



## 50th Anniversary Review

### 1960 - 2010

The following review details the history of the National Building Agency Limited. Initially the National Building Agency (NBA) was established with the primary objective of providing housing for workers in the wake of the national industrial drive experienced in the early 1960's. However, the history of the NBA provides us with a much richer story. Reacting to Government policy the NBA gradually diversified, and acquired a more multifaceted role than was initially anticipated. In order to help the Government meet its housing targets it worked closely with many Government Departments and Local Authorities throughout the country. The NBA has not just provided assistance in residential housing however; it also provided expertise in urban planning and design, conservation and restoration works, a multitude of civic construction projects, and more recently in local and regional development plans.

The narrative of the Agency mirrors 50 years of successive Governments' social housing policies. Its partnership with Local Authorities began with the supplementary construction programmes that came out of the housing crisis of the late 1960's. In the ensuing years, the Agency went on to work with its Local Authority clients to transform blighted areas in Irish towns and

cities, in so doing it set new standards in the planning and construction of social housing in Ireland. The Agency also worked extensively with voluntary and co-operative housing groups along with the Health Boards as modern Ireland's new multifaceted approach to social housing took shape. In recent years another side to the NBA has been highlighted, as it has been at the forefront of the national drive towards the use of sustainable design techniques and the introduction of innovative energy saving practices.

In July 2009, in its report to Government, The Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes it was recommended that the NBA would be merged with three other housing Agencies; the Homeless Agency, the Centre for Housing Research and the Affordable Homes Partnership, into a single Agency. This will open a new chapter in the life of the NBA, which throughout its history, has demonstrated a unique ability to react and adapt appropriately to changing circumstances. There is no doubt that the current adverse economic climate will test this new body; however, the fifty year history of the NBA as outlined in this Review demonstrates that within its new capacity, the Agency can rise to such challenges.

## Celebrating 50 years of the National Building Agency

The 1960's marked a watershed in the industrial development of Ireland. The then Taoiseach, Sean Lemass is synonymous with this period of economic change in Irish history but less well known is the story of an agency that was born in that era. In July 1960, the Department of Local Government proposed to the Cabinet the establishment of a special agency. The principal aim of the agency, as would be later described by Lemass, was to 'remove any limitation to industrial expansion by reason of a housing scarcity'.

At the time, the Irish population was shrinking. Despite a relatively high birthrate, the census of 1956 had recorded the lowest population in the history of the state - 2,894,822, with 200,394 having emigrated since 1951. The chief objective of Irish economic policy of the time was to provide the jobs that would reduce unemployment and make emigration unnecessary.

Elected Taoiseach in 1959, Sean Lemass had previously served as Minister for Industry and Commerce in the 1940's. As Taoiseach, he adopted the First Programme for Economic Expansion, the key author of which was T.K. Whitaker, Secretary of the Department of Finance. Whitaker believed that jobs would have to be created by a shift from agriculture to industry, and the Programme suggested tax incentives to entice foreign firms to set up in Ireland and also detailed the spending of £220 million of state capital on national development.

The Government's focus on promoting industry entered the sphere of housing policy by way of what the Taoiseach described as a 'welcome problem': that of providing dwellings for workers in certain localities where new employment was being created. The idea of a national body to deal with such matters had first been suggested during a discussion between the Taoiseach and the ministers for Finance, Industry and Commerce, Local Government, and Transport on how to provide housing for workers at Shannon Airport. In June 1960, the managing director of Waterford Glass had written to the Minister for Local Government detailing how plans to expand his business were being hampered due to a housing requirement for 150 potential employees. Other firms had also been reporting to the Government that in some areas, growth and expansion was limited due to a lack of accommodation for skilled workers. It was decided that a National Building Agency (NBA) would be the best way for the State to meet the housing needs of emerging industry.

The proposed new agency would be separate from the local authorities, and along with its principal aim of serving the needs of industry, it would also be called on to meet the housing needs of migrant State employees, particularly members of An Garda Síochána. It was agreed at a Cabinet meeting that the Agency, in advance of any legislation, should take the form of



1970 Typical housing provided for Gardaí



1971 Industrial Housing at Droichead Nua

a registered company. This meant that unlike many semi-state companies, the Agency would receive no subsidy from the State, would pay interest on all funds borrowed, and pay VAT on its turnover. The NBA would also be non-profit making. The new Agency, which was formally incorporated on the 13th December 1960, was initially to be based in the Department of Local Government in the Custom House with a board of five part-time directors to be chosen from appropriate areas of the Civil Service.

In early 1961 the Department of Local Government publicly launched the NBA and declared that the 'National Building Agency will be in a position to consider the provision of such houses as a new or expanding industrial undertaking requires in order to facilitate the recruitment from other areas of management personnel and members possessing special skills. The industrial undertaking concerned will be required to underwrite the rents, leases or mortgage repayments of the houses and services provided.'

On 8 of February 1961, the motion to approve the securing of the NBA under the State Guarantees Act was heard in the Dáil. The Minister for Local Government explained to the Dáil that the need for the Agency was one not adequately catered for within the existing statutory and administrative machinery, and reiterated the Taoiseach's view that 'this is a problem that we do not mind at all having to cope with'. The motion was welcomed by the House with the consensus that any initiative aimed at both tackling housing and promoting industry in Ireland was a worthy undertaking.

### **Housing for State Employees**

On its establishment, the Agency was asked by the Minister for Justice to provide a substantial number of houses to accommodate members of the Gardai, primarily at the national headquarters in Templemore but also in many other locations throughout the country. The Agency carried out this work over the next 10 years and in addition, housing schemes for army personnel were undertaken at Athlone and the Curragh at the request of the Minister for Defence. The work at the Curragh, which comprised two phases of 50 dwellings each, was hailed as one the most important developments of the famous army barracks since it was originally constructed as a series of hutments in 1856.

### **Housing for Private Industry**

To meet the housing needs of Ireland's growing industrial sector, the NBA worked closely with the Department of Industry and Commerce and the IDA. Enquiries from private industry came through either of these two bodies and were then submitted to the Board of the NBA. From the outset, the Agency offered a comprehensive service undertaking the acquisition of sites, full project design, contractor procurement, the placing of contracts and construction supervision, in addition to the financing of schemes. The policy when building dwellings for industry was to offer clients a choice of house plans based on traditional forms of constructional types and on more cost effective forms using varying degrees of rationalised prefabricated components.

In its inaugural year, the NBA began the construction of seven projects totaling 36 houses and approved 16 more projects entailing a further 62 houses. While this represented a busy first year for the Agency, the majority of these undertakings were small in volume, with the construction of 20 houses in Cork for the Verolme shipping company the largest project undertaken. The Agency had been established due to enquiries from major industrial concerns, and it had been envisaged that through the Agency large scale projects would be undertaken, opening up new areas to industrial expansion.

The typical profile of projects undertaken for private industry remained unchanged throughout the 1960's however, and by the end of the decade, the NBA had overseen the planning and construction of 707 houses in total for private industry. Examining the disparity between the initial enthusiasm for the Agency and what had materialised throughout the first years of its existence, the Department of Local Government noted reluctance from industrialists to commit to the long-term mortgaging of properties to the NBA. When discussing potential projects with the Agency, many companies now expressed an interest in simply leasing properties instead. While the Board agreed to consider this course of action, it was clear that in its present capacity, the Agency did not have adequate financial grounding to become in effect a landlord for private industry.

The issue of assisting private industry with the financing of housing was taken up in the Housing Act of 1970. Special arrangements were introduced whereby houses nominated by the IDA as key to facilitating industrial expansion would qualify for major subsidies. Workers would be encouraged to purchase their own houses but where they could not, the houses were to be rented to them on a rent scale similar to schemes operated by local authorities. In the ensuing years, demand for the Agency's services rose, with 110 houses being completed in the year 1970-1971 and 311 being completed between 1971-1972. Crucially, the size of the projects

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being advanced had increased dramatically, an example of which was the 300-unit special project planned for Limerick City, Croom and Newport to meet the needs arising from industrial expansion in the Mid-West region.

In 1974, representatives of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), a sector of the EEC, visited Ireland to discuss providing financial assistance for the housing of coal and steel workers. It was decided that the Agency would coordinate the ECSC programme and administer the funds allocated to Ireland on behalf of the EEC. Two regional committees were established, in Haulbowline in Cork and Arigna in Leitrim, to establish the need for housing and to formulate applications for assistance based on their findings. The project ran until 1978 by which time new homes had been built and existing homes modernised in Cork, Leitrim and Roscommon.

The scaling back of the NBA's involvement in building housing for private industry began in May 1976. Up to that point the finance required to meet the Agency's industrial housing programme came directly from the Exchequer, but the Government decided that the IDA, being the authority responsible for assessing the actual housing needs, would be best positioned to finance future projects. There still existed a need for the expertise of the NBA, but their role as housing developers for the IDA gradually came to an end.

## Social Housing

In 1960, the Minister for Local Government initiated a survey by local authorities to estimate the volume of unfit housing in their areas. The results indicated the need for replacement of about 50,000 homes nationwide. This need became more pronounced with the Dublin tenement housing crisis of 1963, after which Dublin Corporation expressed the urgent need for 10,000 new dwellings. The Minister for Local Government recognised that local authority housing should be brought up to date, and specifically requested the 'use of more imagination in the approach to house design' to match the nation's 'expanding economy and social conscience'.

The Minister was referring to industrialised building techniques which could greatly improve the productivity of Ireland's housing construction and, given the trade shortage in the construction industry, allow the country to get to grips with the demand for housing. It was estimated at the time that it would take 1,300 working hours to complete a one-storey prefabricated building, compared to the 4,500 hours it took through traditional building techniques. The Minister also flagged a potential new role for the NBA, aside from providing housing for private industry and state employees, when he said 'it would be my hope that if the introduction of new building





1969 Ballymun

methods was shown to be of benefit to meet at least part of our housing programme, financial agencies such as the NBA, would be favourably disposed towards accepting houses built in this way as suitable for loans.'

The first major project planned by Dublin Corporation to re-home citizens of the city was the construction of about 3,000 homes on 360 acres that had been acquired at the Albert Agricultural Estate in Ballymun. The size of the project presented a problem for Dublin Corporation, and in the resolution authorising the 3,000 units on the Albert College site, they recommended that a government agency be selected to undertake the planning, the development of the site and the provision of the dwellings on behalf of the Corporation. It was suggested that either a new government agency be set up or the work be dealt with by the NBA.

There were difficulties however. Aside from being a completely new undertaking for the NBA, the cost of building the 3,000 houses would amount to almost £6 million. Such a sum was not sufficiently authorised by the NBA Act, and new authority would have to be sought from the Dáil. Moreover, by mid-1964 there was clearly a need for a comprehensive plan to meet the nation's building requirements (75,000 houses nationwide had now been identified as unfit, of which 30,000 were beyond repair). It was suggested that perhaps a new State concern be established to handle housing stock. The Government decided that if real progress were to be made, it must set about a properly planned programme, not only by assessing the immediate backlog of houses, but also through forecasting the housing needs over the next five years. This programme was detailed in the White Paper, 'Housing Progress and Prospects' published on the 8th of November, 1964.

The White Paper identified the immediate need for 13,000 house completions a year. It highlighted that the 1963-64 output amounted to 7,500 and that, under current conditions, the desired total would not be attainable by an already stretched building industry. To address this, the Department of Local Government invited building interests to submit any proposals they might have for the erection of houses other than by traditional methods.

The White Paper also heralded a new housing bill, The Housing Act of 1966. This new legislation replaced all existing Housing Acts, which numbered more than 50 and contained many archaic classifications such as 'persons of the working class' and 'agricultural labourers'. The Act encompassed all levels of local government and therefore ended the tradition of separate legislation pertaining to urban and rural housing. Most importantly for the NBA, the Act stated that 'local authorities will be encouraged to group and act together in executing their building

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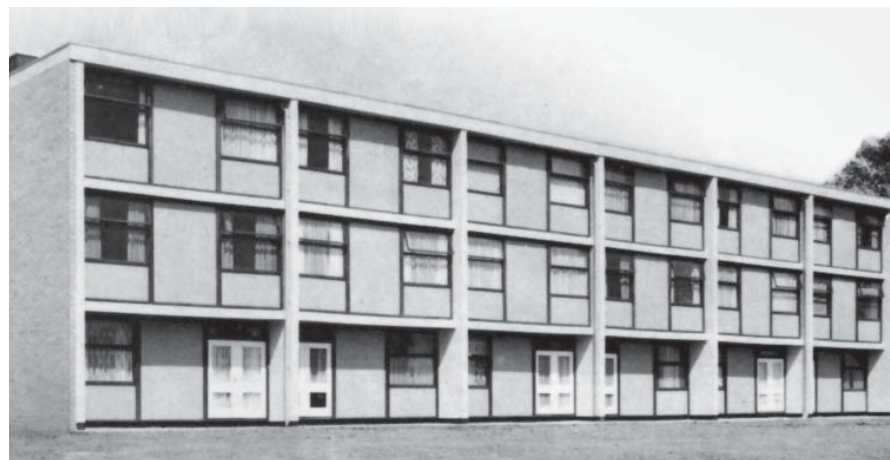
programmes. The service of the National Building Agency Ltd. would be available to help achieve these objects.'

This was the beginning of the NBA's working relationship with local authorities. Over the next five years, the Agency would complete almost five thousand dwellings in partnership with local authorities around the country, including the corporations of Dublin, Cork and Limerick. Most of these projects were constructed using a semi-prefabricated building technique and comprised mixed estates of houses and three-storey flats. The Housing Act had paved the way for the introduction of high rise accommodation by offering additional subsidies for blocks of six stories or more, but seven months after Ballymun's completion in 1969, the highly publicised collapse of the Ronan Point tower block in London ended the construction of high-rise social accommodation in Western Europe's major cities.

In addition to embarking on low cost building projects around the country, the NBA engaged in a programme of private low cost housing to further relieve the pressure on local authorities. These homes were built to meet the needs of individuals and couples on modest incomes who wished to avail of the opportunity to purchase their own homes. Thirteen schemes comprising 355 homes were constructed in provincial towns between 1965 and 1968. This three-year programme remains one of the NBA's few digressions into private construction.

In a move to further assess both the housing backlog and housing need in the years to come, the Government published the White Paper 'Housing in the Seventies' in 1969. The White Paper projected the need for 15,000 houses per year by the mid-seventies and also indicated that the future of the NBA would be concentrated in the provision of medium sized low-cost houses constructed on behalf of local authorities for tenant purchase schemes. The White Paper also suggested that the contribution to housing output made by co-operative groups could become much more significant.

In August, 1970, in a new initiative to meet the country's housing requirements, the Minister for Local Government invited firms to submit proposals for the provision of low-cost housing over a period of three to five years, on the basis of guaranteed orders for standardised dwelling units. It was felt that cost savings could be achieved if building contractors and manufacturers of components could be given an assurance of a continuing market for standardised units and materials. The Department of Local Government short-listed contractors who submitted acceptable proposals, and the Agency was asked to negotiate contracts for specified schemes on behalf of the local authorities participating in the programme.



1970 Three-storey flats in Cork built using cross wall construction



1971 Mayfield, Cork

In addition to cost savings, the objectives of the Guaranteed Order Scheme included greater general efficiency in the use of capital resources, better organisation and wider distribution of overheads in the building industry, along with guaranteed output and greater stability for firms and workers. The project was also designed to encourage an open-minded attitude to new materials, techniques and new forms of construction generally, and to secure a high standard of finished dwellings. The Agency developed a specialised service to carry out work under the project, and for that purpose engaged the services of architectural staff and teams of consultants with experience of local authority housing design and construction. By 1972 the Guaranteed Order Programme comprised 30 schemes and over 4,000 dwellings. The successful development of the project was achieved through the cooperation of the NBA, the housing authorities and the building industry generally. In 1973 the project was superseded by the Government's Emergency Supplementary Housing Programme.

The Emergency Supplementary Housing Programme, launched in May 1973, was organised by the NBA on behalf of the Minister for Local Government in order to supplement the maximum housing output which the local authorities were capable of at the time. The provisional target for the programme was to complete 10,000 dwellings over the five year period from 1973 to 1978, with the added objective of achieving a rate of 2,500 completions annually by 1976. The programme was to be run in cooperation with local authorities, but separately from their normal programmes of home building.

The programme targeted areas of greatest demand, arising from either social conditions or economic development. Housing authorities were asked to review the housing position in their areas and to indicate the amount of houses that would be required under the Programme. The key difference between the Emergency Supplementary Housing Programme and the Guaranteed Order Project was the return to traditional construction methods, with an added emphasis on desirable features such as an open fireplace in each house. By the end of March 1974 work had started on almost 1,600 dwellings with a further 2,800 at planning stage.

By the end of the 1970's, the NBA was providing local authorities with comprehensive housing resources – planning, architectural, engineering, quantity surveying and administrative facilities were at their disposal – to a standard not seen in Irish public service before. The Agency's entry into the social housing sphere had been gradual, but having produced almost twenty-two thousand local authority dwellings and having operated in all 26 counties, the staff of the Agency was now working closely with the administrative and technical officials of state departments, local authorities and health boards. Agency representatives also attended

meetings of housing authorities to report progress, and technical officers of local authorities routinely attended site meetings of schemes being constructed by the Agency.

The work undertaken by the Agency had also diversified greatly, with many of Dublin Corporation's projects now focusing on city infill work: restoring living communities to historical residential areas in the city. Furthermore, both Dublin Corporation and County Council and local authorities in Galway City, Kildare, Limerick City, Louth and Wexford had all entrusted the Agency with preparing an action plan and land use plan which would shape the future form of planning and development in their area for many years to come. These developments were understandably a challenge for the Agency but also a measure of the confidence of the local housing and planning authorities in the capabilities of the NBA to produce effective answers to that challenge.

### **Diversification**

In the early 1980's, the worldwide recession began to impact on the work of the NBA. Though the Agency did not receive any funding directly from the Government, the volume of the NBA's turnover was almost entirely dependent on the extent to which Government policy allocated funds for the provision of local authority housing. The decline in local authority housing began in 1981 when completions fell by 22%, and this trend continued through 1982 and 1983. The Department of Defence's deferring of a number of projects at different sites in 1984 compounded the problem.

Crucially, the bedrock of the Agency's operations, the construction of new local authority dwellings, although reduced, was still viable. However, in 1985 the Government's new policy of offering special housing grants to people willing to surrender the tenancy of their local authority dwellings, as a means of reducing the housing demand, began to have serious implications. A fall in forward building commitments from almost £37m at the close of 1985 to £14.5m a year later was a clear indication of a major downturn in the Agency's main activity.

Consequently, the NBA began to examine possible areas of diversification that would capitalise on its capabilities. Though house building was contracting, the Agency possessed experience in undertaking large scale construction projects, and had developed close working relationships with local authorities and Government departments built up over 25 years. In 1985, the Board proposed that a way for the NBA to promote a broader and more attractive service would be to strengthen expertise in the area of urban design. The first step was to establish an Urban Design Unit within the existing structure of the Agency and recruit suitably

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qualified officers. This was done in the latter part of 1986, and a year later the Unit had produced a number of urban studies on Wexford, Galway, Cork, Waterford, Tullamore, Castlebar, Ballina, New Ross and Enniscorthy.

Shortly afterwards, the Department of the Environment announced a new role for the Agency, whereby it would undertake the development of [on its own or in partnership with the private sector] 'suitable urban renewal projects'. Significantly, the Government also chose to extend tax incentives for urban renewal to nine provincial towns: Athlone, Castlebar, Dundalk, Letterkenny, Kilkenny, Sligo, Tralee, Tullamore, and Wexford. Until then the beneficial incentives, which included a 100% tax allowance for the cost of construction or refurbishing commercial buildings and a 50% allowance to owner-occupiers of new or refurbished residential units, had been confined to designated areas of the five main cities (Dublin, Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford). The Agency began plans to start construction on two pilot schemes – one in Wexford and one in Cork.

Along with the NBA's first forays into the area of urban redevelopment, 1989 also saw the completion of an agreement with Powerscourt Estates Ltd. The Agency was contracted to prepare the necessary plans for the restoration of the historic Powerscourt House and the development of the Powerscourt Estate in Enniskerry, Co. Wicklow as a major leisure complex and tourist destination. The Powerscourt development offered an opportunity for the Company to further broaden its range of activities, and together with diversification into the area of urban renewal, would help to ensure the viability of the company for the immediate future. Moreover, the Powerscourt development was on a scale seldom seen in Ireland, and it positioned the Agency as a leader in the planning and development of projects of this nature.

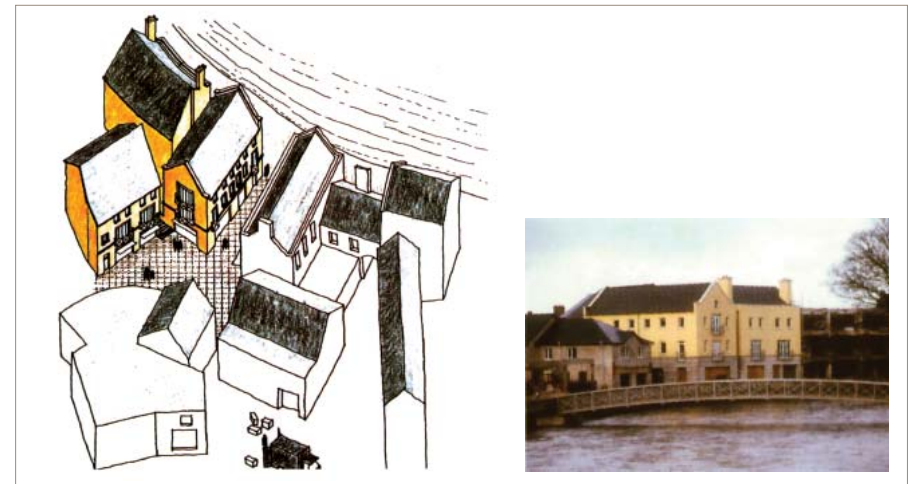
## Expansion

By February 1991, Ireland was emerging from almost a decade of recession. The years of economic difficulties had seen a considerable decline in local authority residential construction, with the yearly number of housing completions dropping from 7,000 in 1984 to around 1,500 in 1990. This resulted in a backlog of people requiring local authority housing amounting to almost 20,000 in total. The Government decided that a fresh impetus, along with fresh finances, was required to tackle the problem, and in February 1991 the Minister for the Environment published the housing blueprint, 'A Plan for Social Housing'.

At the heart of the new plan was the recognition that the model of constructing large-scale housing estates on greenfield sites would 'not now be appropriate' for Ireland. Such estates



1987 Urban Renewal Wexford - the first urban renewal project in Ireland



1994 Pilot Urban Renewal Development at Rockwood Parade, Sligo



1991 Powerscourt



Centre Block, Sligo

it said 'have in the past, reinforced social segregation with adverse consequences'. A later Government described the need 'to ensure a good mix of housing as a means of mitigating the extent and effects of social segregation in housing'. The strategies of the innovative housing policy would seek to achieve this, while designating a far more varied and active role for the NBA.

A variety of approaches were detailed in the plan. Where people were living in substandard private housing, local authorities would for the first time be allowed to refurbish and extend these houses instead of building new houses, and where possible, local authorities would be encouraged to purchase private housing to meet their needs. There was also an additional boost for voluntary and co-operative housing, as it was agreed that 90% of the cost of voluntary housing units would be met by the Exchequer. Perhaps most crucial to the innovative changes, and welcomed by all as an important move, was an emphasis on people with low incomes being able to own all or part of their homes through co-ownership with local authorities. In essence the idea was that a resident could purchase 50% of their property and pay rent on the other 50% which was owned by the local authority, thereby enjoying the benefits of ownership but with affordable outgoings that would be significantly less than under an ordinary mortgage.

This change took inspiration from European models where the old system of governments and local authorities providing and managing housing stock was gradually being ended. The Minister for the Environment said at the time that 'in the future, governments will continue to be responsible for housing the weaker sector of the community but that the way to meet this responsibility is through a more complex role than the old hands-on system of 'build X thousand council houses'. While the older methods provided better quality physical housing standards, they lacked the essential element of consumer choice, and the new scheme would radically widen housing options.

The Minister of State at the Department of the Environment explained that 'there were social reasons relating to the need to develop more mixed communities and limit housing segregation. There was a need to encourage self-help and co-operative effort by making available appropriate subsidy schemes; to give people a choice about the kind of housing they wanted'. Increasingly, this choice would be provided by constructing varied and smaller local authority housing projects on infill sites in town centres.

This exciting new challenge set for the Agency was multifaceted. The new Government policy called for a dramatic increase in the number of housing completions by local authorities, with an ambitious national target set of 5,000 houses per year after three years. This would initially

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lead to increased demand for the Agency's support services in its ongoing commitment to local authority housing. Additionally, although the Agency had previously taken part in various restoration works, the call for local authorities to restore and extend unfit private housing would result in far more complex restoration projects being undertaken. Chiefly, the new emphasis on achieving a balanced social mix of housing would see the Agency involved in voluntary housing sites, private housing sites and shared ownership housing, frequently situated side-by-side in active urban communities. Here, the foresight of the Agency in diversifying into Urban Renewal could clearly be seen. These new local authority projects would demand skillful and sensitive planning at inception, together with a multitude of innovative housing designs.

Special attention was given to the new role envisaged for the Agency in the Government's housing blueprint in the NBA's two year Corporate Plan running until 31 December 1992. With the help of the local authorities a number of sites were identified with first phases of co-operative housing in mind. By 1992, plans for four pilot schemes had been prepared, and construction work had started on one.

By 1993, capital funding had become available for local authority housing again, and while the commencement of 500 houses was not close to the average production of 1,100 per year achieved in the early 1980's, it represented a significant upturn on the 29 and 17 completions for 1989 and 1990 respectively. Significantly, the Government also decided to extend the designated urban renewal scheme for another three years and to add new towns to the scheme. Over the preceding years, the NBA's expertise in the planning and developing of areas designated for urban renewal had been showcased through significant projects in Wexford and Waterford. As a result, many local authorities were actively seeking Agency involvement in the redevelopment of their urban centres. In 1994, the Agency was commissioned by nine towns to carry out the preparation of strategy framework plans.

The affairs of the Agency were examined again in 1994 by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Commercial State-Sponsored Bodies. The Committee recognised the Agency's impact on government urban renewal policies, and encouraged the NBA to increase its activities in this area. The Joint Committee also drew attention to the fact that local authorities had begun to commission new construction projects other than local authority housing. The Agency had gained experience in a range of new areas, having worked on projects such as libraries and swimming pools over the previous years, and the Committee suggested the Agency should avail of these opportunities to broaden its work base.



*Dundalk Swimming Pool*



*NBA Studio, Hatherton*

In May 1995, the Government built on its existing housing policy with the launch of 'Social Housing – The Way Ahead'. The document, described as 'a blueprint for future action on social housing', included an increase of 30% in the public capital programme for housing. This would provide funds for over 7,000 new homes annually, almost half of which would be in the voluntary sector. Increases in capital assistance grants meant that the Government would now be funding up to 95% of the cost of housing built by housing co-operatives and voluntary groups, instead of the current 60-70%. Additionally, the plan would make tenant purchase and shared home ownership schemes more accessible to people on low incomes.

By 1998 the Agency's remit covered almost every area of public construction. Taking that year alone as a sample, the Agency completed almost 350 new dwellings which were a mix of local authority and voluntary; designed and constructed a new design studio for Agency staff at Hatherton in Milltown; initiated work on a new office headquarters for Louth County Council; began conservation and environmental work at the Spanish Arch in Galway; and had been commissioned to plan a Library for Wicklow County Council along with a fire station headquarters in Wexford and a swimming pool for Dundalk Urban District Council. Heading towards the new millennium, the Agency had established itself as a flexible company positioned to respond to new needs and opportunities where they arose.

### **Housing Modern Ireland**

Following the unprecedented growth in house prices during the late 1990's (30% in 1998 alone), a crisis of affordability began to develop in the Irish housing market. Intense investor speculation inflated property prices further and as they rose, increasing numbers of low to medium-income households were frozen out of the property market. In 1998, over 45,000 households awaited accommodation on local authority housing lists, despite Ireland's public and private construction industries having completed 42,000 homes in the same year. In response, in 1999 the Government introduced a new Affordable Housing Scheme to tackle the issue. Under the 1999 initiative, local authorities would provide newly built houses on their own lands at what was essentially cost price. To assist them in making houses affordable, a site subsidy of up to €50,000 per house was made available from the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to the City Councils and the Dublin local authorities, and €31,800 per house for other local authorities. Eligibility for the new scheme was based on the same criteria as for the existing Shared Ownership Scheme. The demand for affordable housing was instant, especially in large urban centres, and the Agency was immediately commissioned to work on a number of schemes nationwide.

Despite an increased output by local authorities, demand for affordable housing continued to increase and in 2000, the Government introduced the new Planning and Development Act. Part of this new legislation stated that up to 20% of land used for residential developments of 5 or more houses would be made available to the relevant local authority and reserved to meet social and affordable housing needs. Though the NBA played less of a role in this initiative, it was an important step towards reaching the Government's aim of providing a wide range of housing tenure and ownership options to match the particular needs of the end user.

Following the property boom of the late 90's, the Government commissioned the economic consultant Peter Bacon to produce a series of reports on the spiraling house prices, and recommendations on how best to curb property speculation and increase the supply of houses. With regard to the latter, the Bacon Reports (1998 – 2000) recommended an increase in output of social and affordable housing and an extension of the local authority shared ownership scheme to those whose incomes were marginally above the limits. Additionally, the Bacon Reports identified that higher density housing would be required to house the nation's rapidly growing population. However, Peter Bacon also noted that high-density housing was too readily associated in the public mind with deprivation, and tackling this mindset would require very high standards of architectural skill.

NBA design teams had much experience in this area, as in the years that preceded the Bacon Reports local authorities had already begun to express a desire to build houses to a greater density. Two projects completed in 1998 had illustrated the Agency's use of imaginative techniques in layout and design to achieve higher residential densities without sacrificing the attractiveness of the projects – a scheme of 32 dwellings at Wyattville Road for Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council and a 26-house scheme at King Street, Wexford on behalf of Wexford Corporation, achieved densities of 17 and 37 houses per acre respectively.

The Government's response to the social housing recommendations made in the Bacon reports was wide-ranging. Firstly, the Government targeted an increase in the number of local authority housing starts under the National Development Plan from 35,500 to 41,500 (1,000 extra in each year from 2001 to 2006). An additional subsidy was provided for the Affordable Housing Scheme, and in the Social Partnership Agreement 2003-2005 'Sustaining progress', the income limits for both the Affordable Housing and Shared Ownership Schemes were increased to take account of pay rises and house price increases.

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A number of measures were also taken to facilitate local authorities and approved voluntary and co-operative housing bodies to acquire sufficient land to enable them to meet the targets set under the National Development Plan (NDP) for the provision of social and affordable housing. The Agency played a major part in this initiative, both identifying and acquiring land for the development of voluntary and affordable housing. Throughout the next few years, the NBA began to assemble a land bank portfolio of sufficient size to enable an ongoing rolling housing development programme, in partnership with local housing authorities and voluntary and co-operative housing associations.

The implementation of the Government's multi-strand approach to address housing needs had greatly increased the demand for the Agency's services. Client authorities were now providing a wide range of housing options to match local needs, not only through traditional methods of procurement but also through the new affordable housing arrangements, public private partnerships and a new rental scheme. Over the next few years, the number of housing commissions received by the NBA almost tripled. In 2004, eleven contracts totaling 235 affordable houses were completed compared with 95 delivered in 2002. The new challenge related not only to an increase in numbers but also to the provision of a range of houses for people requiring different tenures or ownership options – local authority, voluntary, group housing, housing for special needs, private serviced sites, affordable shared ownership and private housing; and this approach, in turn, required the Agency's design teams to carefully respond in a creative way to provide integrated and imaginative solutions for these various projects.

While assisting the Government to meet its targets in the national affordable housing drive, the Agency continued work in its other areas of expertise. Conservation and refurbishment of old buildings still represented an important portion of the Agency's work and in 2004, major conservation work to the famous medieval wall at Spanish Arch in Galway was completed. In the same year construction work to convert Dundalk Gaol into a new county archive also commenced.

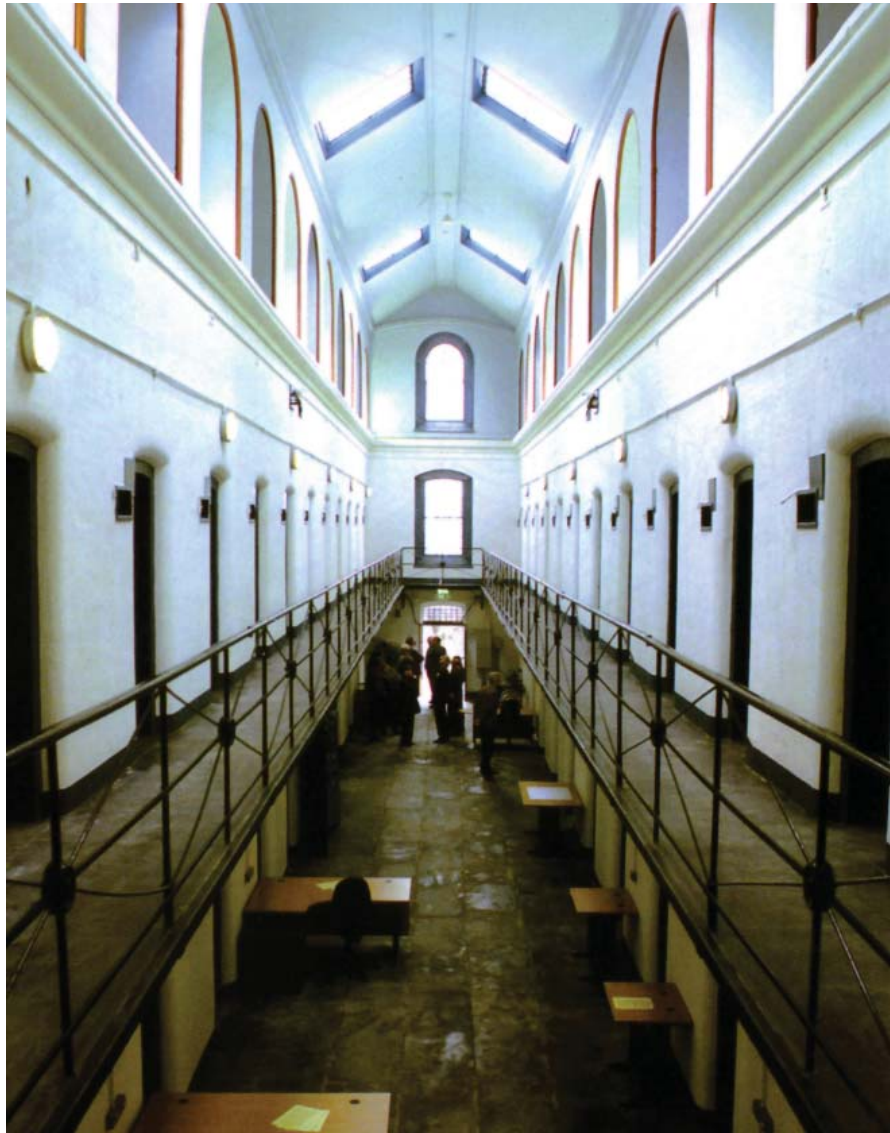
The Government's Urban Renewal Scheme of 1999 introduced the concept of Integrated Area Plans (IAPs) which were prepared by local authorities on the basis of guidelines drawn up by an advisory panel on urban renewal. The new scheme represented a more targeted approach to the award of urban renewal incentives, concentrating not just on areas of physical development but also on issues of local socio-economic benefit. One of the first projects for the Agency's planning unit under these new guidelines was to create, in partnership with the



1998 Wyattville Road, Ballybrack



Wexford Fire Station



1999 Dundalk Gaol Rehabilitation for use as a Book Depository

local authority, a development plan for Sligo and its environs. This was completed in 2004 and shortly afterwards, the Agency team began work on a development plan for the County of Sligo. The preparation of these two plans positioned Sligo to respond to its designation as a 'gateway' under the National Spatial Plan.

There was also considerable demand for the Agency's services in a national drive to upgrade existing public sector housing stock. Many of the homes concerned had been built decades ago, and the Government charged local authorities with the task of improving the physical fabric of the estates by way of refurbishment and environmental improvement works. In 2005, the NBA completed the upgrading of 75 houses in Ballinasloe, Drogheda and Monaghan and started work on a further 320 houses in Dublin, Cork, Wexford, Kells, Bray, Newtownmountkennedy and New Ross. This work would extend the lifespan of these houses while making them more comfortable for their residents. In response to the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government's policy document of 2007 'Delivering Homes, Sustaining Communities', the Agency established an in-house multi-disciplinary specialist Regeneration Unit to assist local authorities in advancing their remit this emerging area.

Though the NBA and the Irish construction industry in general had seen a period of great productivity, the years of prosperity brought with them further demand for housing driven by net immigration and a new desire for housing occupancy more in line with Western European averages (approximately three people per household). In 2006, the National Economic and Social Council's (NESC) analysis and report on housing in Ireland concluded that, despite an increased output, there had been an ongoing net deficit in respect of local authority housing. The NESC recommended an increase in output and in the following two years, working closely with its client authorities, the Agency brought to construction stage almost 1,500 local authority homes. This level of housing output had not been seen by the Agency for some 25 years, and taking into account the increased investment in modern planning and urban design by the company during these years, represents one of the Agency's most productive periods in public service.

The new millennium brought with it an increased focus on the environmental impact of house building. In 2002, to promote the shift towards 'greener' homes, the Government established the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) with the aim of accelerating the uptake of superior energy planning, design, specification and construction practices in the construction industry. To improve the quality of energy features in Irish housing, the SEAI's introduced the 'House of Tomorrow' programme – a scheme funded under the National Development Plan