial crisis which enveloped and subsumed the country from 2008. The impacts of this relatively short, sharp shock have lasted longer than the event itself, and can still be seen. Much has also been written about the resulting austerity, and the impact this had on poverty, inequalities and access to opportunity (see, for example, Coulter & Nagle, 2015; or Heffernan et al., 2017). Since this period in Ireland's history a significant number of reforms have been implemented across the spectrum of public sector activity. In this paper we want to question where the reform around housing sits in relation to theoretical approaches to the policy process.

Given the impact that the financial crash and subsequent bailout had on Irish democracy, economic sovereignty and trust in democratic structures, it could reasonably be concluded that the central platform for the general election in 2011 was for political reform (Murphy, 2017). Over the following years a raft of reform proposals was taken forward for implementation, the outcomes of which are still being assessed. Some measures established new agencies, frameworks and strategies, whilst others focused on specific public sector reform, tightening and redefining governance for existing organisations. In relation to local government reforms, 'the government concentrated on expenditure consolidation, cost savings, value for money and efficiency' (Quinlivan, 2017, p. 123). This might also be relevant to other reforms more generally. Such reform, particularly during the time of austerity, has been focused on output legitimacy, including efficiency and cost-effectiveness, rather than seeking input improvements to democracy, such as citizen integration and participation (Quinlivan, 2017). As Lewis (2019, p. 285) suggests, 'the reform agenda for the past decade has been dominated by the need to cut costs, improve efficiencies and, only in recent years, to begin the process of securing improved outcomes'. Indeed, by using a Multiple Streams Framework approach, MacCarthaigh (2017, p. 161) shows that the post-crisis period between 2011 and 2016 was a 'window of opportunity presented by the crisis' which 'was exploited by policy entrepreneurs... to implement major reform efforts'.

Although some have argued that reform is often about 'closing the stable door after the horse has bolted' (Coakley, 2013, p. 239), it is often a crisis that is the necessary catalyst for change. Analysing the policy landscape is, however, a complex process, and we have

therefore applied the advice of Sabatier (2007, p. 330) to ‘use multiple theories if possible’. Utilising five theories of the public policy process, we highlight how elements from each approach can explain the drivers for, and outcomes of, change.

We seek to offer a theoretical perspective, providing the reader with a different outlook. This paper therefore considers two key elements of the reform agenda. We first consider the impact of the crisis, as a perturbation requiring a reform response, and set out how reform is a key part of this process. Importantly, we recognise the elaborate nature of the Irish policy landscape, and the effect that this complexity has on reform. Secondly, we provide a general assessment of the likely outcomes of those reforms. In assessing reform around housing and placing this within theory we detect an approach which is cognisant of Irish history, culture and society, and highlight that elements from theories are evident in the instigation and development of policy change in the Irish context.

The paper is set out in the following four sections. The first focuses on the practice of reform, particularly in the field of housing, whilst the second contextualises theoretical approaches with regards to the shock of the financial crisis and the resulting reform process and policy response. This initial outline sets the scene for the final sections, which discuss the political philosophy driving the reform, and the overarching outcomes of the reform agenda to date, before providing conclusions.

Reform in the area of housing

Academic analysis has been questioning of whether the Irish housing system is fit for purpose. The marketisation of the social housing sector and the wider financialisation of the housing system have become a key facet (Hearne, 2020). Whilst property ownership continues to be perceived as being a good long-term investment (Byrne & Norris, 2018; Molloy et al., 2018), it is the increasing emphasis on ownership of property for rental and the derivation of an income which has exacerbated housing inequalities (Dukelow & Considine, 2017). These factors, as drivers of public policy, have impacted and shaped the Irish housing system, a system which ‘reflects very few of the attributes of best practice’ (Lyons, 2017, p. 143), and instead is considered as being dysfunctional (Byrne & Norris, 2018; Corrigan et al., 2019; Fields & Hodkinson, 2018; Hearne, 2020; Norris, 2017).

Given the severity of the financial crash in Ireland, and the reciprocity between this and a dysfunctional housing system on cause and effect, it would be expected that the state's response would include some attempts at reform. Therefore, in addition to the identified need for procedural reform as a means to address concerns of accountability, transparency and openness, and to instil trust in processes, there has been a drive for more structural and facilitative reform in relation to the housing field, to improve the delivery of new housing and opportunities for home ownership and to address homelessness.

An early measure was the establishment of the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) in 2009, a state-owned company formed to acquire and manage toxic real-estate resources (Byrne, 2016). Although outside of the window for the reforms analysed within this paper, its scope and impact warrant mention. With a core objective to reduce the contingent €30 billion of bad debt, it seeks to maximise recovery from property-backed loans, through the delivery of majority market-priced housing and office accommodation. A subsidiary, National Asset Loan Management Designated Activity Company, guarantees, insures and makes loans, whilst the allocation of strategic development zones in the Dublin Docklands and Poolbeg forms a key aspect of its aim to deliver 21,000 residential units by the end of 2021 (NAMA, 2020). Since 2012, through its National Asset Residential Property Services, NAMA has sought to promote social housing delivery, mainly through acquiring the incomplete units of unfinished 'ghost estates' and leasing to accredited housing bodies or local authorities (Sirr, 2019).

Part V of the Planning and Development Act, 2000, had made available a mechanism, within developments of over four units, for the provision of affordable or social housing. Under the provisions of the Act, up to 20 per cent of housing-scheme land or completed dwellings would be transferred to the local authority. Following the crash, the viability of developments became the focus of the development lobby (Waldron, 2019), and Lewis (2019) describes how the Urban Regeneration and Housing Act, 2015, subsequently reduced the percentage provided to local authorities from 20 per cent to 10 per cent on developments over nine dwellings, to encourage development by reducing costs whilst reflecting the changed post-crash economic situation. The 2015 Act also reduced the options available for developers to fulfil their Part V obligations, by removing the alternative of a financial payment. Similarly, the reconfiguration of

the planning system since 2017, to ‘speed up the planning process’ (An Bord Pleanála, 2017, p. 1), has resulted in a fast-track planning process for large residential development – those of over 100 dwelling units or 200 student beds – that bypasses normal governance arrangements (Lennon & Waldron, 2019) by sending relevant planning applications to An Bord Pleanála, which up to then had been the body for hearing planning *appeals*, and not adjudicating planning applications.

Other reform sought to formalise and extend longer-term trends. The Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act of 2014 heralded a milestone in the reform of social housing provision. A key part of the Act was the introduction of the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP), which sought to replace previous reform mechanisms, such as Rent Supplement and the Rental Accommodation Scheme, providing housing through direct placement into privately rented accommodation or providing financial support for eligible families to access the private rental sector. As such, the Act sets out that the provision of housing assistance is deemed to be an appropriate form of social housing support for qualifying households. In addition, the Act also sought to encourage private landlords into the market and provided for tenant purchase, including the Tenant (Incremental) Purchase Scheme from 2016. However, these mechanisms, and particularly the subsidy provided to the private rental sector to deliver social housing objectives, have increased demand and fuelled rental prices increases (Byrne & Norris, 2018). Reform, provided through amending the existing residential tenancy legislation, has sought to address this by designating rent pressure zones, within which rents cannot be increased by more than 4 per cent annually. Five local authorities in the Dublin area and Cork City were initially designated in December 2016. Since then, rent pressure zones have been extended to cover the majority of tenancies in Ireland.

Whilst not strictly reform, this period has been a fertile time for the publishing of a number of strategies and plans, which highlight the narratives, if not the actions, of government. These have promised, variously, a commitment to end homelessness (*The Homeless Policy Statement*, 2011); delivery of more social housing (*The Social Housing Strategy 2020*, 2014); to address homelessness, accelerate social housing, build more homes, improve the rental sector and utilise existing housing (*Rebuilding Ireland – An Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness*, 2016); and to support the delivery of an increased level of supply of purpose-built student accommodation (*Student Accommodation Strategy*, 2018).

Amongst the good intentions there has been the practical implementation of possible solutions to elements of the housing crisis. A cost-rental pilot scheme in Stepside, Dublin, is being developed which provides affordability through linking rent to the long-term costs of the development. Meanwhile, a Housing First model is being applied by several charities and Dublin City Council, 'directed at people who are sleeping rough or have experienced repeat homelessness and have mental health and addiction problems' (Sirr, 2019). With no requirement for the participant to be 'housing ready', this is a recovery-orientated approach that centres on moving people experiencing homelessness quickly into independent and permanent housing, and providing additional supports and services as needed.

Other initiatives have not been so universally popular, with the 2015 reform of design standards (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2015) providing a controversial national requirement focusing on reducing the cost of housing development rather than improving quality. Similarly, the measurement of housing output was also controversial, as the methodology used could be misleading. The census of 2016 added only 8,800 new houses to stock, 'despite over 51,000 new houses having been reported as completed', raising the importance of independent assessment of 'politically important data such as house-building metrics' (Sirr, 2019, p. 131). The counting of new housing was handed to the Central Statistics Office in 2018, which found that, from 2011 to 2017, official figures had over-reported the number of new houses being built by some 30,000 units (Sirr, 2019, p. 67).

Finally, the Land Development Agency (LDA) was launched in September 2018, with the remit to build 150,000 new homes within twenty years. Modelled on proactive land-management practices in Germany and the Netherlands, the LDA will initially focus on the use of state-owned land. It is too early to assess the impact of the LDA; however, the intention of using compulsory purchase has been subject to questions of incompatibility with EU competition laws, whilst the delivery of housing on a 10 per cent social rent, 30 per cent affordable purchase ratio and 60 per cent open market purchase has raised concerns amongst housing activists, who fear that the LDA will merely be another profit-orientated residential developer.

Since 2010 reform in the housing field has been wide-ranging, with structural and procedural change seeking to address supply and demand. Other, wider reform measures implemented since 2010 will also have an impact on the area of housing. These have included

widening the input of stakeholders in the policy development process, such as through pre-legislative scrutiny (since 2011); providing oversight of processes, through establishing a National Oversight and Audit Commission (in 2014) and an Office of the Planning Regulator (in 2018); refocusing the leadership of reform within government by establishing the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform since 2011; ‘de-agencification’ and consolidating corporate management of local government, including the reduction in the number of local authorities, the abolition of town councils and augmentation of regional assemblies (2012, 2014); and instigating new regulations, such as those for lobbying activities identified by Chari et al. (2007, p. 422) as aiming to overcome ‘concerns over the democratic deficit, [and] the openness and transparency of government’.

For some of these measures, it is too early to assess their impact; for others, an initial take on the reforms can be done. The next section links the theory to the aims of these reforms.

Linking theory and reform

‘Policy conveys the sense that activity is deliberate and purposeful rather than erratic or random’ (Colebatch, 1998, p. 72). However, this simple explanation of deliberate and purposeful action masks a process which is itself complex, and comprised of intricate structures, contestations of power and political conflict, taking place within a web of interwoven relationships and personal interests. Policymaking is often a messy, fraught, imbalanced process. Academics and policy researchers have therefore sought to develop theories of policymaking to provide simplification, and a means of facilitating better understanding (Sabatier, 2007).

An individual theory of the public policy process can provide a pointer from which the context within a specific domain can be analysed. However, utilising a range of theoretical approaches provides a better understanding of public sector and policymaking reform. This section contextualises the reforms undertaken since 2010 with five theoretical approaches (Table 1). Each has been the focus of discussion by the forum of experts contributing to the *Theories of Policy Process* publication (see Weible & Sabatier, 2018), which over twenty years, and in four editions, has provided a debating setting to promote and refine policy process theories, frameworks and models. Schmitt (2012) recognises that comparative policy analysis falls into three groups: approaches which compare public policies; those which

consider patterns; and those which address decision-making processes. The particular theories chosen for this review each have application to the third group, reflecting that reform and policymaking are a process. Additionally, elements of each of these five theories are evident in the recent development of public policy in the Irish housing context, and in the instigation and the implementation of the reform agenda.

Table 1: Summary of theories

<i>Theoretical approach</i>	<i>Key elements</i>
PET (Punctuated Equilibrium Theory)	Policy develops incrementally, where the prevailing political system and vested interests dampen change, promoting continuance of the equilibrium, but significant events provide for policy change. The policy landscape is typified as being one of long periods of stability or status quo, punctuated by short periods of shift or change (Baumgartner et al., 2018).
PFT (Policy Feedback Theory)	Policy, once developed, impacts on future policy process choices. The development and implementation of policy facilitates the growth and expansion of networks and shapes public perception regarding the limits of public action, protecting the policy-path status quo.
ACF (Advocacy Coalition Framework)	Policymaking is the result of competition between coalitions of actors, advocating beliefs about certain policy options, and promoting their own vision and opinion about available policy choices. The four paths to major policy change are: policy-orientated learning, external shocks, internal shocks and a hurting stalemate.
MSF (Multiple Streams Framework)	The policy process is comprised of three streams: problem, policy, politics. Stage alignment, or a ‘policy window’, facilitated by those with an interest in making policy, known as ‘policy entrepreneurs’, provides the impetus for policy development. An approach used to good effect by Irish academics: MacCarthaigh (2017), in relation to the reform of Irish public service; Murphy (2017), in relation to the role of the policy entrepreneur; and Lennon & Waldron, (2019) in relation to de-democratisation of the planning process.
NPF (Narrative Policy Framework)	Considers the impact of social construction on the policy process, which is debated on narratives. With the potential to exert significant influence, the use of narrative conserves, protects and supports policy choices by legitimising action.

Major policy change, or punctuations, are categorised by John & Bevan (2012) into high- and low-saliency events. That the financial crisis was a high-saliency event for Ireland is not contested. There is no doubt that the upheaval during 2008, and subsequent recession,

represented a significant shock, or punctuation, to the status quo. The global financial crisis swept over the Irish economy, including the area of housing, ensuring that change was inevitable. The imposition of fiscal restraint and recalibration measures by the troika, comprised of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, equated for many a loss of sovereignty. This represented new actors entering the policy arena, broadening the debate and increasing the urgency for change. In this context, the positive feedback was for reform to focus on efficiency, value for money and cost savings (Quinlivan, 2017).

Four paths to major policy change are identified by Sabatier & Weible (2007, p. 208): ‘policy-orientated learning, external shocks, internal shocks, [and] a hurting stalemate’. Each are recognisable within the historical development of the Irish housing system. The potential policy-orientated learning might be represented by the increase in social housing from 1948 to 1955, following developments in other European social-democratic countries (Dukelow & Considine, 2017). External shock can be associated with the 2008 financial crisis, with the hurting stalemate in the following years through to the present. The potential internal shock of the 2020 general election (GE2020) was quickly surpassed by the new external shock of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The internal shock of GE2020 provides an example of alignment of problem, policy and politics frames into a policy window. This window enabled the housing crisis to be considered and very nearly accepted as a problem to be addressed by political engagement and policy solution, and resonates with the alignment of problem, policy and politics espoused by Kingdon (1984). A progressive alliance, capturing the national mood around housing and homelessness, might have been close to facilitating a paradigm change (Hall, 1993; McGee, 2020). However, despite pre-election commitments, the fall-out of GE2020 and the subsequent economic shock of the pandemic mean that such a paradigm shift is unlikely to be on the agenda for significant change.

Recognising that past policies constrain future policymaking, and identified by Béland (2010) as lock-in effects, path dependency is evident when considering that current policy requires an ongoing resourcing commitment for both its implementation and incremental evolution. This ongoing resource commitment reduces the opportunity for new policy creation and development and highlights the power that historic policy has in shaping political behaviour, attitudes and ultimately current policy processes. Therefore, policies shape politics (Pierson, 1993). This is illustrated by Khare (2018) with

Chicago's agenda to privatise public housing. Her study recognises that the ceding of power from the public sphere, to a reliance on the private sector, has resulted in the market being considered as the only path to remedy systemic market failure in the provision of affordable housing. Fitzgerald et al. (2019) recognise a similar reduction in policy options in Ireland. This path dependency is also acknowledged in the Irish policy context by Norris (2014, 2016) and Lewis (2019), typified by the consensus on home ownership (and inertia around creating a viable rental system that would equate to home ownership), supported by 'the innate conservatism of Irish politics' resulting in the limited proposals for, and instigation of, change (Ferriter, 2004, p. 19).

Baumgartner et al. (2018) identify the difficulties that groups have in initiating or instigating change, particularly if their stance differs from those of the prevailing status quo. This is supported by research by Mettler & Sorelle (2018), which found that interest groups form to support the continuance of a policy, responding to policy change rather than coalescing to lobby for policy change. This suggests that public sector actors 'mobilise their allies [and] demobilise those who oppose them' (Mettler & Sorelle, 2018, p. 111) through the policy process. Research by Lennon & Waldron (2019), looking at the influence of lobbyists on the planning process, suggests a similarity in the Irish development context.

Table 2 sets out the link between three specific and key reforms relating to housing provision, in relation to theoretical approaches. This emphasises the role that a multi-theoretical approach can have in helping to understand the context and drivers which enable, or indeed inhibit, major policy change.

Although punctuations, or perturbations, can be a catalyst for change, often instead of facilitating major policy change, punctuations might even dampen the momentum for that policy change, promoting a retrenchment of the status quo. Dukelow (2011) identifies that the financial crash of 2008 led to a deeper free market response in Ireland. Similarly, the experience of Khare (2018) of market activity suggests that the housing crisis is unlikely to be addressed by reform which continues to promote the market. Therefore, a question remains as to whether the reform agenda since 2010, and any post-Covid-19 response, might lead to further retrenchment of public sector involvement, with a greater role for the private sector? Such retrenchment might be aided by further narratives of the planning system as being an inhibitor both of development and of wider economic recovery (Lennon & Waldron, 2019; Parker & Doak, 2012).

Table 2: Reform within a theoretical frame

<i>Reform</i>	<i>Theoretical link</i>
An Bord Pleanála, Strategic Housing Development Planning Applications (2017)	<p>PET – the financial crash was a punctuation to the equilibrium, which enabled a refocusing of public policy reform onto the mechanisms of financing the housing development process.</p> <p>NPF – a narrative of planning inhibiting development, and therefore being the problem, is highlighted with the need to ‘speed up the planning process’ (An Bord Pleanála, 2017). Similarly, the narrative of an onerous planning system, requiring new developments to provide affordable housing within a difficult financial setting, focuses on the viability of development schemes.</p>
Urban Regeneration and Housing Act, 2015	<p>ACF – a historically strong development lobby within Irish political economy is able to influence and promote change.</p> <p>MSF – the development lobby was able to use legitimate forms of struggle to align streams (problem, policy, politics) to form a policy window, with the planning system being the identified problem.</p> <p>PFT – with an installed private sector approach, the positive feedback and path dependency is for more private sector freedom to provide a solution to the housing crisis.</p>
Housing Assistance Payment (HAP)	<p>PET – the financial crash was a punctuation to the equilibrium, which enabled further public policy reform to increase reliance on private provision, with focus on the mechanisms of financing of the housing development process as part of a wider approach to development and social welfare provision.</p> <p>NPF – a narrative is perpetuated that the private sector is inherently efficient and is able therefore to deliver social objectives efficiently and effectively. The media perpetuate the narrative of social housing stigmatisation.</p> <p>ACF – a historically strong development lobby within the Irish political economy is potentially able to influence and promote change which facilitates buoyant buy-to-let and build-to-rent markets and an increasingly important private rental sector.</p> <p>MSF – the alignment of streams (problem, policy, politics), where the public provision of social housing (including resulting stigmatisation and residualisation) is the problem.</p>

Table 2: Reform within a theoretical frame (Contd.)

<i>Reform</i>	<i>Theoretical link</i>
	PFT – a history of movement from the direct supply of public housing to a facilitating role for the property market, with a reliance on the private sector in providing social outcomes. The positive feedback is for more private sector freedom to provide a solution to the housing crisis, involving more state-led development of private markets.

This assessment of the public policy process highlights the links between theory and practice in the Irish context.

Discussion

Whilst a full analysis of specific reforms may be premature at this point, with some measures only recently implemented, this discussion facilitates an initial assessment of the reform agenda around housing undertaken since 2010.

There is little doubt that the global financial crisis of 2008 represents a punctuation, a shock of such significance to act as a catalyst for change. In the context of housing in Ireland, Finnerty et al. (2016, p. 237) recognise that policy transformation had begun in the 1990s towards an ‘increased reliance on private provision’ but had ‘been given added impetus’ following the 2008 crisis. Bourdieu (1999, p. 183) illustrates the process of transferring state activity from the left to the right hand of the state; he describes the shifting emphasis from the social functions of state to the economic, and the ‘transfer into the private sector of the public services with the most profit potential’. He rationalises that neoliberalism facilitates the distribution of resources and refocuses public action from tackling the causes of inequality to tackling the symptoms or effects of inequality. In the context of public housing provision, this is represented by the transfer from the provision of subsidies to construct social housing, replaced instead by ‘allocations to individuals’ (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 182).

Formalising a long-term trend of replacing social housing with allowances to subsidise private renting households, the HAP introduced in 2014 increases reliance on the private sector, and costs the Irish state €750 million per year, and could potentially cost over €1 billion by 2022 (Ó Broin, 2019). This is in addition to other rent supplement and homelessness budgets. It is this delivery of social housing objectives through the subsidy to the private rental sector

which has been identified as increasing demand and fuelling rental price increases in this market (Byrne & Norris, 2018; Ó Broin, 2019), necessitating a secondary policy response of rent control to mitigate the negative impacts of the primary policy. Examination of the Irish policy area seems to fit within Bourdieu's analysis, representing a transfer from the subsidy of construction, which might have societal benefits, to the individualisation of allocations, benefiting the few. Indeed, Murphy & Dukelow (2016, p. 320) recognise the state-led development of private markets, including the private rental sector, as 'forms of corporate welfare, where social policy becomes a state-supported quasi-market for private profit'. This reliance on the offer of for-profit landlords 'is clearly inferior to the traditional local authority direct provision offer in relation to... "security" and pose troubling questions in terms of "availability"' (Finnerty et al., 2016).

But it is the large-scale change from public to private ownership of social housing provision, alongside buy-to-let financing (Ryan-Collins et al., 2017) and build-to-rent developments (Hearne, 2020), which validates Torgersen's 1987 description of housing being 'the wobbly pillar under the welfare state'. In the UK, Bowie (2017, p. 34) suggests that the pillar had 'been removed altogether': is there synergy in this statement for Ireland? Kemeny (1995, pp. 173–4) recognises that 'housing lies in a grey zone between the "universals" of the welfare state and major consumer goods. In some countries housing is treated more like a "universal" while in others it is treated more like a consumer good', though 'housing has a tendency to change status... within societies over time'. In the Irish context, Lewis (2019, p. 45) identifies the 'privatisation of social housing' as being a policy measure since the 1930s, though the reduction in public subsidy from the mid 1980s similarly undermined the welfare approach.

Reforms post 2010 continue this trajectory. Finnerty et al. (2016, p. 237) highlight the negative effects of 'the dilution of housing security and the uncertainty of household access given the volatile nature of much of this private provision'. It is this change of policy direction from direct supply of public housing to a facilitating role for the property market, with the resulting fall in home ownership, which is recognised by Hearne (2020, p. 2) as 'nothing less than a structural shock to the Irish housing system'.

The commodification and financialisation of housing systems, with the introduction of globalised finance and vulture capital activity, have been identified by Fields & Hodkinson (2018) as resulting in housing system dysfunctionality. Byrne & Norris (2018) similarly identify the

role that the global financial crisis has on promoting dysfunctionality in the Irish context, which Hearne (2020, p. 16) suggests is the start of 'housing dystopia'. Reforms since 2010 appear to have done little to change this underlying cause of dysfunction. Despite the impact of global finance, 'domestic policy played its part in the housing crisis' (Lewis, 2019, p. 94), with Hearne (2020, p. 11) suggesting that the crisis is a result of 'neoliberal housing and economic policies pursued by government'. The National Economic and Social Council (2018, p. 2) recognises that 'the availability of land for housing in appropriate locations, in a way that is consistent with affordability, has long been an unresolved policy issue in Ireland'. Historical policy processes, personal preference and a redefinition towards free-market provision, supported by recent reform, has arguably perpetuated a flawed housing system which negatively impacts at every level of housing provision.

Dukelow & Considine (2017, p. 292) identify that 'social housing estates remain highly spatially segregated'; however, despite residualisation and stigmatisation, there continues to be high demand for social housing, and the limited supply has an impact on the private rental sector. Historically, this sector was 'an unattractive vehicle for private investment, and lacking the subsidies provided for home ownership and social housing' (Lewis, 2019, p. 301). However, the 'shift in public policy in the 1980s sparked a revival in investor interest' (Lewis, 2019, p. 301), which has been augmented by reforms since 2010, as the state provides housing through direct placement into privately rented accommodation or provides financial support for eligible families to access the private rental sector (Ó Broin, 2019). Reform in the housing support area, through the development of HAP, accords with Dukelow's 2011 assessment that the post-crash period of retrenchment maintained the market-led paradigm.

Mainly altered to facilitate housing delivery, planning reform has also followed this trajectory. Measures implemented since 2010 have promoted a role for the state of facilitating development, often in the face of opposition on grounds of democratic participation or simply upholding meaningful standards. This is evident in both Ireland and the UK, where the scapegoating of planning as a major inhibitor to development has allowed it to be re-engineered to facilitate private sector profitability (Lennon & Waldron, 2019; Parker & Doak, 2012). This provides a good illustration of theoretical approaches to coalitions and the use of narrative, as Waldron (2019, p. 685) identifies that the mechanisms of the state, including the planning system, are 'being repurposed to facilitate a finance-led regime of urban growth'.

Reforms such as fast-track planning and viability assessments get to the crux of the issue and are a response to unprovable claims that the planning process for development is too complex, or a burden, and therefore is part of the problem. In this respect, Parker & Doak (2012) highlight that the planning system is often identified as an inhibitor and a constraint to efficient development. The Irish development lobby used legitimate forms of struggle to accrue agency and to successfully institutionalise its objectives through recent reforms, to obtain recognition that there is not so much a housing crisis but rather a planning crisis (Lennon & Waldron, 2019). Despite these reduced requirements, Part V only delivered 1,326 new dwellings in 2019 (Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, 2019).

The programme for government between Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party includes an ambition for less reliance on HAP, and a target of 50,000 new social housing units over five years (Government of Ireland, 2020), a target that is significantly less than the 60,000 units outlined in Fine Gael's manifesto (Fine Gael, 2020, p. 67). There is an explicit (and understandable) bias in favour of home ownership, which is accentuated by the inertia around the creation of an equal and equitable rental sector. Renting will never deliver the same benefits as ownership but adjusting the benefits of ownership could make renting a more equitable alternative.

Regarding local government reform, Ogbazghi (2020, p. 1), argues that, despite reforming zeal, 'the impetus for change was neutralized by constitutive features of Irish political culture, conventional practices, and established elite interests. While critical of existing arrangements, politicians found it impossible to accomplish change'. This position has wider agency beyond local government reform, being as applicable for housing and planning reforms. Indeed, early criticism on the advisory role of the Planning Regulator has focused on the centralising aspect of the process, providing more power to the minister (Ó Broin, 2019). Similarly, whilst effective overview and scrutiny is conducted by local authorities in the UK, as a key part of governance arrangements, the National Oversight and Audit Commission is a centralised, national approach. Whilst neither of these centralising aspects are problematical per se, it is an augmentation of centrally held power within an already centralised state.

Deliberation is ongoing regarding the effectiveness of the lobbying regulations. Despite weaknesses of the legislation around the cooling-

off period between serving as a politician, civil servant or advisor and taking a lobbying role, known as ‘revolving door provisions’, Murphy (2017, p. 141) regards this legislation as ‘the government’s finest hour’ by ‘ensuring openness in public life’ and making ‘Irish politics more transparent and accountable’. Murphy (2017, p. 142) further suggests that now ‘lobbyists do not have undue influence’ and therefore policymaking ‘is conducted... free from any taint of corruption’; with the legislation ‘guaranteeing that the state has the appropriate architecture to ensure openness, transparency and accountability in public life’. Keeling et al. (2017, p. 26) see the 2015 Act as the ‘starting point’ in ‘attempts to regulate lobbying through the legislative process’, and suggest that future amendments will make the regulations stronger. However, despite two reviews and amendments to tighten the regulations, and publication of a code of conduct for persons carrying on lobbying activities (2018), Waldron (2019, p. 702) thinks that ‘Ireland’s system of lobbying regulation can be too easily sidestepped by corporate actors based on the informal relationships they cultivate with policymakers and the economic resources they can leverage in the policymaking process’. The provisions within the regulations, which provide for a ‘cooling-off’ period is recognised by Murphy (2020) as ‘limited and contentious... [and] moreover, the regulator has no power of sanction’. In the housing policy arena, the Lobbying Act is arguably yet more ‘pretendy’ legislation.

It is arguably too early to adequately assess the impact and outcomes of the reforms in the area of housing implemented since 2010. However, an assessment can be made on the reforms as part of a settling process, as the policy process finds its new equilibrium. Radical action has been taken to initiate new policies, particularly around reform which facilitates the market, or which centralises activity, though transformation has been less radical in other areas which might protect consumers or augment provision. Figure 1 sets out the reforms around the binaries of retrenchment or augmentation, and centralisation or localism, clearly outlining the centralisation and retrenchment outcomes.

Some reforms around trust have caught the media attention, though these might be a form of media-friendly window-dressing, whilst more significant reform perpetuates the current policy paradigm, characterised by retrenchment and centralisation. Perhaps the change brought by the tranche of reform during 2010–20 was necessary to ensure that the status quo might continue.

Figure 1: Indicative outcomes of reform and direction

Conclusions

The Irish public policy process is the result of a historical mix of ideological and cultural practice, social policy and political process. It is this complexity which provides its uniqueness. However, existing theories of the policy process aid effective analysis of policy landscapes, and the use of elements from a range of theoretical approaches is necessary to enable a fuller understanding of that complexity. We have sought to offer a theoretical perspective, providing the reader with a different outlook, utilising five theories of the policy process to explore the drivers for, and outcomes of, change in the Irish housing context. This has included recognition that policymaking is the result of competition between coalitions of actors, that their narrative can socially construct reality, and that policy change can occur when a problem is aligned with a policy and political support, as exemplified by the outcomes of recent general elections. Similarly, this theoretical perspective also reflects the importance of path dependency, and the effect that previous policy decisions can have on the present, highlighted by the continued trajectory towards a market approach to housing provision. Therefore, elements of each of these theories or frameworks are evident in the Irish housing policy process.

It is the theory of punctuated equilibrium, however, that has particular resonance with the development of the housing system and

the related policy process which has exhibited mainly incremental policy change. This period of reform is a recognisable settling process, as the policy process found its new equilibrium, and different influences, recognised by different theoretical approaches, have both promoted and at times inhibited change. The reforms around trust have masked the more deliberative and paradigm-enforcing reforms around housing (HAP) and planning (Part V; strategic developments), which have an outcome of retrenchment over augmentation, and centralisation over localism. The result is cognisant of Irish history, culture and society: globalist and internationalist in outlook, juxtaposed and coexisting with a more localist (rather than localism) and clientelist practice.

Social, economic and political shocks have provided the impetus for significant historic policy change, though more recent perturbations emphasise that major punctuations are usually followed by retrenchment. The reforms since 2010 and the outcomes of GE2020 continue that trajectory. Despite being fought on a platform for change, the outcome of GE2020 is the formation of a new, grand coalition, potentially perpetuating retrenchment instead of promoting radical transformational policy change, though time will tell in this regard.

The crash provided the policy window to undertake significant reform; the Covid-19 crisis is likely to provide a similar window. The question is whether a post-Covid-19 response will lead to further retrenchment and centralisation of the public sector, whilst the private sector is augmented and facilitated. This is likely to be supplemented by further narratives of the planning system being an inhibitor to development and of wider economic recovery, and so requiring further reform.

Historical policy processes and free-market provision have provided a flawed housing system, which negatively impacts at every level of provision. In this respect, the crisis, whilst still ongoing, has a deeply historical basis. It also has an ideological, economic and cultural basis, with significant social impacts for those struggling to find secure, safe, appropriate and affordable housing. The dysfunction is a result of the same historical and cultural practice, social and economic policy, and political processes which have influenced the public policymaking process. Ireland has a proud counter-reformation history, and this continues to the modern day. However, the reform is itself a means of maintaining the current; it is unlikely that the reforms implemented since 2010 will address the structural flaws evident in the

housing crisis. A more likely outcome is that the reforms have been necessary to maintain the status quo.

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