

**From hovels to homes:  
the provision of public housing in Irish provincial towns, 1890-1945**

A dissertation submitted to the University of Dublin  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## Declaration

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Peter Connell

## Summary

In the mid-1940s a quarter of all private dwellings in Irish provincial towns had been built by their local councils in the preceding fifty years. In comparative terms this represented a high level of state involvement in housing in a country lacking a substantial industrial working class or an influential social democratic politics, two key factors in promoting state housing in other countries. Two basic research questions are explored. Why were levels of public housing so high in Irish towns? And what factors lay behind the wide variations in public housing provisions across those towns?

In terms of methodology, the topic is explored at three levels – housing policy at the state level, the varying impact of public housing provision across 74 provincial towns and a more detailed examination of the process of provision in a series of case-study towns. This exploration is structured around three reasonably distinct phases in public housing provision, 1890-1922, 1922-1932 and 1932-1945, corresponding to the early phase under British rule, the Cumann na nGaedheal government in the first decade of the new state and the Fianna Fáil building programme. The methodology is essentially comparative with housing conditions in Irish towns compared to those in England and Scotland and state housing policy set in the broader context of developments in Europe and Britain. Below this level detailed statistical comparisons are made of housing conditions and public housing provision across 74 Irish provincial towns as a means for identifying the factors that influenced the propensity of municipal authorities to build. A more detailed exploration of the process of public housing provision in a number of case-study towns, using both quantitative and qualitative sources, seeks to explore how town councils operated as institutions and as a space contested by local interests. The research is based on three main sets of sources. Firstly, published census returns from the 1880s through to the 1940s, household return forms for the case-study towns for 1901 and the annual reports of the Local Government Board (1880-1920) and of the Department of Local Government and Public Health (1922-51). These sources provide much of the data on which the analysis of housing conditions and public housing provision is based. Secondly, the archives of a number of municipal authorities are used to explore their capacity to deliver housing policy set at the state level and to identify the political and class interests that both promoted and inhibited the building of public housing. These sources are complemented by the use of national and provincial newspapers. The third set of sources are the archives of government departments, especially the Department of Local Government and Public Health. These are used to provide insights into how the state bureaucracy shaped housing policy and also provide valuable sources relating to the slum clearance programmes of the 1930s.

Regarding the first main research question - why were levels of public housing so high in Irish towns? – the answer lies, firstly, in the important place it came to play in the politics of many municipal authorities in the years up to 1922, linked, in part, to the Irish Parliamentary Party's agenda of securing unchallenged leadership of nationalist politics. To some extent the public housing programme in towns up to 1914 followed in the slip stream of the highly successful implementation of the Labourers Acts in rural Ireland. But the issue of subsidies for urban housing propelled it on to the national stage in the critical years between 1917 and 1922 which, in turn, obliged the new Free State government to be seen to address the issue as early as 1922. The 1930s public housing programme in towns can be seen as part of Fianna Fáil's wider programme of nation building and establishing its political legitimacy, linked to themes of national regeneration and a reclaiming of national sovereignty. The party's identification with the promotion of public housing in provincial towns is evident from an analysis of the factors determining which municipal authorities were proactive and which were not.

Regarding the second research question - what factors lay behind the wide variations in public housing provisions across provincial towns? – the answers lie at the local level and relate to issues of administrative competence and the balance of local social and class relations, mediated through local politics. It also reflected historic patterns in housing conditions, although it is clear that those towns with the poorest conditions did not necessarily benefit most from the housing programmes. This finding undermines the notion of a benevolent state intervening to address social ills. Instead, state policy formation and action has to be understood as part of a story of the quest for political legitimacy and hegemony on the part of different actors, be they part of the state bureaucracy, political parties or interests in civil society.

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My first debt is to my supervisor, Professor David Dickson, who has acted as an invaluable sounding board and source of good advice since I first approached him about this research in early 2012. As many PhD students will attest, the range of friends and colleagues receptive to long conversations about ones growing obsession, as Year 1 turns to Year 4, tends to dwindle so I am especially grateful to David for his sustaining interest, guidance and encouragement.

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Back in St Patrick's Classical School in Navan in the 1970s my History teacher was Fr Gerry Rice. We still met up every few months and he still has very wise things to say about the history of the town and of the country and about the relevance of History to understanding who we are.

Over the course of the four years I have benefited from the advice and encouragement of my fellow post-graduate students in the School of Histories and Humanities, some of which had to do with learning how to be a student after a long time since I last enjoyed that status. It still remains the case that insights and valuable snippets of information can be gleaned over a pint that simply are not available in any library.

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## **Abbreviations**

AMAI	Association of Municipal Authorities of Ireland
CCA	Cork County Archives
DLGPH	Department of Local Government and Public Health
IPP	Irish Parliamentary Party
LCA	Louth County Archives
LGB	Local Government Board
LLF	Local Loans Fund
MCA	Meath County Archives
MNCA	Monaghan County Archives
NAI	National Archives of Ireland
PUS	Public Utility Society
TDF	Transitional Development Fund

## Introduction

Speaking in the House of Lords in August 1883 in a debate on the first Labourers (Ireland) Act, the Tory peer Lord Weymss, a leading figure in the Liberty and Property Defence League, posed the question ‘if the State builds houses for the working classes why should they not undertake to clothe them also?’<sup>1</sup> The overall thrust of the act was based on earlier housing acts designed to facilitate slum clearance in Britain’s largest cities with the additional provision of modest state subsidy.<sup>2</sup> Although the Act passed without significant opposition, the views expressed by Weymss reflected a considerable nervousness on the part of the Gladstone government and the Conservative opposition at the prospect of state subsidies for working class housing in Ireland. Some were consoled by the belief that the legislation was unworkable. Others ensured that amendments imposed tight controls on its operation and that the interest of the Treasury and private property would be secured. Reluctantly and tentatively the British state had conceded the principal of allocating public funds for housing.

Sixty years later, in 1943, Ballina UDC completed its final housing scheme in a ten-year programme funded by considerable state subsidies. The town had been re-made in the preceding twenty-seven years since the first council houses were occupied in 1916; 341 condemned dwellings had been demolished by the local council and 535 built. Almost half the town’s population now lived in public housing. Remarkably, Ballina, a market town with a population of 6,000 on the north coast of County Mayo, had probably amongst the highest proportion of public housing of any town in Western Europe, challenged only by some towns in western Scotland. And Ballina was not alone amongst Irish provincial towns. Across the country, over a quarter of the 72,755 private dwellings in Irish provincial towns in 1946 had been built by their councils.<sup>3</sup> Towns like Thurles, Navan, Sligo and Drogheda had one third of their populations living in council housing. This was a rate comparable to the mining and industrial

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<sup>1</sup> *Hansard* 3, cclxxxiii, 925-30 (17 August 1893). Quoted in Murray Fraser, *John Bull’s Other Homes. State Housing and British Policy in Ireland, 1883-1922* (Liverpool, 1996), p. 28. Lord Weymss’s views were echoed in Dublin some two decades later: the city’s Town Clerk remarked that ‘if they are going to build houses for the people, I don’t see why they should not provide them with umbrellas and top hats’. (Quoted in David Dickson, *Dublin. The Making of a Capital City* (London, 2014), p. 422).

<sup>2</sup> The relevant acts, discussed below, were the Artisans and Labourers Dwellings Act, 1868 (31 & 32 Vict. c. 131), known as the Torrens Act, and the Artisans’ and Labourers’ Dwellings Improvement Act 1875 (42 & 43 Vict. c. 64), known as the Cross Act.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Local Government, *Housing: A review of past operations and future requirements* (Dublin, 1947), Appendix A.

towns of north-east England where councils had the highest house building rates in England.<sup>4</sup> A primary research question therefore is: what were the circumstances that led to state subsidised public housing constituting such a high proportion of the housing stock of Irish provincial towns in the 1940s?

Further afield, in Britain, Germany, France, Sweden, Austria and the Low Countries, the years after World War I witnessed state involvement in housing on a substantial scale for the first time, although in most of these countries this was not sustained beyond the early 1920s. In general, this was a different model and involved state support for non-profit institutions and for municipal authorities which were at one remove from the ownership and management of social housing. In Britain, 1.1 million housing units were built by the state up to the outbreak of World War 2, at which point council housing represented about 12 per cent of the housing stock.<sup>5</sup> In France, social housing societies had built 150,000 by 1939, but this represented only two per cent of the housing stock.<sup>6</sup> In Holland 22 per cent of housing units built between 1902 and 1930 were built by local authorities or housing associations while in Sweden by 1945 12 per cent of the housing stock was rented by either the state or cooperatives.<sup>7</sup> The first public housing programmes in the United States represented part of the federal government's response to the collapse in the economy in the early 1930s but only 117,000 units were completed by 1940, a tiny proportion of the country's housing stock.<sup>8</sup>

The exceptional scale of local authority housing provision in Ireland was confirmed by a report published by the Department of Local Government after World War 2 which indicated that 114,000 had been built by local authorities in the area of the Free State in the years 1883-47, representing 17 per cent of the housing stock.<sup>9</sup> None of this is to suggest that what is being explored here is a contribution to an exceptionalist view of Irish history. On the contrary, the approach adopted is to set the decisive impact of the state on housing provision in Irish provincial towns in the years between 1890 to 1945 in a wider context of ideas and concepts

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Ryder, 'Council house building in County Durham, 1900-1939: the local implementation of national policy' in M.J. Daunton (ed.), *Councillors and tenants: local authority housing in English cities, 1919-1939* (Leicester, 1984), pp 45-50.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Power, *Hovels to High Rise, State Housing in Europe Since 1850* (London, 1993), p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>7</sup> Niels Prak and Hugo Priemus, 'The Netherlands' in Colin Pooley (ed.), *The Comparative Study of Housing Strategies in Europe, 1880-1930*, (Leicester, 1992), p. 178; Thord Strömberg, 'Sweden' in Pooley, *Housing Strategies*, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Harloe, *The People's Home? Social Rented Housing in Europe and America* (Oxford, 1995), p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Department of Local Government, *Housing: a review of past operations and immediate requirements* (Dublin, 1947), p. 10. The figure of 17 per cent is based on the 662,000 private dwellings reported in the 1946 census, volume 4.



that support an understanding of the evolution of all housing systems. Thus the narrative of the state's role in housing in Irish towns calls for an interrogation of the changing role of the state in its various manifestations and of the ideas that shaped housing policy. Within that broad framework, the actual implementation of state policy suggests a range of themes, including the relationship between the state at national level and the local authorities charged with delivering housing, and the role of local authorities and how they reflected and shaped social relations in the towns they administered.

Central to the approach adopted in this thesis is a comparative perspective. At one level this involves exploring the variations in public housing provision across 74 provincial Irish towns. But at a more general level it seeks to set the particular model of housing provision – the municipal authority as builder, part funded by state subsidy – in the context of different models of provision. A detailed study of the history of the state's role in housing across Europe is beyond the scope of this study, but a recognition of those different models casts a new light on the model that evolved in Ireland, itself derivative of developments in Britain. For example, the housing studies literature, in comparing housing systems, identifies 'mass' and 'residual' models of state housing provision.<sup>10</sup> This relates to the question – what is the role of public housing? Is it to address general housing needs (mass) or as a safety-net for the least well off (residual)? Michael Harloe argues that the residual model, whereby public housing is targeted exclusively at those without the resources to provide their own accommodation, is the norm and the mass model gains state support only in times of crisis.<sup>11</sup> His work has been criticised for having an Anglo-Saxon bias and underplaying the role of the social market in housing in many European countries.<sup>12</sup> Here, an 'integrated' non-profit sector was supported by the state, with a wide range of civil society organisations including cooperatives, trade unions, churches and non-profit financial institutions involved. The history of these systems provides a comparator against which to explore the particular model that evolved in Ireland.

The housing literature on Britain suggests that at different stages through the first half of the twentieth century the state sector addressed the needs of different groups, from the skilled working class in the 1920s to those in the poorest housing conditions in the 1930s. Marian Bowley's seminal work, *Housing and the State 1919-44*, published in 1945, concluded that until the 1930s 'the market for local authority houses was largely confined to a limited range of

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Malpass, 'Histories of Social Housing: A Comparative Approach' in Kathleen Scanlon, Christine Whitehead and Melissa Fernández Arrigoitia (eds), *Social Housing in Europe* (Oxford, 2014), pp 259-74.

<sup>11</sup> Harloe, *The People's Home?*, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Malpass, 'Histories of Social Housing', p. 264.

income groups, that is in practice the better-off semi-skilled workers with small families and fairly safe jobs'.<sup>13</sup> A key research question here is to determine the extent to which this pattern applied in Irish provincial towns, given that the Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890, through the various Acts of the 1920s under the Cumann na nGaedheal government and down to, Fianna Fáil's housing programme of the 1930s, explicitly sought to address the housing needs of different disadvantaged groups. The implementation of national policy at the local level was, of course, subject to the varying capacity of municipal authorities and the balance of sectional and political interests within councils. This local perspective will form an essential part of an exploration of the provision of housing in provincial towns.

European patterns of social housing provision emphasise that the state's role in housing could take many forms. In the British housing literature, M.J. Daunton's argument that there was nothing pre-determined about the form that the state's role would take seems compelling. He suggests that from the 1880s up the World War I both Tories and Liberals, albeit from different perspectives, viewed the urban housing question as essentially about land.<sup>14</sup> Liberals identified the high cost of building land in towns and cities as the key barrier to affordable housing, while Tories focused on the over-taxation of land and property. Perhaps counter-intuitively, Liberals opposed housing subsidies, as they distracted attention from the need to address the cost of land, while Tories favoured them as they reduced the prospect of urban ratepayers having to make a contribution to the affordability of working class housing. Daunton also emphasises the ambiguous stance of the labour movement towards state involvement in housing.<sup>15</sup> He argues that working class perceptions of the state were shaped by the experience of 'the poor law or the policeman or the school board visitor who threatened and controlled their lives'.<sup>16</sup> However, the weakening of autonomy of working class organisations such as trade unions and cooperatives as providers of welfare services following the 'people's budget' of 1909-10 narrowed the range of possible solutions to the housing question in Britain. These kinds of civil society organisations emerged as providers or sponsors of social housing in countries such as Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden with the state and municipal authorities playing a much narrower role. At the end of the war a swift response was required to address the chronic housing shortage and the Addison Act of 1919, with its commitment to state-owned housing, set the template for the state's involvement in housing for more than half a century.

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<sup>13</sup> Marian Bowley, *Housing and the State, 1919-44* (London, 1945), p. 129.

<sup>14</sup> See M.J. Daunton, 'Introduction' in M.J. Daunton (ed.), *Councillors and tenants: Local authority housing in English cities, 1919-1939* (Leicester, 1984), pp 3-6.

<sup>15</sup> M.J. Daunton, *A Property Owing Democracy? Housing in Britain* (London, 1987), pp 58-61.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 59-60.

There is a strong case to be made that the template for the state's involvement in housing was set at an early stage in Ireland with the passing of the various Labourers Acts from 1883 onwards. The political context which led to almost 50,000 cottages being built in rural Ireland for labouring families by 1915 with finance supplied by the state, their rents subsidised by both the state and rate-payers, is well rehearsed in the literature, notably by Murray Fraser, Virginia Crossman, Mary Daly and others.<sup>17</sup> Fraser succinctly describes this context as 'the desire of the Irish Parliamentary Party to absorb farm labourers into the parliamentary nationalist movement' and to 'win [them] over to constitutional nationalism through the offer of better housing'.<sup>18</sup> As C.S. Parnell sought to build this political coalition of tenant farmers and labourers, he declared that 'the national credit is pledged to securing for the Irish labourers some such amelioration in their own condition as they have so loyally striven to bring about in the condition of the tenant-farmers'.<sup>19</sup> A more detailed account of the evolution of the legislation and its implications for urban housing is offered in Chapter 3, but as early as the 1890s two key provisions were adopted that can be seen as precursors of the way state support for urban housing would come to operate. The first was a provision whereby the building of labourers' cottages could be subsidised by a levy of up to 1s in the pound on county rates. The second, introduced as part of the Conservative government's 'constructive Unionism' agenda in 1891, saw the establishment of a fund derived from Land Act surpluses that was allocated to subsidise cottage construction.<sup>20</sup> In parallel with these developments the first housing legislation to have a significant impact on urban housing in Ireland, the Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890, was passed in Westminster. And although it contained no provision for state subsidies, and the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) had virtually no input into its progress through parliament, the Labourers Act offered a model for the party when it sought to conscript the issue of urban housing into its political agenda for Home Rule from about 1905 onwards. The passing of the Clancy Act in 1908, including a modest state subsidy for urban housing, was therefore proclaimed as a great political achievement by the IPP (even though it simply mirrored the increasingly generous financial provisions in the Labourers Act of 1906).

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<sup>17</sup> Murray Fraser, *John Bull's Other Homes*; Virginia Crossman, *Politics, pauperism and power in late nineteenth-century Ireland* (Manchester, 2006), pp 144-82; Mary E. Daly, *The Buffer State: The Historical Roots of the Department of the Environment* (Dublin, 1996), Chapter 5; Tony Fahey, 'Housing and Local Government' in Mary E. Daly (ed.), *County & Town. One Hundred years of Local Government in Ireland* (Dublin, 2001), pp 120-29; Padraic Kenna, *Housing Law, Rights and Policy* (Dublin, 2011), pp 31-33.

<sup>18</sup> Fraser, *John Bull's Other Homes*, pp 27, 60.

<sup>19</sup> D.B. King, *The Irish Question* (London, 1882), p. 275.

<sup>20</sup> Fraser, *John Bull's Other Homes*, pp 33-34.

The Labourers Acts can also be set in the context of other significant interventions by the British state in the economic and social spheres of Irish life. These include the system of national school education established in 1831, a national police force and a raft of legislation relating to the occupation of land. Some historians frame this intervention in terms of Ireland as Britain's 'social laboratory', allowing 'the English rulers of Ireland to approach Irish social problems in a relatively freewheeling manner'.<sup>21</sup> The notion was first advanced by W. L. Burn in his study of legislation relating to landholding in Ireland from the 1840s through to the 1880s. 'The most conventional of Englishmen', he argued 'were willing to experiment in Ireland on lines which they were not prepared to contemplate or tolerate at home'.<sup>22</sup> Cultural historian, Declan Kiberd, goes further and suggests that models were only adopted in Britain 'after they were seen to thrive and prosper' in Ireland.<sup>23</sup> Richard Butler, in his study of the prison inspection system in Ireland, critiques this characterisation and suggests a transnational perspective where 'ideas and precedents ebbed and flowed across the Irish Sea' and where 'we need to consider that there were many laboratories and not just one'.<sup>24</sup> Fraser offers further critiques based on his work on housing policy, including the observation that 'there is no evidence that any strategy was tried out with the conscious intention of it being intended for Britain'.<sup>25</sup> His conclusion that British governments viewed state intervention in Ireland as 'a necessary evil' is one that offers a useful perspective on the 1890 and 1908 Housing Acts and one that challenges the notion of a benevolent state discussed below.

Crossman's work offers insights into how the Labourers Acts were implemented on the ground in rural Ireland that suggest ways of exploring urban housing provision. These include evidence on how different interest groups promoted or obstructed the building of cottages; the extent to which the patterns of provision actually addressed housing needs, and the impact of local government reform and an extended electoral franchise on levels of building activity. Her work presents data at the provincial and poor law union level which shows huge variations in the application of the Acts that reflect underlying differences in the rural economy, in the extent of landlord influence on boards of guardians, and in local willingness to raise additional taxation. For example, all ten boards of guardians that had erected more than 100 cottages by 1888 were

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<sup>21</sup> Donald H. Akenson, *The Irish Education Experiment: the National System of Education in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1970), p. 388.

<sup>22</sup> W. L. Burn, 'Free Trade in Land: An Aspect of the Irish Question' in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 31 (1949), p. 68.

<sup>23</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: the Literature of the Modern Nation* (Massachusetts, 1995), p. 28.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Butler, 'Rethinking the origins of the British Prison Act of 1835: Ireland and the development of central-government inspection, 1820 – 1835' in *The Historical Journal*, 58, no. 3 (2016), p. 746.

<sup>25</sup> Fraser, *John Bull's Other Homes*, p. 5.

tenant controlled. Her observation that the success of the Acts was viewed quite differently 'in the centre and in the localities' highlights the value of a methodology accommodating both perspectives. Yet the literature is virtually silent on these issues regarding the implementation of the Housing of the Working Classes Act (1890) and its corollary, the Clancy Act of 1908, certainly beyond the confines of the larger cities.<sup>26</sup> Exploration of the geographical variations in the provision of labourers' cottages under the various Labourers Acts from 1883 onwards points to a methodology that can provide insights into the operation of all forms of local government, the relationship between local government and government departments, and the balance of power between competing economic and political interests at the local level. Crossman's study of the operation of the Acts focuses primarily on the shaping of the legislation and its impact in initiating social change,<sup>27</sup> and Lane, Fitzpatrick and Aalen's work in this area points in the same direction, although a comprehensive analysis of cottage provision at the level of poor law union and rural district remains to be carried out.<sup>28</sup>

The unprecedented nature of the state's involvement in rural housing via the Labourers Acts had its roots in the Land War of the early 1880s. The Land Commission emerged from the same well and represented another quite unprecedented intervention on the part of the state into Irish economic and social life. Terence Dooley's work establishes the intensely political nature of that intervention as it developed from an exclusively rent-fixing body in the early years through to its becoming the agent for massive land redistribution in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>29</sup> He suggests that

no other body was as important to the people living in the Irish countryside for most of the twentieth century as the Land Commission. It is hardly an exaggeration to claim that its impact on Irish society was matched only by that of the Catholic Church.<sup>30</sup>

There are two aspects of the operation of the Land Commission that have relevance for an understanding of the significance of public housing in provincial towns. The first is that, as an

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<sup>26</sup> Fraser in *John Bull's Other Homes* (pp 91-94) provides a partial overview of the scale of public housing provision but tends to concentrate on Dublin and its suburbs. He quotes the absolute number of houses built in provincial towns, highlighting Galway, Kilkenny, Wexford and Drogheda. This obscures the proportionally greater impact that the legislation had on smaller towns such as Longford, Navan and Fermoy.

<sup>27</sup> Crossman, *Politics, pauperism and power*, pp 144-82.

<sup>28</sup> Pdraig Lane, 'Agricultural Labourers and the Land Question' in Carla King (ed.), *Famine, Land and Culture in Ireland* (Dublin, 2000), pp 201-15; David Fitzpatrick, 'The Disappearance of the Irish Agricultural Labourer, 1841-1912', *Irish Economic and Social History*, vii (1980), pp 66-92; F.H.A. Aalen, 'The Rehousing of Rural Labourers in Ireland under the Labourers (Ireland) Acts, 1883-1919' in *Journal of Historical Geography*, 12, no. 4 (1986), pp 287-306.

<sup>29</sup> Terence Dooley, *The Land for the People'. The Land Question in Independent Ireland* (Dublin, 2004).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

agency of the state, it confirmed the legitimacy of state intervention as a way of dealing with economic and social issues that demanded a political response. In Britain Enid Gaudie has outlined the relentless and often successful campaigns mounted against the modest legislative proposals relating to sanitary conditions and housing through the second half of the nineteenth century and demonstrated both the resistance of the prevailing ideology to state intervention and the pre-eminence of the notion of private property.<sup>31</sup> She quotes the repeated use of the phrase 'highly injurious to rights and property' by petitioners against legislation relating to building and sanitary regulations and against all proposals that might entail increased taxation on rate-payers. The Liberty and Property Defence League, founded by Lord Weymss, quoted above in relation to the Labourers Act, served as a lobby group for industrialists and property owners opposed to what they regarded as the onward march of state socialism. From the 1880s onwards, the challenges to the absolute rights of private property began to gain ground. The Local Government Reform Act of 1888 put in place the administrative machinery that had the capacity to deliver on the permissive elements of sanitary and housing legislation already on the statute book. But the pace of state intervention in Ireland was more marked with the notion of dual-ownership of land already established by the Land Acts of the 1880s and the state subsidies for rural housing via the Labourers Acts. The scale of the Land Commission's operation is described by Dooley, involving over £77 million advanced to 124,000 tenants under the terms of the 1903 and 1909 Land Acts.<sup>32</sup>

The second aspect of the history of the Land Commission that bears on the question of public housing is the very different scale and nature of its operation during the Cumann na Gaedheal administration between 1922 and 1932 compared to its subsequent position under Fianna Fáil. Following the passing of the Land Act of 1933 the Commission operated what can be described as a populist policy of allocating land to evicted tenants, landless men and agricultural labourers.<sup>33</sup> Dooley makes clear the political bounty that Fianna Fail expected to reap from a policy that had 'such appeal for the masses in rural Ireland'.<sup>34</sup> The Housing Act of 1932 initiated parallel intervention in provincial towns, and the politics surrounding that intervention and how it was shaped by Fianna Fáil is a central theme of the later part of this thesis.

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<sup>31</sup> See Enid Gaudie, *Cruel Habitations, A History of Working-Class Housing in Britain, 1780-1918* (London, 1974), especially Chapter 9.

<sup>32</sup> Dooley, *The Land for the People*, p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 106-7.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

Perhaps the most salient point to emerge from this brief overview of the evolution of the state's role in public housing is that it was multifaceted and contingent. Harloe, in critiquing how some historians have portrayed the narrative of the state's role in housing, identifies 'the myth of the benevolent state' as a particular weakness.<sup>35</sup> This 'myth' assumes a causal link between the reality of slums and urban squalor and the response of housing reformers and the state. Harloe argues that we need to look beyond what appears to be the humanitarian stance of reformers and interrogate their perspectives and their motives. Hamlin convincingly argues this point when assessing the sanitary reform movement of the 1840s.<sup>36</sup> He argues that 'the recognition that conditions do not determine responses is necessary if we are to avoid falling under the rhetorical spell cast by sanitarians a century and a half ago'.<sup>37</sup> Again, this appears to be a valuable insight in that it recognises the reality that meaningful state action to address the crisis in working class housing, well documented by the 1880s across most European countries, did not occur until after World War I.

Irish historiography in this area displays some weakness, with a tendency to focus on cataloguing housing conditions and on the nuts and bolts of state intervention. Fraser and Daly's work are notable exceptions with the former's *John Bull's Other Homes* and the latter's *Buffer State* interrogating state housing policy and setting it in the context of competing sectional and political interests. Jacinta Prunty's *Dublin Slums, 1800-1925*<sup>38</sup> is the most comprehensive account of urban deprivation in an Irish context, how it was perceived and measured and the evolving response by the state, local authorities and civil society. In her introduction she describes the slum question in Dublin in these years as

revolving around a number of key issues: contagious disease, poor sanitation, tenement accommodation, overcrowding and moral degradation, vagrancy and homelessness, and the policing, control and relief of the poor by both state and charitable institutions.<sup>39</sup>

What follows explores these issues and records the trajectory of the growing body of public health legislation and public and philanthropic housing initiatives that were in place by the end of the nineteenth century. In some respects her approach maps on to how the slum problem was conceived of in the nineteenth century. While there is a recognition that those living in the slums were poor, the slums are largely defined in public health terms, with an emphasis on

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<sup>35</sup> Harloe, *The People's Home?* p. 17.

<sup>36</sup> Christopher Hamlin, *Public Health and Social Justice in the Age of Chadwick: Britain 1800-1854* (Cambridge, 1998).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>38</sup> Jacinta Prunty, *Dublin Slums, 1800-1925: A Study in Urban Geography* (Dublin, 1998).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

overcrowding and lack of sanitation, rather than the economic and political structures that shaped the city. Despite the passing of public health legislation and advances in sanitation Dublin's slums remained amongst the worst in the British Isles into the twentieth century. That this was the case, she argues, 'was due to the scale and complexity of the problem, and the lack of political will'.<sup>40</sup> Ascribing to lethargy the relative failure on the part of those in positions of power to address Dublin's sum problem tends to elide an adequate exploration of their interest and motives. Both Daly and Fraser, on the other hand, locate their accounts of the evolution of housing policy firmly in the context of competing economic and political interests.

Alongside Prunty, works by F.H.A. Aalen and Frank Cullen construct clear narratives regarding housing conditions in Dublin and the legislative and administrative responses that evolved from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.<sup>41</sup> Cullen's work on the South Dublin Poor Law Union shows that in small villages such as Clondalkin and Rathfarnham sanitary and housing conditions were little better than in the Dublin slums.<sup>42</sup> Under the Public Health Act of 1878, Poor Law guardians became the local sanitary authority and Cullen highlights their role in addressing issues of contaminated water, inadequate sewerage and lack of scavenging.<sup>43</sup> One of the strengths of the Act, he argues

was the way in which it increased awareness throughout the rural communities of matters such as personal hygiene and sanitary standards, thereby encouraging people to cooperate with officials and become actively involved in the improvement of their own living conditions.<sup>44</sup>

But focusing on the details of the implementation of legislation, without giving due weight to its political context, can lead to a Whiggish view of history that fails to explain the uneven impact of such legislation. Marilyn Silverman's study of the operation of the Labourers Acts in Thomastown, Co. Kilkenny, offers a more nuanced perspective and suggest the legislation 'tackled many issues. It aimed to obviate a farm-labour shortage, keep a labour pool in rural areas, restrain wage levels, and alleviate what had become an unacceptable living standard and

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 337.

<sup>41</sup> F.H.A. Aalen, 'Health and Housing in Dublin c.1850-1921' in F.H.A. Aalen and Kevin Whelan (eds) *Dublin City and County: From Pre-History to Present* (Dublin, 1992), pp 279-304; Frank Cullen, 'The provision of working- and lower-middle-class housing in late nineteenth-century urban Ireland' in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, III C (2011), pp 217-251.

<sup>42</sup> Frank Cullen, *'Cleansing rural Dublin': public health and housing initiatives in the South Dublin Poor Law Union, 1880-1920* (Dublin, 2001).

<sup>43</sup> Public Health (Ireland) Act 1878 (41 & 42 Vict. c. 52).

<sup>44</sup> Cullen, *Cleaning Rural Dublin*, p. 53.



public health problem.<sup>45</sup> Other perspectives on the nature and implementation of public health legislation, such as those put forward by Patrick Carroll and Patrick Joyce discussed below, set these developments in the context of the exercise of state power, a discourse not explicitly apparent in Prunty and Cullen's work. Carroll, for example, traces the links between eighteenth century discourses on medical police and nineteenth century conceptions of public health.<sup>46</sup> Reference to medical police, with its echoes of police more generally, aroused public suspicion and the term receded from use in the latter half of the nineteenth century. However, the coercive nature of the practice of elements of public health, such as slum clearance, suggests the value of an approach that interrogates these developments in a critical way. .

Turning to the state's intervention in housing, the notion of a benevolent state would suggest that the people and places experiencing the worst conditions would be the primary beneficiaries of state policy. The literature on the Labourers Acts shows that the highest levels of provisions of cottages did not necessarily take place in counties where labourers were least well housed.<sup>47</sup> There has been no research carried out on a comparative basis on the impact of the Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890, the Clancy Act or, indeed, any of the Housing Acts enacted in the Free State between 1922 and 1945 in Irish towns. Addressing this gap forms a significant element of the current research.

The British literature on regional variation in the provision of public housing is mostly based on regional studies such as those by Robert Ryder on Durham, Robert Finnigan and John H. Jennings on Leeds, Madge Dresser on Bristol, Jean Turnbull on Carlisle and Jean Young on Dundee.<sup>48</sup> While all of these offer useful insights into the different aspects of the topic, Mark

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<sup>45</sup> Marilyn Silverman, *An Irish working class: explorations in political economy and hegemony, 1800-1950* (Toronto, 2006), p. 218.

<sup>46</sup> Patrick Carroll, 'Medical Police and the History of Public Health' in *Medical History*, 71 (2002), pp 461-94.

<sup>47</sup> See F.H.A. Aalen, 'The rehousing of rural labourers in Ireland under the Labourers (Ireland) Acts, 1883-1919' in *Journal of Historical Geography*, 12, no.3 (1986), pp 287-306; F.H.A. Aalen, 'Public housing in Ireland, 1880-1921' in *Planning Perspectives*, 2, no.2 (1987), pp 175-193; Fintan Lane, 'Rural labourers, social change and politics in late nineteenth-century Ireland' in Fintan Lane and Donal O'Drisceoil (eds), *Politics and the Irish Working Class, 1830-1945* (London, 2005), pp 113-139; Crossman, *Politics, pauperism and power in late nineteenth-century Ireland*.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Ryder, Robert, 'Council house building in County Durham, 1900-1939: the local implementation of national policy' (PhD thesis, Durham University, 1979); Robert Ryder, 'Council house building in County Durham, 1900-1939: the local implementation of national policy' in Daunton (ed.), *Councillors and tenants*, pp 39-100; Robert Finnigan, 'Council housing in Leeds, 1919-39: social policy and urban change' in Daunton (ed.), *Councillors and tenants*, pp 101-153; Madge Dresser, 'Housing Policy in Bristol, 1919-30' in Daunton (ed.), *Councillors and tenants*, pp 155-216; Jean Kay Young, 'From 'laissez-faire' to 'Homes fit for Heroes', 1869-1919' (PhD thesis, University of St Andrews, 1991); J.M. Jennings, 'Slums, subsidies and working class housing, the experience of Leeds 1933-36, and the influence of local initiative on policy formulation in the British Labour Party, 1930-51' (PhD thesis, University of North Carolina, 2002);

Goodwin's work on regional variations in council housing provision in England and Wales is informed by a methodological approach that is closest to that adopted in this study.<sup>49</sup> His starting point is a detailed cataloguing of these regional variations that are apparent 'even when national processes were at their most uniform'.<sup>50</sup> His approach is firmly grounded in the social sciences as he seeks to link variations in patterns of public housing between 1919 and 1982 and what he terms 'spatial variations in social processes'.<sup>51</sup> These social processes include the interaction between changes in local economies, class structures and political practices. He draws a useful distinction between two groups of factors that lie behind variations in housing provision. The first simply reflects differences in towns. National slum clearance policies, for example, were more likely to have an impact on industrialised towns of the north-east than market towns of the south-west. The second relate to what he terms 'the heterogeneity of local social relations'.<sup>52</sup> In terms of public housing, the balance of political power on local councils, for example, could influence how national policy was implemented. His approach goes beyond an examination of the exercise of power by political parties at the local level and links this to class and property relations. This suggests a useful framework for approaching the housing question in Irish towns in search of an explanation for the wide-ranging variations in the pattern of public provision.

Goodwin's work suggests two further research questions. The title of his thesis includes the phrase 'the social democratic state', and it is clear that the Labour Party and the labour movement at both the national and local levels had decisive influences in shaping public housing policy and its implementation in Britain. It is equally clear that these influences were much weaker in Ireland, and yet by the 1940s a quarter of the housing stock of provincial towns had been built by local authorities. The question arises as to what impelled such a high level of state involvement in housing in provincial towns in the apparent absence of influential organisations representing working-class interests.

The literature is unambiguous in establishing a link between state-subsidised housing in Ireland, the IPP and the politics of home rule in the first two decades of the twentieth century.<sup>53</sup> The IPP's promotion of the Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890 in the local elections of 1899 and the subsequent campaign for subsidies was motivated by a desire to neutralise the

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<sup>49</sup> Mark Goodwin, 'Council housing, the social democratic state and the locality' (PhD thesis, London School of Economics, 1984).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>53</sup> Fraser's *John Bull's Other Homes* was the pioneering work in this area and his account in Chapter 1

electoral challenge of Sinn Féin and labour interests at local level. Certainly in Dublin, Ciaran Wallace's analysis of the 1899 elections shows that the IPP faced a challenge from candidates sponsored by the Labour Electoral Association which had included in its platform a call for working-class housing at reasonable rents.<sup>54</sup> Whether similar pressure was brought to bear on the IPP in provincial Ireland by working-class organisations merits investigation. In Britain the overwhelming evidence of the very poor housing conditions endured by the country's urban working class was in the public domain for decades and, according to Seán Damer, 'every liberal and left-wing group including trades councils all over the country, had the municipalisation of housing as a central issue throughout the last decade of the nineteenth century'.<sup>55</sup> Yet, despite this, public housing provision in urban Britain by 1914 was but a fraction of that in urban Ireland. Even in Scotland only one per cent of the housing stock was in municipal ownership by 1914 despite its well-documented housing shortages and labour activism.<sup>56</sup> Turning to the 1930s, Fianna Fáil's economic and social programme has been thoroughly analysed in the literature, including work by Cormac Ó Gráda, Kevin O'Rourke, Mary Daly, Joe Lee, Ronan Fanning, Richard Dunphy and Mel Cousins.<sup>57</sup> Daly's *Buffer State* provides the most detailed account of Fianna Fáil's housing policy in the 1930s.<sup>58</sup> She correctly identifies the fact that funding for private and rural housing exceeded what had been initially planned for, but she does not explicitly address the high levels of public housing in towns.<sup>59</sup> The question arises as to what were the political circumstances, both at national and town levels, that shaped the housing programme in this way, given the apparent weakness of the kind of social democratic politics that Goodwin describes in England.

The second research question suggested by Goodwin's work relates to what he terms 'the local state'. As the vehicle for implementing state housing policy and its various manifestations in the form of borough corporations, urban council and town commissioners, it

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<sup>54</sup> Ciaran Wallace, 'Local politics and government in Dublin city and suburbs, 1899-1914' (PhD thesis, University of Dublin, 2010), p. 115.

<sup>55</sup> Seán Damer, 'State, Class and Housing: Glasgow 1885-1919' in Joseph Melling (ed.), *Housing Social Policy and the State* (London, 1980), p. 78.

<sup>56</sup> see Richard Rodger, 'Scotland' in Richard Rodger (ed.), *The Comparative Study of Housing Strategies in Europe, 1880-1930* (Leicester, 1992), pp 105-131.

<sup>57</sup> Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland: A New Economic History, 1780-1939* (Oxford, 1994), pp 384-441; Kevin O'Rourke, 'Burn everything British but their coal: the Anglo-Irish economic war of the 1930s' in *Journal of Economic History*, 51, no. 2 (Jun., 1991), pp 357-366; Mary Daly, *Industrial development and Irish national identity, 1922-1939* (Dublin, 1993); Joseph Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989), pp 175-270; Ronan Fanning, *The Irish Department of Finance, 1922-58* (Dublin, 1979); Richard Dunphy, *The Making of Fianna Fáil Power in Ireland, 1923-48* (Oxford, 1995); Mel Cousins, *The Birth of Social Welfare in Ireland, 1922-52* (Dublin, 2003).

<sup>58</sup> Daly, *The Buffer State*, pp 200-48.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

represents a key focus for this study. The evolution of the local state or local government from the reforms of the mid-nineteenth century through to the ceding of power to the central state from the 1920s onwards is a fairly well developed theme in Irish historiography. Matthew Potter's *The Municipal Revolution in Ireland* attempts a comprehensive history of the evolution of municipal governance from 1800 to modern times, tracing its modernisation and democratisation in a 'golden age' between 1871 and 1923, following by a reining in of its power in what he calls 'an age of democratic centralism'.<sup>60</sup> The phrase 'democratic centralism' is, perhaps, an unfortunate one given its association with Leninist principles of political organisation and decision making. Potter's perspective implies a dilution of local democracy and the implementation of the County Management Act (1940) in 1942 is certainly consistent with that view. Joe Lee takes a jaundiced view of how power was centralised in the new state and claims that

after 1921 the higher civil servants in the early Free State contemplated with mandarin disdain the corruption and incompetence that they associated with local government, and resolved to centralise administrative authority, as far as politically possible in Dublin.<sup>61</sup>

Even under de Valera, who he describes as cherishing 'an idyllic image of the self-reliant image of the rural Christian community' centralisation continued inexorably.<sup>62</sup> However, the growing demands placed on the machinery of local government from the 1930s onwards, much of it related to public housing, sets a useful context in which to assess its effectiveness and the central government's strategy to assume additional powers to itself. Despite Lee's views of a centralising state, he also recognised local government's 'unsavoury reputation for jobbery ... and its attention to the three F's – family friends and favours'.<sup>63</sup>

Potter's work offers useful insights into two sets of relationships that are also a feature of Goodwin's work. The first is the manner in which local councils reflected the balance of social forces in their towns. The second, which is the primary theme, is the changing relationship between the local state and the central state. This is also a recurring theme in the current research. The relationship between local authorities and the Local Government Board (LGB) was crucial in determining whether progress took place in implementing the provisions of the Housing Acts prior to 1922. O'Donoghue assesses the nature of the relationship in his biography

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<sup>60</sup> Matthew Potter, *The Municipal Revolution in Ireland: A handbook of urban government in Ireland since 1800* (Dublin, 2011), pp 289-336.

<sup>61</sup> Joseph Lee, 'Centralisation and community' in Joseph Lee (ed.), *Ireland: towards a sense of place* (Cork, 1985), p. 84.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

of the board's chief administrator, Sir Henry Augustus Robinson, and concludes with a quotation from R.B. McDowell that 'relations seem to have been remarkably harmonious notwithstanding "a trace of paternalism"'.<sup>64</sup> Daly's *Buffer State* catalogues the much more intrusive role that the Department of Local Government and Public Health (DLGPH) played in the work of local authorities and the alacrity with which bodies regarded as under-performing were suspended.

Potter bases his approach around eleven urban case-studies, and there are some parallels with the methodology being adopted here. However, they tend to be 'stand alone' case studies, and by failing to build more explicit comparisons between towns a level of insight is lost. For example, the number of houses built by a particular municipal authority is presented as evidence of a pro-active housing programme when, in fact, more comprehensive data show it lagging well behind other towns. Drogheda's output of public housing up to 1914 is reported as 128 units and described as 'good',<sup>65</sup> for example, when in fact it ranked 30<sup>th</sup> out of 74 towns on a per capita basis.<sup>66</sup> Potter's work, though, does highlight the value of focusing on the shifting balance of political and class interests in the local state to understand the varied history of housing at the local level. Works by Desmond Roche, Mark Callinan and Justin F. Keoghan, Dermot Ferriter and Daly provide overviews of the evolution and functions of Irish local government as an arm of the state.<sup>67</sup>

This is a rich literature but, apart from Potter's work, published research on the governance of individual towns in the period 1890 to 1945 is very limited. Gregory O'Connor's thesis on local government in the towns of Tuam and Armagh between 1840 and 1940 takes a comparative approach and successfully sets the operation of both local authorities in the context of competing local interests and of how these changed over time.<sup>68</sup> He notes that in Tuam the extension of the electoral franchise in the 1899 local elections had little impact on the composition of the Town Commissioners in terms of class and that although 'town labourers had the vote for the election of town commissioners, [they] were not organised and generally

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<sup>64</sup> Brendan O'Donoghue, *Activities Wise and Otherwise: The Career of Sir Henry Augustus Robinson 1898-1922* (Sallins, 2015), p. 82.

<sup>65</sup> Potter, *The Municipal Revolution*, p. 221.

<sup>66</sup> Based on data from the *Annual Report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health 1929-30*, Appendix xxxix, pp 216-19.

<sup>67</sup> Desmond Roche, *Local Government in Ireland* (Dublin, 1982); Mark Callinan and Justin F. Keogan (eds), *Local Government in Ireland, Inside Out* (Dublin, 2003); Diarmaid Ferriter, *Lovers of Liberty? Local Government in Twentieth Century Ireland* (Dublin, 2001); Mary Daly, *County & Town: One hundred years of Local Government in Ireland* (Dublin, 2001).

<sup>68</sup> Gregory O'Connor, 'A Comparative Study of Local Government in Tuam and Armagh 1840-1940' (PhD thesis, Maynooth University, 2005).

supported a local publican or employer'.<sup>69</sup> Between 1928 and 1942 a combination of Fianna Fáil and Labour controlled the Town Commissioners, and O'Connor suggests that the political alliance between the local authority and the influential local TD, Mark Killilea, 'resulted in great benefits for the town and the Fianna Fáil party'.<sup>70</sup>

This interplay of local and national politics across provincial towns as a factor shaping public housing provision is a recurring theme in the current research. Although it deals exclusively with an earlier period, Patrick J. Hester's study of the evolution of administration in Leinster towns is valuable in charting the emergence of a Catholic middle class from the 1850s. He outlines the challenges faced by this new cohort of town commissioners following the passing of the Town Improvement Act of 1854, and emphasises the financial constraints within which they operated. By exploring urban conditions relating to water supply, sewerage and housing, he exposes the gap between the reforming legislation passed at Westminster and the capacity and, to some extent, the willingness of Town Commissioners to implement it.<sup>71</sup> To coincide with the abolition of town councils in 2014, some local authorities issued commemorative publications to mark their history. Amongst the best of these is Martin Morris's *A History of Longford Town Council*, which is particularly useful in charting the town's early venture into public housing in the 1890s and the council's financial difficulties in the 1930s.<sup>72</sup>

This question of capacity is an important one given the growing range of functions allocated to municipal authorities from the mid-nineteenth century. Related research questions include what scale of budgets were available to Town Commissioners as they assumed responsibility for implementing the early housing Acts of 1890 and 1908? Where did expenditure on public housing, and the extensive loans it entailed, fit into their overall expenditure? What was the relationship between the financial capacity of municipal authorities to draw down loans for housing and actual patterns of public housing provision? Apart from financial capacity, a series of questions suggest themselves relating to the competence of these relatively small and institutionally immature bodies to administer the process of housing provision, ranging from the acquisition of sites through to their role as corporate landlords. Particularly in the years between 1910 and 1914 and, again, from 1932 through to the late 1930s, housing dominated the agenda of councils in many towns, with very substantial loans being undertaken and large sums relating to housing grants and rents requiring administration.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p.263.

<sup>71</sup> Patrick J. Hester, 'From corporations to commissioners: Municipal government and urban change in Leinster, 1835-65' (PhD thesis, University of Dublin, 2009), p. 229.

<sup>72</sup> Martin Morris, *A History of Longford Town Council* (Longford, 2014).

The 1930s housing legislation included complex and far-reaching provisions. Published work by Ruth McManus and Joe Brady on Dublin in the first half of the twentieth century has highlighted the Corporation's role as planning authority and developer of public housing.<sup>73</sup> Many of the issues dealt with there mirror those in provincial towns, although the scale is entirely different. Dublin was exceptional in having its own Housing Department and, from 1935, its own Town Planning Committee.<sup>74</sup>

The British and Irish literature on public housing is largely pitched at either the national or the local level. This bifurcation can be a weakness in that it locates the analysis at one level or the other but largely excludes detailed examination of the interaction between national policy and local implementation and lacks the facility to assess implementation in different kinds of urban settings. The first collection of academic essays dealing with working-class housing in Britain, edited by S.D. Chapman and published back in 1971, is essentially a series of local studies, most of which make limited reference to the wider context of legislative developments in public health and housing.<sup>75</sup> Anthony Sutcliffe's survey of the literature on working-class housing in Britain in the nineteenth century, published in 1972, argues that more local studies were required but that they needed to be set 'in a national theoretical framework to explain local variations in rents and conditions'.<sup>76</sup> Young's study of housing in Dundee between 1869 and 1919 and Turnbull's work on Carlisle in the inter-war period are both substantial contributions to the literature.<sup>77</sup> Yet both insist, in terms of methodology, that an exclusive focus on one city represents the best approach. Young argues that

a study which chooses to spread its geographical net to encompass more places would inevitably have to restrict itself in other ways, probably to the detriment of a proper appreciation of the social and political context of local housing markets.<sup>78</sup>

Turnbull employs a similar rationale when stating 'Carlisle [is chosen] because it is a manageable size for the detailed study required'.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ruth McManus, *Dublin 1910-1940, Shaping the City & Suburbs* (Dublin 2002), especially Chapters 1-3; Joseph Brady, *Dublin, 1930-1950: The Emergence of the Modern City* (Dublin, 2014), especially Chapters 1,5.

<sup>74</sup> McManus, *Dublin*, p. 181.

<sup>75</sup> S.D. Chapman (ed.), *The History of Working Class Housing, A Symposium* (Newton Abbot, 1971).

<sup>76</sup> Anthony Sutcliffe, 'Working class housing in nineteenth century Britain: a review of recent research', *Bulletin Society for the Study of Labour History*, 24 (1972), p. 47.

<sup>77</sup> Jean Young, 'From "Laissez-faire" to "Home fit for heroes": Housing in Dundee 1869-1919' (PhD thesis, University of St Andrew's, 1991); Jean Turnbull, 'Housing Tenure and Social Structure: the Impact of Inter-War Housing Change in Carlisle, 1917-39' (PhD thesis, University of Lancaster, 1991), p. 3.

<sup>78</sup> Young, 'From "Laissez-faire" to "Home fit for heroes"', p. 7.

<sup>79</sup> Turnbull, 'Housing tenure and Social Structure', p. 12.

In the Irish literature much of the published work is focused exclusively on Dublin. This is understandable given its size and the deplorable housing conditions in the city in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. McManus's *Dublin, 1910-1940 Shaping the City and the Suburbs* catalogues the development of both public and private housing in the city and sets it within the context of the garden city movement and the work of Geddes and Unwin.<sup>80</sup> Sections dealing with government support for public housing in the 1920s and 1930s provide a useful comparator for provincial towns. Brady's discussion of suburban growth in the 1930s shows the important role played by both private builders and Public Utility Societies in the provision of housing, with these two sectors building almost half the new houses in the city between 1933 and 1938.<sup>81</sup> The contribution made by the different sectors in provincial towns appears to be quite different and will be explored at the town level. The focus of Stephen O'Sullivan's thesis on local authority housing in Cork city is on the links between politics and the cost and design of housing.<sup>82</sup> His research explores how the villa-type housing of the 1920s and the mass produced dwellings of the 1930s reflected quite different political perspectives on the role of the state in housing. John Logan's work on working-class housing in Limerick city successfully links local provision with national policies and makes it clear that the corporation's exertions were 'slight', particularly up to 1914, compared to those in Cork and Waterford.<sup>83</sup>

Some works aspire to pitch their analysis at the national level but ultimately rely heavily on the Dublin experience. An example is McManus's 'Blue Collars, "Red Forts," and Green Fields: Working-Class Housing in Ireland in the Twentieth Century' which, despite its title, focuses exclusively on suburbanisation in Dublin.<sup>84</sup> Other work by McManus provides a very useful overview of national trends in Irish housing and suburbanisation but while there are references to cities other than Dublin, including Cork, Limerick and Galway, these are used to illustrate national trends rather build a composite picture based on local data.<sup>85</sup> Stephen Moore's work on the history of working class housing in Ireland between 1840 and 1912 deals exclusively with Dublin and Belfast, although it does provide a comprehensive account of the evolution of public

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<sup>80</sup> McManus, *Dublin*.

<sup>81</sup> Brady, *Dublin*, pp 201-95.

<sup>82</sup> Stephen Garrett O'Sullivan, 'Local authority housing in Cork County Borough, 1886 to 1992' (PhD thesis, University of Dublin, 1998).

<sup>83</sup> John Logan, 'Frugal Comfort: housing Limerick's labourers and artisans' in Liam Irwin and Gearoid O Tuathaigh (eds), *Limerick: History and Society* (Dublin, 2009), pp 557-82.

<sup>84</sup> Ruth McManus, 'Blue Collars, "Red Forts," and Green Fields: Working-Class Housing in Ireland in the Twentieth Century', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 64 (Oct., 2003), pp 38-54.

<sup>85</sup> Ruth McManus, 'Suburban and urban housing in the twentieth century' in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, Section C, 111 (2011), pp 253-86.



health and housing legislation affecting urban housing.<sup>86</sup> The development of working class housing in Belfast in the period 1871-1911 features in the work of A.C. Hepburn on the wider social history of the city.<sup>87</sup> His assertion that 'much of its housing stock was purpose built for working class families and also constructed under a tested system of building regulations' places the city in stark contrast to Dublin.<sup>88</sup> Fraser traces the initial reluctance of Belfast Corporation to involve itself in public housing, consistent with other municipal councils in Ulster, and notes that they defended their inaction on the grounds that 'housing conditions were not nearly as bad as in Southern Ireland'.<sup>89</sup>

Daly's history of the Department of Local Government, in dealing with housing, is principally concerned with the shaping of national policy, although she characterises the book as 'a history of the relationship between Irish central government and local authorities'.<sup>90</sup> She certainly establishes that national policy, or at least the manner in which it was implemented, favoured rural areas over towns and private provision over public, but the processes at the local level that might explain why local authorities in towns of similar size built quite different numbers of houses remain largely unexplored. Focusing exclusively on national trends in housing provision can sometimes lead to an incomplete understanding of what occurred in different urban settings. Regarding urban housing, Potter's work on the 'municipal revolution', referenced above, comes closest to placing provision within the context of a diversity of local settings.<sup>91</sup> His history of the evolution of municipal governance in eleven provincial towns explores the extent to which they could be said to have pursued policies consistent with municipal socialism, including the building of houses under the various Housing of the Working Classes Acts.<sup>92</sup> A detailed exploration of how municipal authorities viewed the provision of housing within this context of municipal socialism, particularly in the period up to 1914, forms part of Chapter 3.

The collection of essays edited by Michael Bannon, *Planning the Irish Experience and A Hundred Years of Irish Planning*, emphasised that the early town planning movement in Ireland

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<sup>86</sup> Stephen Moore, 'The development of working class housing in Ireland 1840-1912: a study of housing conditions, built form and policy' (D.Phil thesis, University of Ulster, 1986).

<sup>87</sup> A.C. Hepburn, 'Work, Class and Religion in Belfast, 1871-1911' in *Irish Economic and Social History*, 10 (1983), pp 33-50.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 33-34.

<sup>89</sup> Fraser, *John Bull's Other Homes*, p. 94.

<sup>90</sup> Daly, *The Buffer State*, p. 1.

<sup>91</sup> Potter, *Municipal Revolution*.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 143-6.

was essentially Dublin-based, with the key figures including Geddes, Abercrombie and Unwin.<sup>93</sup> Although early initiatives were completely disrupted by war and revolution between 1914 and 1923, one legacy was the establishment of the Civics Institute of Ireland, which continued to promote the need for planning into the 1930s. Bannon's discussion of the Town Planning Bill of 1929 highlights the general lack of political interest in the area and its minimal impact.<sup>94</sup> The provisions of the subsequent Town and Regional Planning Act of 1934 had the force of law, but the legislation was permissive. Seán O'Leary sets the legislation in the context of the time and notes that 'few people had even heard of town planning, concepts such as ecology were unknown'.<sup>95</sup> The literature gives little indication that municipal authorities in provincial towns availed of its provisions prior to World War II. In the apparent disinterest on the part of municipal authorities in the provisions of the 1934 Act, the question arises as to what factors shaped the layout and design of public housing schemes in provincial towns in the 1930s.

A recurring pattern in much of the above literature on Irish urban history is the extent to which it has been heavily dominated by a focus on Dublin and, to a lesser extent, on other cities.<sup>96</sup> This, combined with a focus on pre-twentieth century developments, means that post-1900 Irish provincial towns remain an underdeveloped aspect of the field. In particular, there are very few works that have provided an overview of Irish provincial towns in the century between 1850 and 1950.<sup>97</sup> One of the exceptions is Stephen Royle's 'Small towns in Ireland, 1841' which could be described as a preliminary survey of Irish towns, focusing on classification and geographical patterns of growth and decline.<sup>98</sup> What is absent, though, is any account of the forces that shaped the experience of these towns, whether migration and emigration, the impact of railways, rising living standards, or the growing role of the state, including local government. Royle contributed a similar article to Volume III of the *Cambridge History of urban Britain* that deals with these and many other themes in a systematic way.<sup>99</sup> David Feldman's

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<sup>93</sup> Michael Bannon, *Planning: the Irish Experience, 1920-1988* (Dublin, 1989); Michael Bannon, *A hundred years of Irish planning. Vol.1, The Emergence of Irish Planning, 1880-1920* (Dublin, 1985).

<sup>94</sup> Bannon, 'Irish planning from 1921 to 1945, an overview' in Bannon (ed.), *Planning, the Irish Experience*, pp 40-4.

<sup>95</sup> Seán O'Leary, *Sense of Place: a history of Irish planning* (Dublin, 2014), p. 64.

<sup>96</sup> A recently compiled bibliography of modern Irish urban history contains 83 entries relating to Dublin, 19 for other Irish cities and 7 for 'smaller towns. See Bibliography, Modern Irish Urban History Group, <https://irishurbanhistory.wordpress.com/bibliography/> [accessed 6 June 2016].

<sup>97</sup> The following two publications deal exclusively with pre-twentieth century Irish towns – R.A. Butlin (ed.), *The Development of the Irish Town* (London, 1977) and David Harkness and Mary O'Dowd (eds), *The Town in Ireland* (Belfast, 1981).

<sup>98</sup> Stephen Royle, 'Small towns in Ireland, 1841-1951' in Howard Clarke, Jacinta Prunty and Mark Hennessy (eds), *Surveying Ireland's Past* (Dublin, 2004), pp 517-44.

<sup>99</sup> Stephen Royle, 'The development of small towns in Britain' in Martin Daunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, Volume III, 1840-1950* (Cambridge, 2008), pp 151-84.

essay there on migration, for example, provides a valuable overview of regional rural to urban shifts in population in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He describes the concern expressed in the early twentieth century at the ‘progressive deterioration of the race’ at a time when rural life was being idealised at the expense of urban living.<sup>100</sup> This theme has obvious resonances in an Irish context and Daly detects a bias in favour of rural housing provision at the expense of cities and towns that merits further investigation.<sup>101</sup> Robert Millward’s account of the political economy of urban utilities is an equally systematic overview of the competing interests involved in the expanding provision of water, sewerage, gas and transport services from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.<sup>102</sup> Potter’s *Municipal Revolution* represents an initial exploration of this area for Ireland but it lacks an overview of provincial towns as an urban system. His account of the rise of municipal socialism in his eleven case-study towns is useful, but his assertion that ‘the state expanded its activities in a pragmatic and non-ideological fashion’ is questionable when set against the analysis offered by Millward.<sup>103</sup> In Chapter 3 an attempt is made to address this gap in the Irish literature and to provide an overview of the capacity of municipal authorities across all Irish provincial towns to respond to the new responsibilities, including housing, that was conferred on them in the course of the late nineteenth century.

Much of the literature referred to above indicates that we need to interrogate the notion of the state. Even when referring to ‘the state provision of housing’ it is necessary to address the reality of two states, central authority and local authority, and to consider that the relationship between the two may change radically over time. Different theories of the state provide some useful reference points within which to formulate answers to the question as to why and how the state involved itself in housing in Irish provincial towns between 1890 and 1945. Classical Marxist formulations of the state see it as the instrument of oppression serving the interests of the ruling class. Regarding housing, the state intervenes to ensure it is of a sufficient standard to support the reproduction of the workforce which, in turn, is necessary for sustaining capital accumulation. The building of public housing can create employment, and subsidised housing can be seen as part of the ‘social wage’ which suppresses wage demands and increases profits. State investment in housing promotes stable family life where socialisation passes on values relating to work and discipline. The collection of essays edited by

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<sup>100</sup> David Feldman, ‘Migration’ in Martin Daunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, p. 200.

<sup>101</sup> Mary Daly, *Buffer State*, pp 226-28.

<sup>102</sup> Robert Millward, ‘The political economy of urban utilities’ in Martin Daunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, pp 315-50.

<sup>103</sup> Potter, *Municipal Revolution*, p. 143.

Joseph Melling summarises many of the concerns of Marxist writers dealing with the history of housing, social policy and the state in Britain.<sup>104</sup> Local studies on housing in Leeds, Glasgow, North Shields and Oldham are included there, and authors are united in seeing housing as a crucial element for the state in maintaining stable social relations and efficient production.

Such structuralist views have been critiqued, by, amongst others, American sociologist Theda Skocpol, as ahistorical and failing to allow for any consideration of the state as an autonomous actor.<sup>105</sup> Her work on the comparative history of social policy includes an account of the generous welfare provision for veterans and widows of the American Civil War, which pre-dated welfare systems in Europe.<sup>106</sup> She presents this as emerging from a patronage-oriented party political system and from campaigning by a broad coalition of Civil War veterans. By 1893 expenditure on the programme represented 40 percent of federal spending and in 1910 28 percent of men were recipients. There are interesting parallels here with public housing provision in Ireland, given that both developments could be regarded as anomalous. Skocpol's focus on the role of political parties and civil society groups, not easily mapped onto particular class interests, in shaping policy outcomes provides a useful reference point against which to assess the role of the state in public housing provision in Ireland. For example, the first significant state involvement in housing in Irish provincial towns occurred in 1909-10, following the passing of the Clancy Act in 1908. This did not arise due to any increased militancy on the part of the urban working class but was related to the strategy of the IPP, along with the Liberal Party, to promote social reform as a substitute for Home Rule. At a minimum, Skocpol's approach creates a space for investigating the role of state and civil society institutions in the formation of policy.

Writing of interwar politicians in Britain, Bowley has suggested that 'the housing problem was the slum problem, the problem of people living in insanitary conditions'.<sup>107</sup> This is an enduring theme in the state's involvement in housing and an important theme in the literature. Harloe makes the point that the concept of 'public health', which now refers to the control and elimination of physical disease, had very different connotations in the mid-

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<sup>104</sup> Joseph Melling (ed.), *Housing, Social Policy and the State* (London, 1980).

<sup>105</sup> See Theda Skocpol, 'Bring the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research' in P. Evans et al. (eds), *Bring the State Back In* (Cambridge, 1985), pp 4-37. She argues that 'virtually all neo-Marxist writers on the state have retained deeply embedded society-centred assumptions, not allowing themselves to doubt that, at base, states are inherently shaped by classes or class struggles and function to preserve and expand modes of production ... This makes it difficult to assign causal weight to variations in state structures and activities across nations and short time periods'. (p. 5).

<sup>106</sup> Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers. The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Harvard, 1995).

<sup>107</sup> Bowley, *Housing and the State*, p. 3.

nineteenth century.<sup>108</sup> Linked to this is the notion of the slum, a term first coined in the 1840s.<sup>109</sup> It was viewed as ‘not only physically separate, its inhabitants were a race apart whose characters were judged akin to the most primitive form of humankind or worse’.<sup>110</sup> Harloe quotes the remarks of American social reformer, Alfred T. White, who, writing of the New York tenements of the 1870s, describes them as producing criminals, lunatics and paupers, ‘these noxious and unhappy elements of society, as surely as the harvest follows the sowing’.<sup>111</sup> These conceptions of the slum as a social category, encompassing forms of behaviour that threatened dominant value systems, had a resilience well beyond the Victorian era. As is demonstrated in Peter Mandler and Susan Pedersen’s collection of essays on the post-Victorian British intelligentsia, nineteenth-century notions of respectability, domesticity and improvement continued to inform the thinking of social reformers well into the twentieth century.<sup>112</sup> This means that the way that slums were viewed in the 1840s, when some of the key ideas around sanitary reform were conceived, merits close consideration, even if they predate effective housing legislation by half a century.

A key figure in the English sanitary reform movement was Edwin Chadwick. His involvement in the Royal Commission into the Operation of the Poor Laws and the subsequent passing of the Poor Law Amendment Act in 1834, reflected the ideas of his mentor Jeremy Bentham. The prescription for pauperism was deterrence and Oliver MacDonagh defines Chadwick’s aim as embodied in the new Poor Law

to depauperize the able bodied, to force them out of their fatal protective cover, to drive them into the open labour market and to compel them to fight for their living and develop their skills, industry and exertion.<sup>113</sup>

Such notions of social control are also inherent in Chadwick’s approach to matters of public health. Sanitary reform involved clearing congested courts and alleys, driving new roads through the warrens of overcrowded tenements and freeing up the circulation of air and water. Invisible vapours produced by rotting organic material became trapped in courts and alleyways lacking proper ventilation and were the cause of these areas being the source of illness and disease. The language of the sanitary reformers suggests a parallel miasmatic theory of moral behaviour. Driver notes that

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<sup>108</sup> Harloe, *The People’s Home?*, p. 16.

<sup>109</sup> Martin Gaskell (ed.), *Slums* (Leicester, 1991), p. 3.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>111</sup> Harloe, *The People’s Home?*, p. 16.

<sup>112</sup> Peter Mandler and Susan Pedersen (eds), *After the Victorians: Private Conscience and Public Duty in Modern Britain: Essays in Memory of John Clive* (London, 1994).

<sup>113</sup> Oliver MacDonagh, *Early Victorian Government 1830-1870* (London, 1977), p. 100.

crime... was described by an influential campaigner as 'a subtle, unseen but sure poison in the moral atmosphere of the neighbourhood, dangerous as is deadly miasma to the physical health'. It was the task of social science to diagnose and cure such forms of moral disease.<sup>114</sup>

Driver's survey of early Victorian thinking, linking environment with moral behaviour, makes clear how these sanitary theories influenced how opinion formers and politicians viewed slums.<sup>115</sup> He notes that the Social Science Association, founded in 1857 and committed to social action, was heavily influenced by a form of environmentalism which mapped types of behaviour onto types of environment. Chadwick's prescription for the physical rehabilitation of British cities and their slums through investment in drainage, sewers, street cleansing and water supply required state intervention and substantial municipal investment and brought him into conflict with prevailing laissez-faire ideas regarding the role of the state. Further, as Richard Rodger points out, these prescriptions were all external to the house.<sup>116</sup> Rodgers goes on to argue that the failure of the sanitary reform movement to initiate anything more than a minimalist posture towards the housing question can be linked to issues related to the sanctity of property rights, the placing of slum dwellers' plight in a moral framework, laissez-faire orthodoxy and the resistance of ratepayers to increased municipal expenditure.

Chadwick's solutions to the sanitary problems of British cities and their slums, and, by extension, the moral state of the working class, were essentially technical, not economic or social. Hamlin argues that Chadwick sought to draw attention away from the notion of poverty as the primary cause of disease and high mortality.<sup>117</sup> As such, the sanitary reformers offered a conservative counter-weight to contemporary radicals' and Chartists' demands for economic and political rights. Chadwick, as architect of the new Poor Law and author of the *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* in 1842, was the most prominent advocate of a new role for the state - to enumerate, investigate and regulate its population. The relevance of this mid-nineteenth century ideology to twentieth century public housing is implied by Patrick Joyce who argues that 'the centrality of sanitation in public health ideology and legislation was evident for at least half a century after Chadwick's time'.<sup>118</sup> Patrick Carroll's work on the relationship between state formation, science and the nature of power, set in an Irish context, takes up many of these themes and provides some useful perspectives on the

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p.279.

<sup>115</sup> Felix Driver, 'Moral geographies: social science and the urban environment in mid-nineteenth century England' in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 13, no.3 (1988), pp. 275-87.

<sup>116</sup> Richard Rodger, *Housing in Urban Britain, 1780-1914* (London, 1989), p. 44.

<sup>117</sup> Hamlin, *Public Health and Social Justice in the Age of Chadwick*, p. 86.

<sup>118</sup> Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom* (London, 2003), p. 67.

operation of sanitary and housing legislation through the late nineteenth century and later.<sup>119</sup> The very identity of the state is tied in to its capacity to exercise power through the deployment of knowledge and technology. He describes the growing scale of that capacity in the nineteenth century in the following terms:

From topsoil and water closets to the hedgerows and healthy houses, the physical condition of land and people were made a target of governing strategies. These strategies involved the incorporation of land, the built environment, and bodies into governed and governing spaces.<sup>120</sup>

Joyce puts forward a similar formulation of state action and argues ‘the significance for governance [is] before populations can be governed they must be known or identified’.<sup>121</sup> He reads the detailed mapping of cities and towns in the mid-nineteenth century as a drive to ‘make these spaces legible and hence governable involving untwisting the unwinding alleys, and smoothing out the irregularity of the space of the courts and wynds’.<sup>122</sup> This suggests a very different and more sophisticated conception of the state than that of a benevolent actor compelled to address sanitary or housing issues simply because they have come to public attention. Instead, it provides a lens through which we can assess the growing body of legislation relating to public health and housing conditions enacted from the 1850s onwards and how it empowered municipal authorities and their officers – medical officers of health, health inspectors and sanitary officers – to regulate.

Patrick Joyce’s work on the liberal state turns this perspective around and, while recognising the ‘force and subtlety of state power’, explores the notion of different actors as ‘authors of the state’.<sup>123</sup> In his exploration of the history of the postal system he defines its operatives as involved in the ‘re-production’ of the state in daily life. This suggests a way of looking at key figures in public housing programmes such as engineers, Medical Officer of Health, Sanitary Officers and Town Clerks as both representatives of state power and as creators of the local state as it operated in towns.

### **Methodology and sources**

Devising a methodology that can bring an original perspective to the history of public housing provision in urban Ireland involves addressing some of the thematic gaps and methodological

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<sup>119</sup> Patrick Carroll, *Science, Culture and Modern State Formation* (Berkeley, 2006).

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>121</sup> Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom*, p. 13.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>123</sup> Patrick Joyce, *The State of Freedom: a social history of the British state since 1800* (Cambridge, 2013), pp 44-45.

weaknesses in the literature discussed above. So, in attempting to design a methodology that incorporates a 'vertical' dimension encompassing relationships between the national and the local and a 'horizontal' dimension that accommodates a comparative perspective across Irish towns, this study is conducted on three levels.

The first involves an assessment of evolving housing policy at the national level as expressed in legislation from the Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890 through to the 1932 Housing Act and amending legislation, as articulated by politicians and state officials. This assessment is set in the context of parallel developments in Western Europe and, especially, in Great Britain. The second level consists of an analysis of housing conditions and public housing provision in seventy-four provincial towns and how they evolved in the years 1890 to 1945. The 74 towns are located in the twenty-six counties of what was to become the Free State in 1922 (see Appendix 1 and 2). Developments in these towns are set in a comparative context, particularly in relation to Britain, but also in relation to towns in the six counties of northeast Ulster that came to form Northern Ireland. And the third level is built on a more detailed exploration of housing conditions and the process of public housing provision in fifteen case-study towns, with a particular focus on six of these towns.

At the first level the narrative is set in the context of relations between Ireland and Britain. This is not only because of their political union up to 1922 but also because housing legislation that had been passed at Westminster up to that date continued to form a framework for housing policy in the Irish Free State. In addition, although economic and social conditions were quite different in the two countries during the 1920s and 1930s, Irish housing legislation, in some aspects, continued to reflect the thinking underpinning housing policy in Britain. In order to have a baseline for housing conditions in Irish towns at the beginning of the century, the published census returns for 1901 and 1911 relating house size and the level of overcrowding in English, Scottish and Irish towns are compared. The shifts in housing policy between general provision and slum clearance in Ireland are also set in this comparative context.

In adopting a comparative approach at the national level, the widest possible range of provincial towns has been chosen. The question arises as to the appropriate definition of 'provincial towns' for the purposes of this research. In 1926 there were 93 towns / cities in Ireland with their own municipal governance. Four of these were cities – Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Waterford – and a further eight were in the immediate vicinity of Dublin city. These have been excluded on the basis that their development during this period was intimately related the experience of Dublin city. A number of towns with municipal authorities had stagnated or



declined during the nineteenth century to the point where in 1926 they had populations of less than 1,500. These were also excluded as they did not generally avail of the provisions of the Housing of the Working Classes Act (1890) and its successors, but appear, in some cases at least, to have entered into arrangements with the relevant county council to have the Labourers Acts applied in their towns. The remaining 74 towns, are taken to constitute by our definition the 'provincial towns' of Ireland. Much of the analysis at this level is quantitative and based on published census returns from 1891 down to 1946, on the annual reports of the Local Government Board and the Dept. of Local Government and Public Health, and on housing surveys from 1929 and 1946. These sources have been used to build a statistical database for the 74 towns which illuminate trends in population and housing conditions together with variables linked to public housing provision. These include the number of houses completed per year, the number of houses condemned and demolished, the rents collected and arrears outstanding.

A more detailed exploration of the process of public housing provision is undertaken in the 15 case-study towns. This layer will also include a detailed profile of the housing stock and housing conditions in these towns based on the 1901 census returns. This will provide the basis for an assessment of the impact of the various housing programmes between 1900, a time when some local authorities were beginning to avail of the provisions of the Housing of the Working Classes Act (1890), and 1946, just prior to the major post-war housing schemes. The sources that will principally inform research at this level are the records of the relevant municipal authorities, local and national newspapers, and the archives of the Department of Local Government and Public Health. The 15 case-study towns have been chosen to reflect a range of institutional settings including Borough Corporations, Urban District Councils and Town Commissioners; a range of town sizes from Edenderry (population of 2,093 in 1926) to Drogheda (population of 12,716); a geographical spread of towns, with seven in Leinster, four in Munster; two in Connacht and one in Ulster; a representative spread of towns in terms of growth and decline in the years 1880-1946, in terms of housing stock and housing conditions and in terms of the timing and scale of public housing provision.

Within these 15 towns, six were chosen for particular in-depth study. The archives of the municipal authorities of these towns – Drogheda, Navan, Athy, Fermoy, Tuam and Ballina – are reasonably extensive and this has afforded an opportunity to explore the process of public housing provision in more detail. A continuous set of council minutes, with a small number of gaps, survive for all these towns from the 1890s through to the 1940s. In addition, housing committee minutes survive for Drogheda and Navan and are intermittently included within the

main council minutes for the other towns. Partial rentals for council property also survive for some of the seven towns. With the remaining nine case-study towns, particular issues have been explored in each. These include Longford's role as one of the first towns to avail of the provisions of the Housing of the Working Classes act of 1890; Arklow Town Commissioners' reluctance to apply for urban district status in the early years of the century and the subsequent UDC's efforts to address the town's poor housing conditions; the unusual tendering for a large housing scheme in Clones in 1933; an exploration of the role of local builders in Tralee in the early 1930s, and a close examination of slum clearance in Kilrush and Listowel in the 1930s. In attempting to construct an overview of variations in public housing provision in all 74 towns particular issues were investigated in some detail in towns other than the fifteen case-study towns. For example, the relative failure of Ennis UDC to build houses in the 1930s and the reluctance of Monaghan UDC to subsidise slum clearance housing from the rates are issues that merit exploration.

Municipal authority archives represent one of the three principal sources for this research. The second, national and regional newspapers, have been used extensively to supplement accounts of council activity and to capture the tenor of the public debate on housing at the local and national levels. Minutes of council meetings generally represent a much more formal account of proceedings than that appearing in newspaper reports which often recorded quite revealing exchanges of views. Newspapers are often the only surviving source of information for local elections, including lists of candidates, their affiliations and results. Housing featured quite prominently in the local elections of 1899 and 1934 and regional newspapers can act as a source for the political debate around the issue. Editorials and opinions pieces in regional papers are particularly useful in exposing local issues such as ratepayers concerns and their attitudes to poverty and public housing. The online database of newspapers, the Irish Newspaper Archive, has been used extensively to source relevant material from thirteen regional papers as well as from the *Cork Examiner*, *Irish Independent* and *Irish Press*. In addition, the *Drogheda Independent* and *Longford Independent* were consulted in the National Library.

The third key source is the archives of the Department of Local Government and Public Health. These remain largely uncatalogued in the National Archives. The material accessed falls into two categories. The first consists of about one hundred of the four thousand boxes of material that constitute the archive and were accessed in 2013. They were uncatalogued but were retrieved by staff on the basis of the labels on the boxes – that they contained material relating to a county in which one of the case-study towns was located, that the material related to a municipal authority, and that it related to housing. The vast bulk of the material consulted

dated from the period after 1945 and only a small number of documents, mostly relating to a review of the public housing programme carried out in the mid-1940s, proved useful. In 2015 the formal cataloguing of the archive was commenced and by spring 2016 material relating to Counties Carlow, Cavan, Clare and Cork had been completed. Some of these files now catalogued have proved invaluable in exploring the implementation of slum clearance legislation in the 1930s, particularly in relation to the case-study towns of Kilrush and Fermoy.

Most of the primary sources referred to above are characterised by the fact that they were produced by government departments and local authorities. Those working in the field of housing studies stress the need to adopt a critical approach to the social construction of the data and the evidence they use.<sup>124</sup> Jim Kemeny argues that 'housing facts' such as 'households' and the notion of 'overcrowding' are socially constructed and need to be interrogated rather than simply accepted objective concepts.<sup>125</sup> The definition of 'overcrowding', for example, changed from a simple one of 'more than two persons per room' to one incorporating the presence or absence of separate sleeping quarters for adolescents of different sexes. What health professionals may have viewed as overcrowded conditions may have been regarded entirely differently by poorer households forced to keep lodgers as a source of income. Social constructionism is itself an approach in the social sciences and has been applied in the study of housing systems, particularly in discourse analysis where the use of language is analysed and interrogated.<sup>126</sup> The approach sees hegemony and power relations realised through the manner in which discourse is framed and language used. It appears to offer a valuable tool in approaching the primary sources explored in the current research. Adopting a self-consciously critical approach to government and local authority records, for example, involves recognising that they are socially constructed and what they exclude may be as important as what they include. The language used by councillors and local authority officials to describe those applying for housing, for example, merits close examination. Families are described as 'respectable', 'deserving' and 'hard-working'; others are described as 'unreliable' or 'unsuitable'. These are socially constructed terms that require interrogation as they reflect underlying attitudes and power structures. Silverman's work on the concept of 'respectability' as a defining characteristic of class assignment in nineteenth- and twentieth-century small-town Ireland offers a useful template when approaching much of the archival material relating to housing policy both at the

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<sup>124</sup> Jim Kemeny, *Housing and Social Theory*, (London, 1992), p. 167.

<sup>125</sup> Jim Kemeny, 'The Social Construction of Housing Facts' in *Housing, Theory and Society*, 1, no.3 (1984), pp 149 -164.

<sup>126</sup> Keith Jacobs and Tony Manzi, 'Evaluating the Social Constructionist Paradigm in Housing Research' in *Housing, Theory and Society*, 17, no. 1 (2000), pp 35-42.

state and local authority level.<sup>127</sup> The quantitative approach adopted through much of the thesis therefore serves as a starting point to explore and interrogate underlying process.

The methodology adopted here consciously attempts to incorporate perspectives other than those involved in the 'provision' of public housing, as the term suggests something of a one-way process. At the level of the state, both national and local, housing policy was shaped by competing political and economic interests, some of which favoured public provision while others promoted state support for home ownership. Although the primary sources are dominated by these voices, it is important to provide space for the agency exercised by those viewed as the 'subjects' of public housing policy and those living in poor housing conditions. Exploration of the political campaigns at the town level for improved housing, particularly in the late 1890s and the 1930s, form part of an attempt to recognise that agency. The public inquiries of the 1930s linked to the demolition of Clearance Areas and the forced displacement of residents provides a further insight into the perspective of those who were the subject of state action. An exploration of the strategies employed by those threatened by eviction from their condemned dwellings and of those obliged to pay higher rents in new council housing is designed to complement a 'top-down' view of provision and emphasise its contested nature.

## **Structure**

In terms of structure, the thesis adopts a broadly chronological approach, with the three main phases in public housing provision – 1890 to 1922, 1922 to 1932 and 1932 to 1945 – corresponding to Chapters 3 to 6. Chapters 5 and 6 deal with the major housing programmes implemented by Fianna Fáil under the provisions of the 1931 and 1932 Housing Acts. Chapter 2 seeks to set a baseline of economic and social conditions in Irish provincial towns at the end of the nineteenth and to set their development into the international context of rapid urbanisation. Patterns of rural-urban migration to provincial towns in Ireland are analysed and linked to the existence of a 'reserve army' of labour dependent on seasonal employment and poor housing conditions. An analysis of the House and Building Return forms in the 1901 census for over 13,000 houses located in the case-study towns provides a breakdown of housing conditions based on 'housing classes' and on the contemporary definition of overcrowding as more than two persons per room. This data allows for a reconstruction of a housing geography of each of the towns against which subsequent public housing provision can be set. The findings are set against data on housing conditions in different regions of the United Kingdom and the

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<sup>127</sup> Silverman, *An Irish Working Class*, pp 294-96.

six-county Ulster. The chapter also includes an exploration of the property relations that framed patterns of poor housing.

Chapter 3 deals with the first phase of public housing provision in the years between 1890 and 1922. It includes an exploration of the political and institutional context in which levels of public housing provision evolved and sets the initial implementation of the Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890 and the Clancy Act of 1908 alongside an account of the operation of the Labourers Acts. The chapter undertakes an assessment of the capacity of municipal authorities in provincial towns to undertake the kind of infrastructural investment which the reform of local government and the growing body of legislation passed at Westminster implied should occur. An attempt is made to identify those towns that were leaders and laggards in raising loans for investment. The remainder of the chapter consists of an account of the public housing provision in towns between 1895 and the onset of war in 1914. Themes explored include the relationship between the LGB and local councils as the former pursued a public health agenda, the factors influencing local councils in deciding whether to involve themselves in public housing, and the impact of local government reform and local politics on the housing question, in particular its place in the local elections of 1899. An exploration of how councils approached the management of some of the early schemes provides insights into competing interests at council level and how prospective tenants were chosen.

Chapter 4 covers the period 1922 to 1932 and deals with the ways in which housing policy evolved under the Cumann na nGaedheal government, from the £1 million scheme launched in 1922 to the abortive Housing Act of 1931. A key theme is the deliberate emphasis in policy on general housing provision and the emphatic support for private building. The impact of this policy is assessed in case-study towns, with a focus on who were the main beneficiaries. Government claims that prohibitively high building costs lay behind the reluctance to tackle poor housing conditions is assessed. Data from the 1926 census is used to present a picture of housing conditions in provincial towns and to compare how those conditions had changed since the beginning of the century in the fifteen case-study towns. In dealing with the period leading up to the publication of the 1931 Housing Act, the focus is on the growing public debate on the housing question and Fianna Fáil's adoption of housing as a key part of its social programme.

Chapters 5 and 6 provide an account of the Fianna Fáil housing programme of the 1930s in provincial towns. Given that the change in government marked a fairly decisive break with the economic and social policies pursued by its predecessor, the formulation of housing policy is examined at state level with the Department of Finance, the DLGPH and the Housing Board

identified as the three key institutional players. Minister Seán T. O’Kelly’s role in promoting slum clearance programmes is examined, as is the critical role of local politics in determining when and how the new housing legislation was implemented in individual towns. With the Department actively encouraging councils to start building, the role of the building industry is assessed and the extent to which it may have exploited the high level of demand for its services in some towns. The literature suggests that the Town and Regional Planning Act of 1934 had a limited impact on the physical development of the towns in the 1930s. This contention is assessed alongside an exploration of what other factors shaped the geography of public housing in provincial towns in these years. Chapter 5 concludes with an account of the winding down of the programme from 1938 onwards, the introduction of the County Management system in 1942 and a brief overview of post-war public housing policy.

The focus of Chapter 6 is specifically the slum clearance programme and the rehousing of those displaced from condemned dwellings. The slum as a social construct is explored and the way in which key players in the housing programme, including politicians, medical and engineering professionals and the media viewed the slum and its residents is interrogated. Government policy as articulated in the 1932 Act provided significant support for slum clearance, as opposed to general housing provision. How this policy played out at the local level is explored in the context of competing economic and political interests. Using recently catalogued material in the National Archives, the events surrounding the definition of Clearances Areas and implementation of follow-up intervention is examined and the sometimes conflicting perspectives of state officials and town residents are explored. Accounts of public inquiries linked to slum clearances are used to provide insights into the balance of forces in provincial towns. The chapter continues with an account of the strategies open to landlords whose properties were subject to demolition, to those threatened with eviction and to those rehoused in new council houses.

Chapter 7 provides an overview of public housing provision in towns between 1890 and 1945 with a focus on the marked variations in provision and the factors that lay behind these variations. The scale of provision across the 74 towns is benchmarked against the data from housing surveys conducted by their councils and against housing conditions as measured in census data. The scale of the programme is set in the context of housing programmes in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The relative contribution of the public and private sectors in Irish towns is assessed and set against the evolution of different housing systems in Western Europe. Finally, the Conclusion attempts to review the topic, focusing on four main themes – housing,

politics and the state, the local state, housing and social class and the sanitary approach and general provision.

## Chapter 2

### Setting the context

#### Irish towns – stagnation and decline

Any attempt to assess housing conditions in Irish towns around 1900 and to place them within a comparative context exposes the unique trajectory of urban development in much of the country over the preceding half century. Across the developed world, including Europe and North America, the number of urban dwellers increased from 60.8 million in 1850 to 215.2 million in 1910.<sup>1</sup> In Ireland, while the proportion of the population living in towns and cities increased during these years, as shown in Table 2.1, this pattern, of course, had less to do to urban growth than rural decline. Ireland's urban population did increase by 350,000, but almost 300,000 of that increase is accounted for by the phenomenal growth of Belfast, while the rest reflects the more modest growth of Dublin between 1891 and 1911. On the other hand, the rural population fell by more than two and a half million.

**Table 2.1**

**Percentage of the population that was urban in selected countries, 1850 and 1910<sup>2</sup>**

	Urban population 1850	Urban population 1910 <sup>3</sup>
Ireland	13.3	28.8
Belgium	36.9	59.2
Denmark	18.6	39.2
France	23.4	41.5
Germany	19.0	51.6
Netherlands	38.9	53.3
United Kingdom	42.8	71.3

*Source – Bairoch and Goertz, p. 289; Census of Ireland, 1911*

In Western Europe and the UK the growth of cities represented the most dramatic manifestation of urbanisation. But smaller centres, similar to those that are the subject of this research, also grew rapidly. In England and Wales, for example, the aggregate population of towns of between

<sup>1</sup> Paul Bairoch and Gary Goertz, 'Factors of Urbanisation in the Nineteenth Century Developed Countries: a descriptive and econometric analysis', in *Urban Studies*, 23 (1986), pp 285-305.

<sup>2</sup> The data in this table is based the definition of 'urban' used by Bairoch and Goertz, i.e. settlements with populations of 5,000 and over.

<sup>3</sup> Figures for Ireland relate to 1851 and 1911 and are taken from W.E. Vaughan and A.J. Fitzpatrick, *Irish historical statistics, population 1821-1971* (Dublin, 1978), p. 27.



2,500 and 20,000 increased by 52 per cent between 1871 and 1911.<sup>4</sup> In the same period of the 59 towns in the cohort of 74 towns meeting this criterion, their aggregate population fell by 10 per cent.<sup>5</sup> And decline was almost ubiquitous. When the 14 smaller towns with populations of between 1,500 and 2,500 are included, only 15 of our 74 towns experienced growth in population between 1871 and 1911. A closer analysis of these towns suggests that boundary extensions account for much of the growth in all but five towns – Bantry (+30.5%), Bray (+26.4%), Portlaoise (+19.7%), Dundalk (+15.9) and Athlone (+13.8%). Some, such as Carrick-on-Suir (-32.8%), Tuam (-29.4%) and Dungarvan (-23.7%), experienced precipitous declines. In almost all cases, demographically speaking, towns fared better than their immediate hinterlands. Even Carrick-on-Suir, which lost almost one third of its population in these years, did better than the five electoral divisions surrounding it which suffered a decline of 40 per cent.<sup>6</sup>

The contrast between the growth in British towns in the second half of the nineteenth century and the stagnation of Irish town, particularly outside Ulster, reflects their very different economic experiences. In the former, growing industrialisation and trade sucked in migrants; in the latter, the demographic decline of their hinterlands and post-Famine de-industrialisation could not counter modest rises in living standards.<sup>7</sup> The high proportion of the workforce in Irish provincial towns designated ‘general labourers’ or ‘agricultural labourers’ in the census points to the economically marginal position of much of the urban population. Across the fifteen case-study towns, out of a male workforce of just over 20,000, over 5,000 were categorised as either labourers or agricultural labourers in 1901.<sup>8</sup> Table 2.2 shows that in most provincial towns that year more than one in five of the male workforce was a general labourer or agricultural labourer. In eight of the fifteen case-study towns more than one in four fell into this category. The relatively low figures for Tuam, Ballina and Listowel may be less a reflection of the less

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<sup>4</sup> Data comes from C. M. Law, ‘The growth of urban population in England and Wales, 1801-1911’ in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 41 (1967), p. 141.

<sup>5</sup> Of the 59 towns, 17 had their municipal boundaries altered between 1871 and 1911. Of these 17, 12 had their municipal boundaries extended. The overall impact of these boundary changes is to inflate the aggregate population of these towns in 1911 relative to 1871. We can conclude that the decline in population was somewhat more than 10 per cent. Assessing population change in these towns before 1871 is more problematic as a further 34 had their boundaries altered in the 1860s, often in connection with the adoption of the Town Improvements Act (1854).

<sup>6</sup> The five electoral divisions are Newtown (Co. Tipperary), Kilmurry (Co. Tipperary), Carrickbeg (Co. Waterford), Fenoagh (Co. Waterford) and Portnascully (Co. Kilkenny).

<sup>7</sup> Ó Gráda provides the best overview of post-Famine living standards in Chapter 10 of his *Ireland: A New Economic History*. While it is indisputable that living standards rose, this occurred at the expense of massive emigration. Overall, the growth rate in Ireland’s national income was one of the lowest in Europe between 1848 and 1918 (p. 242).

<sup>8</sup> This excludes 2,080 defence personnel, 1,245 of whom were stationed in Fermoy.

precarious nature of employment in those towns than the fact that they were located in small-farm regions where there was minimal demand for labour beyond that provided by the farmer's family.

**Table 2.2**

**Percentage of male workforce categorised as labourers or agricultural labourers, 1901**

Town	% male workforce 'labourers'
Tuam	17.1%
Listowel	18.6%
Longford	20.2%
Clones	20.6%
Fermoy	22.0%
Ballina	22.4%
Navan	24.2%
Tralee	25.2%
Athy	26.7%
Drogheda	29.1%
Kilrush	30.1%
Arklow	30.2%
Tullamore	30.5%
Enniscorthy	32.1%
Edenderry	34.5%

*Source: Census of Ireland, 1901*

Although the census data relating to occupation does not easily lend itself to reconstructing the pattern of industrial employment, it is clear that most provincial towns had tiny industrial sectors. Referring to the early years of the twentieth century, Ó Gráda claims that 'excluding food and drink, the south was virtually without industries at this time'.<sup>9</sup> Of the fifteen case-study towns, only Drogheda could be described as having any substantial industry, with over 1,000 (160 men and 890 women) employed in Boyne and Usher's linen weaving mills. In total, about 13% of the town's male workforce could be described as being employed in industry. Approximately 13% of Tralee's male workforce could also be regarded as industrial workers but, unlike, Drogheda with over 1,000, the Kerry town had no female industrial workers. In the smaller case-study towns well under 10 per cent of the workforce was employed in industry. The economic profile of all these towns is in stark contrast to towns in north-east Ulster.

<sup>9</sup> Ó Gráda, *A New Economic history of Ireland*, p. 313.

Portadown, Co. Armagh, for example, increased its population by 25 per cent between 1881 and 1901 and 37 per cent of its male workforce was employed in industry, with over 1,000 women working in the town's textile mills.

### **The poverty of Irish towns**

A further indication of the relative poverty of provincial towns outside the six counties that were to constitute Northern Ireland<sup>10</sup> is apparent when a comparison is made of poor law valuations per capita across 70 towns in the remaining 26 counties and the 22 towns in this part of Ulster. As a measure of urban wealth this ratio has been used by Brian T. Preston in generating a typology of English and Welsh towns in the early twentieth century along a 'rich town'/'poor town' spectrum.<sup>11</sup> The average rateable valuation per capita across all 92 Irish towns in 1904 was £2 2s. 6d., with the average for the northern towns at £2 18s. 0d. and for the 70 towns outside this region, £1 17s. 6d. Figure 2.1 shows that few 'southern' towns had valuations per capita above £2 5s. and most were clustered, independently of size, at between 30s. and £2. Growing northern towns such as Lisburn (£2 14s. per capita), Ballymena (£2 18s.) and Portadown (£2 12s.) were, using this measure, almost twice as rich as towns such as Tralee (£1 10s.), Enniscorthy (£1 10s.) or Tullamore (£1.6s.). As we shall see, these low valuations in part reflect the low quality of the housing stock. But they also reflect the relatively small number of buildings that could be described as industrial infrastructure. Although there is no direct correlation amongst the case-study towns between rateable valuation per capita and the preponderance of labouring families, it is notable that two of the poorest Leinster towns, Arklow and Tullamore, have high proportions of labourers. Indeed in the case of Arklow, to its 350 labourers dependent on what was likely to have been precarious employment could be added 150 fishermen who lived in very poor circumstances.

Looked at on a wider canvas, Preston's data shows that the median valuation per capita for English and Welsh towns in 1911 was £4 4s. 5d., and only the 25 per cent of the poorest towns had a valuation per capita of less than £3 10s 0d. This means that all southern provincial towns, other than Bray, would fall within the bottom quartile of English and Welsh towns in the early twentieth century on this measure. Of Preston's sample of 760 towns only 8 had a per

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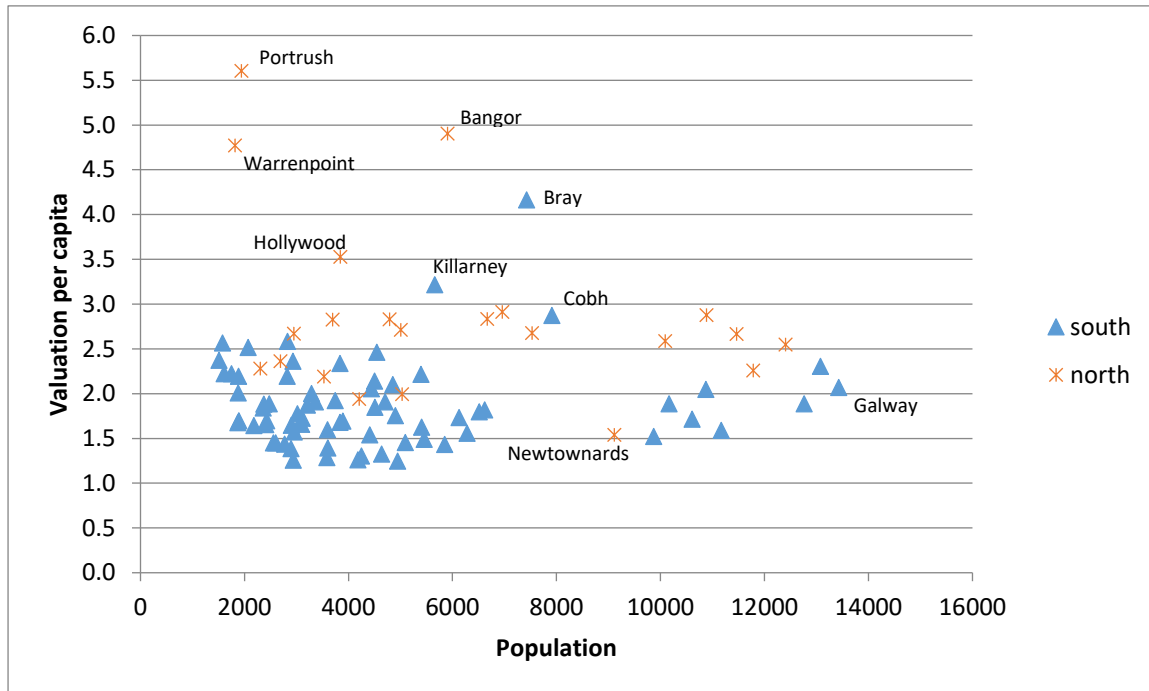
<sup>10</sup> The term 'northern towns' is used to refer to towns in counties Antrim, Down, Armagh, Derry, Tyrone and Fermanagh and 'southern towns' to those in the remaining 26 counties.

<sup>11</sup> Brian T. Preston, 'Rich Town, Poor Town: The Distribution of Rate-Borne Spending Levels in the Edwardian City' in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, 10, no. 1 (1985), pp 77-94. Poor Law valuation per capita is widely used in the Irish literature as a proxy for wealth. See, for example, Cormac Ó Gráda, 'How the Poor (and not-so-poor) Saved: Savings Banks in Mid-Nineteenth Century Ireland and America', *UCD Centre for Economic Research, Working Papers Series* (2008).

capita valuation of less than £2. More than half of our sample of Irish towns (47 out of 70) fall within that category.

**Figure 2.1**

**Rateable valuation of Irish towns per capita, 1904**



*Source: Census of Ireland, 1901; LGB Annual Report, 1904, Appendix E, Table 9*

### Housing conditions

Attempting a quantitative assessment of housing conditions in Irish provincial towns at the beginning of the twentieth century poses a number of methodological challenges. The classification of housing originally introduced in the 1841 census was based on three criteria – the extent of the house (based on the number of rooms), its quality (based on the number of windows), and its durability (as shown by the materials of its walls and roof). This formed the basis of a points system used to divide houses into four classes. Houses categorised as fourth class, scoring one or two points in this system, were one-roomed mud cabins; third class, scoring three to five points, were generally two or three roomed houses, often with thatched roofs. Second class houses, scoring six to nine points, had at least four rooms and at least two windows to the front. First class houses were those scoring more than nine points. Of course this is a highly mechanistic method for assessing the housing stock. It provides no indication of the physical condition of each house or of its facilities – such as running water and sewerage. At

best it can be used to provide an indication of the relative distribution of the housing stock across four ordinal categories.

Decisions taken regarding how this data was published also limits its usefulness. In the 1881 and subsequent published census returns for towns second and third class houses was aggregated together. This is particularly unhelpful as a detailed examination of the House and Building Return forms in the original census returns suggests the distinction between second and third class houses corresponded to a divide between dwellings regarded by the relevant authorities as being suitable for habitation and those that were not. This is confirmed by the fact that Medical Officers of Health and Sanitary Officers reporting to local urban councils that aspired to take an active role as sanitary authorities in the early twentieth century regularly urged them to condemn housing which can be identified in the census returns as third class. In 1918 when the Irish Convention was considering the number of houses in urban areas that needed to be provided, it assumed that all third and fourth class houses as enumerated in the 1911 census needed to be replaced.<sup>12</sup> Later, in the 1930s, whole areas that consisted of what had been classified as third-class housing twenty years earlier were defined as Clearance Areas under the 1931 and 1932 Housing Acts and were subject to demolition.

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<sup>12</sup> *Report of the proceedings of the Irish Convention, 1918* [Cd. 9019], Appendix, xvi.

**Table 2.3****The housing stock and overcrowding in case-study towns, 1901**

Town	Houses	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4	% Pop >2 per room
Fermoy	886	17.3%	74.2%	7.7%	0.0%	24.3%
Enniscorthy	994	16.6%	74.0%	9.2%	0.2%	22.0%
Longford	729	13.3%	71.5%	13.2%	1.0%	17.7%
Clones	435	14.7%	70.6%	14.9%	0.0%	6.5%
Tralee	1459	13.3%	69.2%	18.2%	0.0%	32.5%
Tullamore	830	13.3%	63.6%	23.0%	0.0%	35.8%
Athy	661	12.3%	62.9%	24.8%	0.2%	35.9%
Kilrush	757	9.2%	65.0%	25.6%	0.1%	33.4%
Listowel	562	10.2%	59.9%	22.5%	7.5%	31.8%
Edenderry	437	8.5%	54.0%	37.1%	0.2%	46.7%
Navan	675	11.9%	49.8%	36.4%	1.6%	36.4%
Ballina	612	12.3%	48.5%	39.2%	0.0%	24.3%
Drogheda	2674	10.9%	48.0%	35.7%	4.6%	38.0%
Arklow	1089	8.1%	44.4%	37.1%	10.3%	32.8%
Tuam	482	16.8%	32.4%	48.8%	1.7%	24.4%
Total	13282	12.6%	59.2%	26.2%	1.8%	29.5%

*Source: 1901 Census of Ireland, House and Building Return Forms*

In order to overcome the limitations of the data relating to housing classification in the published census returns, an examination of the House and Building Return forms for 1901 for all houses in the fifteen case-study towns was carried out.<sup>13</sup> In all, the status of over 13,000 houses was recorded. Table 2.3 shows that across the fifteen towns 28 per cent of houses fell into the third or fourth class, with almost 60 per cent of dwellings classified as second class. It also shows considerable variation across the towns and provides a very useful overview against which a more detailed outline of housing conditions can be set. Five towns stand out as having better than average housing – Fermoy, Enniscorthy, Longford, Clones and Tralee – each having less than one in five houses in either class 3 or 4. Six towns – Tuam, Arklow, Drogheda, Ballina and Navan – had poorer housing than average. There does not appear to be any discernible regional pattern in the quality of the housing stock as shown in Table 2.3. However, there is considerable evidence that Clones, with its superior housing, was typical of Ulster towns, excluding Donegal. The 1891 census published aggregate data by housing class for civic areas within counties with the number of second and third class houses reported separately. Table

<sup>13</sup> These returns were examined on the National Archives website. They appear to be somewhat incomplete for Tuam, Ballina and Athy.

2.4 shows that at least 80 per cent of the housing stock in towns in counties Down, Armagh, Tyrone and Fermanagh consisted of first and second class houses. Elsewhere, towns in Wexford and Kildare have similar profiles to those in Ulster.

**Table 2.4**  
**Housing stock of towns in selected counties, 1891**

	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4
Clare	7.8%	40.8%	50.2%	1.2%
Meath	14.2%	45.4%	39.8%	0.6%
Laois	20.4%	47.3%	29.7%	2.6%
Mayo	13.3%	56.3%	29.4%	1.0%
Offaly	14.8%	54.8%	28.2%	2.2%
Cavan	19.9%	58.0%	20.9%	1.2%
Kerry	15.5%	62.2%	20.5%	1.8%
Longford	15.2%	64.5%	20.0%	0.3%
Tyrone	15.2%	64.5%	19.9%	0.3%
Monaghan	16.7%	63.6%	19.7%	0.0%
Down	14.5%	69.3%	16.1%	0.0%
Carlow	18.7%	68.9%	12.0%	0.4%
Wexford	14.1%	75.6%	10.2%	0.1%
Armagh	13.2%	76.8%	9.6%	0.5%
Kildare	10.6%	78.9%	9.5%	1.0%
Fermanagh	23.9%	67.5%	8.6%	0.0%

*Source: Census of Ireland, 1891*

This house classification schema provides some indication of the relative state of housing in Irish towns. However, data relating to the number of dwellings of different sizes provides a more precise indication of housing conditions and allows for some useful comparative perspectives.<sup>14</sup>

#### **Dwelling size – comparative perspectives**

Data on dwelling size is available in the 1901 census for 49 of the 74 provincial towns for dwellings of from one to four rooms. Unfortunately, data is not provided on what proportion these dwellings represented of all dwellings and it is not possible to determine the precise number of distinct households in these towns. Nevertheless, this data is useful as it relates to that part of the housing stock accommodating those whose housing conditions the Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890 and subsequent Housing Acts dealing with public housing were designed to address. Across the 49 towns, of those households living in dwellings of one to four

<sup>14</sup> Shown in Table IX of the published returns for each county in the 1901 census.

rooms, 13 per cent occupied one room, 38 per cent occupied two rooms, 25 per cent occupied three rooms and 24 per cent occupied four rooms. These statistics are worth bearing in mind when the public housing schemes by local authorities are being assessed given that the vast majority of dwellings built were four roomed houses. This data is also available for England, Scotland and Wales and allows us set this indicator of housing conditions in Irish provincial towns in a wider British Isles context.

Figure 2.2 provides a useful snapshot of the size of dwellings occupied by urban working class households (occupying one to four room dwellings) across the British Isles at the beginning of the twentieth century. It highlights the fact that, in this respect, towns in the 26 counties of southern Ireland had more in common with the industrial and mining counties of north-east England and, to a lesser extent, Scotland than with the six counties of north-east Ulster or with the rest of England and Wales. The Irish data is based on the 1901 census and relates to 49 towns in the south and 20 towns in north-east Ulster. In towns such as Portadown (62.3 per cent), Lisburn (60.4 per cent) and Ballymena (56.0 per cent), well over half of all small dwellings had four rooms and across this region just under half of households in provincial towns in small dwellings occupied four rooms. The equivalent figure for the rest of the island was 25 per cent. Here, in 27 of the 49 towns for which data is available, more than half of households living in small dwellings were occupying just one or two rooms. Athy (76 per cent) and Tullamore (70 per cent) had the vast majority of households in small dwellings and living in one or two rooms.

Across the towns of provincial England the number of small dwellings of one or two rooms represented a tiny proportion of all dwellings and less than 10 per cent of one to four room dwellings. In the county of Lancashire, for example, although many of its towns were heavily industrialised and had fairly rapidly growing populations, only 5 per cent of households in small dwellings occupied one or two rooms. The standard small dwelling here, as in most of the rest of the towns of provincial England, had four rooms, typically a 'two up, two down' terraced house.<sup>15</sup> The only towns in England to diverge from this pattern were the mining and industrial towns of Durham and Northumberland. Here mining towns such as Leadgate (53.9 per cent), Seaham (51.0 per cent), Prudhoe (50.8 per cent) and Seghill (46.9 per cent) had high proportions of one and two roomed small dwellings, similar to those in southern Ireland. Daunton explains housing patterns in this region in terms of the unfavourable relationship between wages and rents and the persistence of a vernacular house style, including the Tyneside flat, reflecting scarcities of building land.<sup>16</sup>

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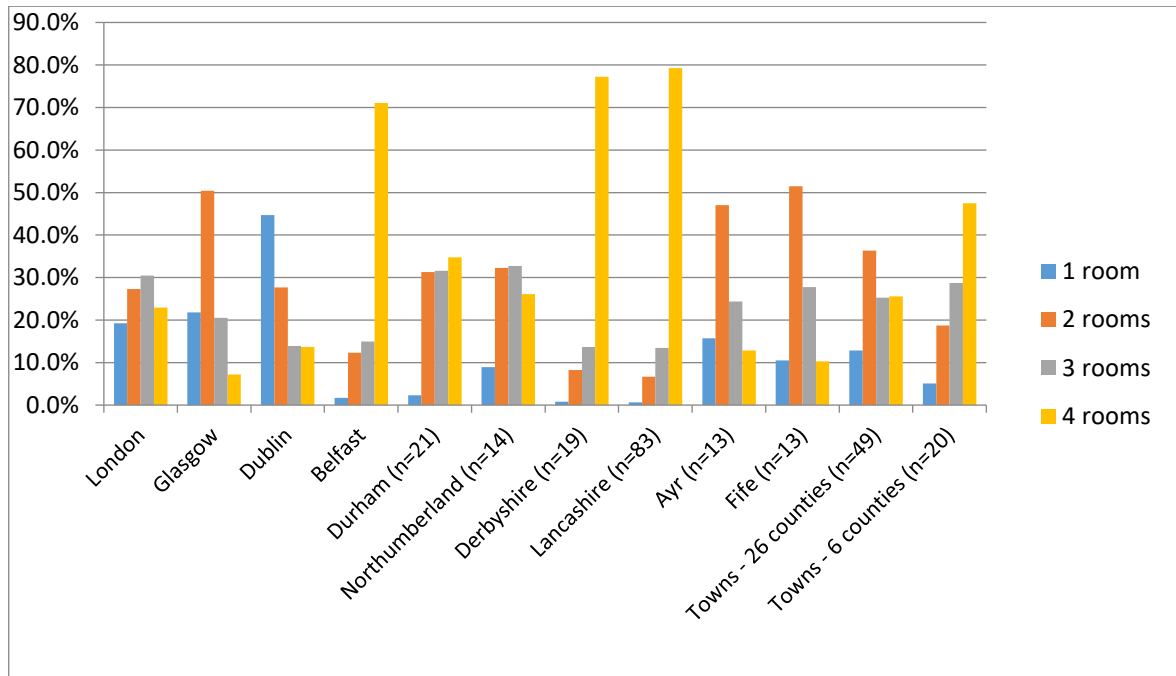
<sup>15</sup> See Daunton, 'Housing', pp 214-17.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.



Figure 2.2

Proportion of one, two, three and four roomed dwellings in cities and regions of the British Isles, 1911



Source: 1901 Census of Ireland, House and Building Return Forms; Census of Scotland, 1911, Vol. II; Census of England and Wales, 1911, Vol. VIII

The very poor housing conditions and high levels of overcrowding in Scotland in the early decades of the twentieth century are well documented in the literature.<sup>17</sup> Many provincial towns which grew rapidly in the second half of the nineteenth century housed the majority of their populations in one- and two-roomed flats. Mining towns in Fife such as Lochgelly and Cowdenbeath had over 70 per cent of households living in one or two rooms. The port of Irvine and small industrial towns such as Newmilns, Darvel and Galston in the valley of the River Irvine in Ayrshire had similar housing profiles. Daunton argues that what underpinned these patterns were high rents, reflecting building costs and land prices.<sup>18</sup> This may have been related to the 'feu' system, unique to Scotland, whereby the vendor had the right to a fixed payment in perpetuity. This system encouraged the building of high-density tenements which could

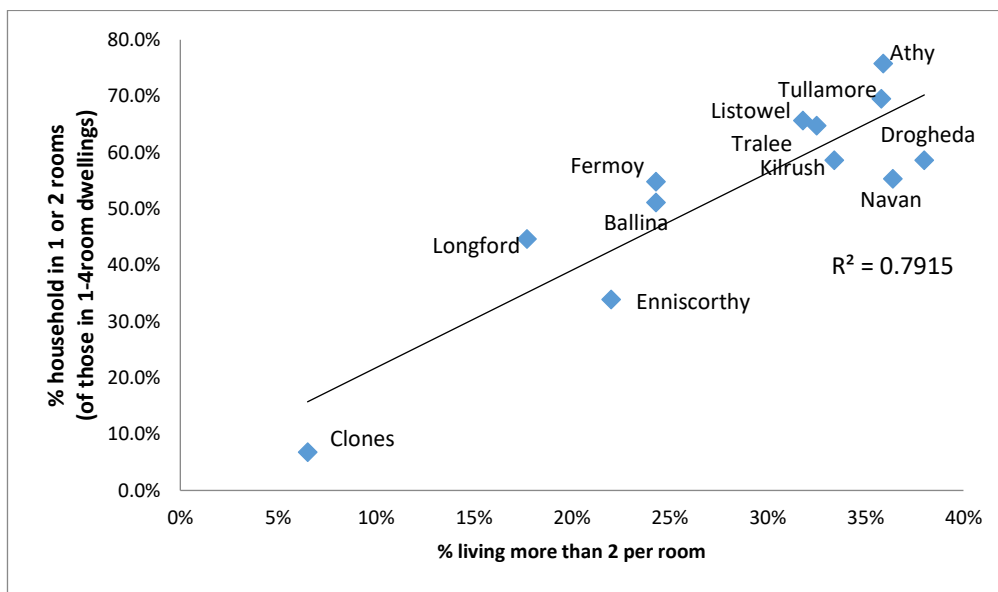
<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Daunton, 'Housing', pp 195-250; Richard Rodger, 'The Victorian building industry and the housing of the Scottish working class' in Martin Doughty (ed.), *Building the industrial city* (Leicester, 1986), pp 152-206; Jean Young, 'From 'laissez-faire' to 'homes fit for heroes': housing in Dundee, 1868-1919', pp 143-150.

<sup>18</sup> Daunton, 'Housing', pp 199-200.

generate rents to meet both the high cost of land and feu payments on the part of the landlord. Rodger argues that the Scottish tenancy system, based on the ‘long let’ whereby tenants were obliged to commit to a one-year rental, led working-class families to minimise their expenditure on accommodation.<sup>19</sup> These factors, combined with semi-skilled work and cyclical unemployment meant that the cheapest possible housing was at a premium.

**Figure 2.3**

**Percentage living in overcrowded conditions vs percentage households in small dwellings, 1901**



*Source: 1901 Census of Ireland, House and Building Return Forms*

High proportions of households living in one and two rooms inevitably produced high levels of overcrowding. This is confirmed in Figure 2.3 which graphs the percentage of households living in one or two rooms in 1901 (out of all those living in one to four rooms) against the proportion living more than two to a room as calculated from the 1901 household returns for the fifteen case-study towns. Towns with high levels of overcrowding such as Drogheda, Athy and Tullamore were also towns where working-class housing was dominated by one and two room dwellings.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Rodger, ‘Employment, Wages and Poverty in the Scottish Cities 1841-1914’ in G. Gordon (ed.), *Perspectives on the Scottish City* (Aberdeen, 1985), pp 25-63.

### **One-room tenements**

Prior to the 1926 census the only published data directly relating to levels of overcrowding in Ireland was that enumerating the numbers living in one-roomed tenements. The extraordinary preponderance of one-roomed tenements in Dublin city is well documented in the literature. In 1911 just over 55,000, or 18 per cent, of the city's population lived more than two to a room in single-room tenements. Of course the majority of households living in a one-roomed tenement consisted of one or two persons.<sup>20</sup> However, larger households living in one room were considered as 'overcrowded' and certainly suggest acute pressure on accommodation. In the 74 provincial towns in 1911, 7,730 persons (2.3 per cent) out of a total population of 337,000 lived in these conditions.<sup>21</sup> While these numbers are not large they mask some significant variations which saw towns such as Edenderry (12.3 per cent), Newbridge (9.5 per cent), Listowel (6.9 per cent) and Arklow (6.8) having relatively high proportions of their populations living in overcrowded one-room dwellings. Again, in terms of regional patterns, Ulster stands apart. Other than Derry (3.9%), no town in north-east Ulster had more than 2 per cent of their populations living in these circumstances, while 28 of the towns in the rest of the country surpassed that threshold. Even in the north-east of England, overcrowded one-room tenements were less common than in provincial Ireland. In the urban areas of County Durham, including the larger cities, less than one per cent of the population lived in these circumstances, while in Northumberland the figure was just over two per cent. This data is not directly available for Scottish towns. Some towns such as Galton (28.2 per cent) and Newmilns (22.8 per cent) had high proportions of one roomed dwellings and given the high rates of overcrowding in these towns discussed below it seems likely that overcrowded one roomed dwellings in Scotland were a feature of the housing problem as they were in some Irish towns.

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<sup>20</sup> Excluding Dublin city, which accounted for almost 40 per cent of the one room tenements across the 32 counties, almost two thirds of one room tenements were occupied by one or two person households.

<sup>21</sup> Data derived from Table X in each of the county report in the 1911 census.

**Table 2.5****Levels of overcrowding by size of dwelling in 74 provincial towns, 1926**

	Size of dwelling (rooms)					
	1	2	3	4	5	>5
Persons	11541	49869	45982	69399	31446	69022
% of all those in private families	4%	18%	17%	25%	11%	25%
Number in overcrowded conditions	7946	28530	17459	11842	1146	nc*
% Living in overcrowded conditions	69%	57%	38%	17%	4%	nc
% of all those in overcrowded conditions living in specified number of rooms	12%	43%	26%	18%	2%	nc

Source: *Saorstát Éireann, census of population 1926, Vol. 4, Housing, Table 16*

\* Not calculated

A more in-depth exploration of patterns of overcrowding in Irish provincial towns is facilitated by the detailed statistical tables published as part of volume IV of the 1926 census of population. Between 1901 and 1926 local authorities build about 5,000 houses in the 74 provincial towns in the 26 counties, so the 1926 census data on housing conditions reflects the impact of the initial phase of state provision and cannot be taken as a baseline for this study.<sup>22</sup> However, table 6 in volume IV of the census records the number of persons occupying dwellings of different sizes in each individual town and is an invaluable source for building a detailed picture of housing conditions. The overview provided in Table 2.5 shows that 40 per cent of all those in private families occupied three rooms or less and these small dwellings accounted for 80 per cent of all overcrowding. The majority of those in one- and two-roomed dwellings lived more than two persons to a room, while overcrowding in dwellings of five rooms and greater was negligible. Again, some distinct regional patterns are evident. In northern towns such as Clones (85 per cent), Castleblayney (82 per cent), Monaghan (77 per cent), Cavan (76 per cent), Ballyshannon (76 per cent), Buncrana (72 per cent) and Cootehill (72 per cent), the great majority of the population lived in dwellings of four rooms or more and levels of overcrowding were low. On the other hand Leinster towns such as Edenderry (57 per cent), Newbridge (56 per cent), Athy (54 per cent), Tullamore (51 per cent), Naas (49 per cent) and Carlow (49 per cent) had half their populations or more living in one- to three-room dwellings with corresponding high levels of overcrowding.

<sup>22</sup> *Saorstát Éireann, census of population 1926, Volume IV, Housing, Table 16.*

**Table 2.6****Levels of overcrowding in provincial towns, UK and Ireland**

Area	Percentage of population living over 2 persons per room
Scotland - Fife towns (1901) (n=10)	45.9
Scotland - Ayr towns (1901) (n=13)	45.1
England - Northumberland (1911) (n=11)	34.5
England - Durham towns (1911) (n=22)	34.0
Ireland - 26 counties - case-study towns (1901) (n=15)	29.5
Ireland - 26 counties (1926) (n=74)	24.1
Ireland - 6 counties (1926) (n=29)	12.8
England - Lancashire towns (1911) (n=83)	6.7
England - Derbyshire towns (1911) (n=19)	4.9

*Source: 1901 Census of Ireland, House and Building Return Forms; Census of the Population of Scotland, 1901, Vol. I; Census of England and Wales, 1911, Vol. VIII; Saorstát Éireann, census of population 1926, Volume 4; Census of Population Northern Ireland 1926, county reports*

Just how exceptional these levels of overcrowding were is apparent when a comparison is made with English towns in the published census returns for 1911. On average, just under one in four of the population of the 74 Irish towns lived in overcrowded conditions. The incidence of overcrowding in provincial towns in Britain was highly region specific and was confined to the mining towns of Durham and Northumberland. The figures for Lancashire and Derbyshire towns shown in Table 2.6 are typical for all of England outside the north-east.

The census data from 1901, 1911 and 1926 explored above, together with the data on town valuations, paint a portrait of the 74 provincial towns in the 26 counties of southern Ireland as poor, with relatively large proportions of their populations living in small, overcrowded dwellings. Housing conditions appear to have been significantly worse than elsewhere in the British Isles, apart from north-east England and Scotland. In these areas, however, towns such as Blaydon in County Durham, Weetslade in Northumberland or Cowdenbeath in Fife had grown rapidly through the second half of the nineteenth century linked to coal-mining and related industrialisation. For example, Blaydon's population grew from 4,861 in 1861 to close to 20,000 by the end of the century. Rural migrants poured into these towns, drawn by employment in nearby coal mines and newly established engineering industries. The contrast with Irish provincial towns could hardly be greater. With stagnant or declining populations, the sources of overcrowding cannot be linked to a rising demand for

accommodation. Instead, the evidence points to a widespread lack of investment in new house building, particularly working-class housing, in the second half of the nineteenth century. Lee notes that it was not necessarily a lack of capital that suppressed speculative investment in Ireland in the second half of the nineteenth century with bank deposits rising from £16 million in 1859 to £60 million in 1913.<sup>23</sup> Ó Gráda suggests a marked reluctance on the part of Irish capitalists to take risks and points out that most of the risk capital that funded the Irish railway system was provided by British investors.<sup>24</sup> However, he also points out that the perceived lack of investment opportunities in Ireland, especially outside Ulster, resulted in significant flows of Irish capital to London and investment in British government securities. The rationale, he argues, 'may simply indicate that returns were higher abroad'.<sup>25</sup> In the context of the virtual absence of speculative investment in housing in towns, the risk averse character of those with capital was compounded by the prospect of more secure and higher returns elsewhere.

### **A deteriorating housing stock**

The high proportion of the housing stock of some towns consisting of thatched cottages at the turn of the century may be an indication of the age of many smaller houses and of the lack of investment in such housing. Table 2.7, based on House and Building Return forms from the 1901 census, shows that over a quarter of houses in the fifteen case-study towns were thatched. Towns such as Tuam, Arklow and Drogheda, which other evidence indicates had some of the poorest housing in the country, had exceptionally high levels of thatched houses. The pattern of thatched housing across these towns suggests that the presence of a dominant landlord, as in the case of Tralee (Denny family) and Fermoy (Abercromby), may have been a factor in promoting some improvements in housing. On the other hand, Navan was divided amongst several absentee landlords<sup>26</sup> while in Ballina, although the Knox-Gore family dominated the life of the town, much of the property was sub-let on long leases to local merchants.<sup>27</sup> As discussed below, property relations in Drogheda also provide an explanation for the chronically poor housing conditions with much of the town's residential property held by small-scale landlords on long leases from the Corporation.

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<sup>23</sup> Joseph Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society, 1848 – 1918* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Dublin, 2008), p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> Ó Gráda, *Ireland, A New Economic History*, p. 325.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 350.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Connell, *Changing forces shaping a nineteenth century Irish town: a case study of Navan* (Maynooth, 1978).

<sup>27</sup> Potter, *Municipal Revolution*, pp 122-23.

**Table 2.7****Proportion of thatched houses in the 15 case-study towns, 1901**

Town	Houses	Thatched
Tuam	482	67.8%
Arklow	1089	47.1%
Drogheda	2674	40.7%
Navan	675	38.7%
Ballina	612	37.9%
Edenderry	437	34.3%
Listowel	562	29.9%
Clones	435	21.1%
Tullamore	830	18.1%
Kilrush	757	14.8%
Longford	729	10.2%
Athy	661	8.5%
Fermoy	886	8.1%
Enniscorthy	994	3.7%
Tralee	1459	2.6%
Total		25.6%

*Source: 1901 Census of Ireland, House and Building Return Forms*

Based on a comparison of Ordnance Survey maps from the 1830s and the early twentieth century, it is apparent that some parts of these towns had changed little in the intervening seventy years. In Drogheda, for example, the north and north-eastern edges of the town at Hardmans Gardens and parts of Scarlet Street, almost exclusively consisting of small thatched cottages in 1901, had much the same layout as they had in the 1830s. When these areas came to be redeveloped by the corporation in subsequent years, there are frequent references to 'old, dilapidated houses'.<sup>28</sup> In early 1915 the Building Surveyor reported to the corporation that 'during the past 10 years over 200 houses had fallen down... and about 640 other houses are now in a condition rapidly approaching dilapidation and that they have been in almost all cases condemned by the Medical Officer of Health as insanitary and scarcely fit for human habitation'.<sup>29</sup> In Tuam, the Ballygaddy Road and Sun Street, again almost exclusively thatched cottages in 1901, appear virtually untouched by any new building in the preceding sixty years. An LGB inspector reporting on housing conditions in the town in early 1920, referred to these houses and stated that 'there is no prospect whatever of any houses suitable for the working

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Drogheda Corporation Minutes Book, 2 October 1928, 1 October 1929, 2 February 1932, 24 April 1933 (Drogheda Civic Offices).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 January 1915.

classes likely to be built by private enterprise'.<sup>30</sup> The same report referred to the fact that the number of houses available to labouring families had decreased as they fell into repair. In Navan, the Sanitary Sub-Officer in 1905 remarked that

Your Council will have to seriously consider the housing question as there are over 40 houses which have fallen into disuse owing to the apathy of landlords whose interest it should be to foster the welfare of the town. Before your next meeting probably 20 more houses will have disappeared and there are several in such a bad state of repair that you will have 90 or 100 out of use before the year is out.<sup>31</sup>

Some months later the same official was critical of both his employer and local landlords when his regular report to the council claimed that 'the want of housing is almost appalling; houses falling week after week and nothing being done by public or private enterprise to replace them.'<sup>32</sup> Five years later Navan UDC informed the LGB that the housing situation in the town had deteriorated as 'the recent storms has made matters worse as some more of the wretched hovels which the people are obliged to live in have been levelled by it'.<sup>33</sup> In 1917, with little prospect of any house-building taking place, the Navan Sub-Sanitary Officer reported that 'housing is getting urgent owing to the number of houses closed up and the number of thatched houses which have become unsound through age'.<sup>34</sup>

### **Rural-urban migration**

Much of the literature referred to in the preceding chapter dealing with urban housing conditions in the second half of the nineteenth century in Britain, for example, links the overcrowded and insanitary tenements that housed the working classes to high levels of rural-urban migration.<sup>35</sup> Migrants were drawn to cities and towns linked to industrialisation and growing trade. While the trajectory of urbanisation in Ireland in the closing decades of the nineteenth century may have followed a different path from countries experiencing industrialisation, there is evidence on the nature and scale of rural-urban migration in provincial Ireland that links it with poor housing conditions. The two most comprehensive reports on social conditions in Ireland in the 1880s and 1890s - the *Enquiry into the Housing of the Working Class* (1884-5) and the *Royal Commission on Labour* (1893-4) and - highlight the weak economic base

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<sup>30</sup> *Tuam Herald*, 10 January 1920.

<sup>31</sup> Minutes of Navan UDC, 5 September 1905 (MCL, NUDC/M/1).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 February 1906.

<sup>33</sup> Minutes of Navan UDC, 21 February 1910 (MCL, NUDC/M/2).

<sup>34</sup> Minutes of Public Health Committee, Navan UDC, 31 January 1917 (MCL, NUDC/HHC/3).

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, David Feldman, 'Migration' in Daunton (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, pp 185-206.



of most towns and, at the same time, the desperation of many migrants. It is a theme that helps inform an understanding of urban housing conditions at this time. The high levels of emigration from rural Ireland in the second half of the nineteenth century are well documented in the literature.<sup>36</sup> Rural migration to towns, although undoubtedly on a smaller scale, has received much less attention even though it does feature in contemporary social commentary.<sup>37</sup>

The literature relating to Ireland generally identifies the unique contribution made by Belfast to rural-urban migration in this period and R.J.Morris characterises the burgeoning growth of towns in east Ulster as ‘a very ordinary European experience. Slowly and decisively, industry came in from the countryside’.<sup>38</sup> Outside this region Timothy Guinnane contrasts the low level of internal migration compared to most of Western Europe due to the failure of Irish towns to generate the demand for labour required to draw population from the countryside.<sup>39</sup> However, while weaker than elsewhere, the growing commercialisation of the Irish economy is reflected in the increasing numbers engaged in the retail sector. Liam Kennedy notes that ‘in the thirty years before 1911 ... publicans, innkeepers and grocers increased in number from 23,459 to 24,945’ and this was in the context of a 23 per cent decline in the overall population.<sup>40</sup> A witness from west Cork, commenting on the scarcity of ‘good’ labourers to the Royal Commission on Labour in 1893-4, remarked that ‘they are not sticking to the agricultural employment as formerly. In fact they are beginning to despise it. They go to America or into shops.’<sup>41</sup>

This quotation encapsulates both the ‘push’ factors that reflected the declining demand for labour in rural Ireland and the ‘pull’ factors that attracted men and women into towns seeking work. In fact Guinnane, in describing rural-urban migration as ‘meagre’, may be underestimating its scale by basing his evidence exclusively on the county of destination data as enumerated in the 1911 census.<sup>42</sup> He states that ‘only about 13 per cent of people in 1911 had been born in an Irish county other than the one in which they lived’.<sup>43</sup> Maura Murphy argues

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<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Timothy W. Guinnane, *The Vanishing Irish. Households, migration and the rural economy in Ireland, 1850-1914* (Princeton, 1997).

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, T.A. Finlay, ‘The significance of some recent Irish statistics’ in *Journal of the Statistical Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, xiii, pp 17-25.

<sup>38</sup> R.J. Morris, ‘Urban Ulster since 1600’ in Liam Kennedy and Philip Ollerenshaw (eds), *Ulster Since 1600: Politics. Economy and Society* (Oxford, 2013), p.128.

<sup>39</sup> Guinnane, *The Vanishing Irish*, pp 122-24.

<sup>40</sup> Liam Kennedy, ‘Farmers, Traders, and Agricultural Politics in Pre-Independence Ireland’ in Samuel Clarke and James Donnelly (eds.), *Irish Peasants: Violence and Unrest 1780-1914* (Manchester, 1983), p. 342.

<sup>41</sup> *Royal Commission on Labour. The agricultural labourer*. Vol. IV. Ireland. Part IV, p. 120.

<sup>42</sup> Guinnane, *The Vanishing Irish*, p. 123.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

that this approach to measuring rural-urban migration may seriously underestimate the flows as much short range migration would not have involved the crossing of a county boundary.<sup>44</sup> In order to test this hypothesis, data on place of birth for six towns from the published returns from the 1911 census was examined, each of the towns being located close to a county boundary. By calculating the rate of migration to each of these towns from the nearby county we can draw some conclusions regarding the scale of short range migration which did not involve crossing a county boundary.

**Table 2.8**

**Place of birth of population in selected towns, 1911**

Town	% born in same county	% born in different county	% born in neighbouring county <sup>45</sup>	% born not in town but in same county	% not born in town
Clones	60	40	13	13	53
Carrick-on-Suir	70	30	20	20	50
New Ross	82	18	7	7	25
Youghal	81	19	7	7	26
Carlow	58	42	18	18	60
Clonmel	70	30	13	13	43
Average	70	30	13	13	43

*Source: Census of Ireland, 1901, Household Return Forms*

Table 2.8 shows that there was quite a high level of variation in levels of migration to towns with 82 per cent of the population of New Ross born in the same county compared to just 58 per cent in Carlow. On average, 30 per cent of the population of these towns was born in another county. Of this 30 per cent, 13 per cent had migrated from a bordering county. If we make the conservative assumption that, on average, a further 13 per cent were born in the same county but outside the town, then we can calculate that more than a quarter of the population of these towns were short range migrants – i.e. born elsewhere in the same county or across the border in a nearby county. Together, this data suggests that between 40 and 45 per cent of provincial town dwellers were migrants. A partial examination of the 1911 household census returns for Carrick-on-Suir confirms this pattern. The town is located in County Tipperary, but is close to

<sup>44</sup> Maura Murphy, 'The economic and social structure of nineteenth-century Cork' in David Harkness and Mary O'Dowd (eds), *The Town in Ireland*, (Belfast, 1981), pp 125-26.

<sup>45</sup> For the purposes of this table, the neighbouring counties are: Clones (Fermanagh border – distance, ½ mile), Carrick-on-Suir (Waterford – immediately south of the town), New Ross (Kilkenny – immediately west of the town), Youghal (Waterford – 2 miles north of the town), Carlow (Laois – immediately to the west, over the River Barrow) and Clonmel (Waterford – immediately to the south over the River Suir).

the borders of counties Waterford and Kilkenny. The hinterland of the town comprises equal land area from each of the three counties. An examination of 271 households in 15 randomly chosen areas of the town<sup>46</sup> shows that 73, or 27 per cent, of heads of household were born outside County Tipperary with 41 of these born in County Waterford and a further 11 in County Kilkenny. If we make the conservative assumption that a further 41 were born elsewhere in County Tipperary then, if this sample is representative, it seems likely that over one third of household heads migrated to the town from the local region and a further seven per cent from farther afield. This suggests that the pattern of migration to Irish provincial towns in the latter part of the nineteenth century may not have been that different from small and medium sized towns in the UK and Western Europe in terms of scale. However, what was different was the scale of emigration from Irish towns as, despite rural-urban migration, most had declining or, at best, stagnant populations. Elsewhere labour was drawn to cities and towns as growing industries generated employment; outside the north-east of Ireland migrants fled rural areas, most to emigrate, but some to seek often precarious employment in nearby towns which were themselves being abandoned by emigrants. The phenomenon of emigration from Irish towns has received little attention in the Irish literature and Daly argues that ‘the overwhelming majority of the “vanishing Irish” vanished from the countryside, and for this reason most studies of the Irish population since the famine have concentrated on rural Ireland’.<sup>47</sup> However it can be argued with some confidence that levels of migration from towns were at least as high as migration into towns given the documented surplus of births over deaths and the overall stagnant town populations. Appendix 4 shows levels of net migration for a range of Irish towns between 1926 and 1936 and confirms that some towns such as Cobh, Tipperary and Athlone experienced quite high levels of outward migration during this decade.

The Royal Commission on Labour published in the mid-1890s, although ostensibly concerned with the condition of agricultural labourers, repeated links rural migration with urban deprivation and poor housing. Reporting on conditions in the poor law union of Kanturk in north-west Co. Cork, assistant commissioner W.P. O’Brien linked ‘the stringent clauses inserted...in all local leases against the erection on farms of labourers cottages’ with the migration of labourers into the towns and villages of the area.<sup>48</sup> Through the 1880s and 1890s

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<sup>46</sup> The streets were as follows: Ballylynch, Bridge Street, Castle Street, Chapel Lane, Cook Lane, Cross Lane, Five Alley Lane, Jones’s Lane, Long Lane, Mill Street, O’Donnell’s Lane, Rack Lane, Red Garden, Sallyard Lane, Walshe’s Lane.

<sup>47</sup> Mary E. Daly, *The Slow Failure: Population Decline and Independent Ireland, 1920-1973* (Wisconsin, 2006), p. 22. Guinnane’s *The Vanishing Irish*

<sup>48</sup> *Royal Commission on Labour. The Agricultural Labourer. Ireland, Vol IV, Ireland, Part II*, H.C. 1893-94, [C.6894-xxi], p. 36 and p. 37.

the Labourers Acts began to address the poor housing conditions of agricultural labourers and the difficulties of obtaining sites for cottages. However other, even stronger, imperatives were driving rural labourers to emigrate or to migrate to local towns. Writing from Co. Clare, O'Brien predicted the demise of the rural labourer as tillage acreage declined and the demand for labour became ever more seasonal:

The ordinary agricultural labourer...[is] as a rule, dependent...for the means of living on such casual and intermittent employment as they obtain in the spring, haytime and harvest, and such odd jobs as they can obtain at other periods in breaking stones for the road contractors, or in working in such lands as are usually held by shopkeepers, and others in the immediate vicinity of the towns, in which the great majority of the labouring classes may be said to be now concentrated.<sup>49</sup>

The relieving officer for Naas district reported that there were about 350 agricultural labourers in the district, of whom 250 lived in the town.<sup>50</sup> Due to the highly seasonal nature of employment Michael Walsh, secretary of the local Labour League, claimed that 'the condition of the poor people in winter time is next to starvation'.<sup>51</sup> Despite being less than fully enthusiastic about the operation of the Labourers Act, a local landlord, also in the Naas area, suggested that 'the labourers in towns are worse housed than those in the country. Many of their dwellings are entirely unfit for human habitation, badly constructed, over-crowded and without privies'.<sup>52</sup> In the Roscrea area the sub-commissioner, Roger Richards, reported that 'such labour as is not permanently engaged drifts to the larger centres and is available for special times. It is fitfully employed, and is for the greater part of the year surplus labour'.<sup>53</sup> A local RIC sergeant explained the patterns of emigration and immigration in the area by suggesting that labourers in regular employment 'contrive to scrape together enough to carry them across to America', whereas those in casual employment 'are unable to save any passage money'.<sup>54</sup>

With a declining demand for labour in rural areas, and little demand for labour on a year-round basis, both farmers and landlords were incentivised by the rating system and the prospect of high poor rates to push surplus labour into the towns. Giving evidence to the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes, Robert Metge, a ratepayer in Navan, claimed that the overcrowded state of parts of the town of Navan was the result of

...the system of rating. It became an advantage to the landowners and tenants to drive in the population from the country districts into the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., Part III, p. 36.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

towns... For instance the Poor Rates in Navan are now 2s. 8d. in the pound, whereas outside the boundary, where these men who are living in these wretched houses are employed...the rate is only 8d. or 7d.<sup>55</sup>

When questioned how landlords and tenant farmers conspired to displace rural labourers, Metge replied that they allowed their houses to fall into a state of disrepair and when the local sanitary authority insisted that repairs be carried out, they refuse and the houses are demolished. Metge added that 'the people who go out of them must go somewhere, and they go into the towns and then they huddle together'.<sup>56</sup> Metge owned property in Navan and his evidence may have reflected his resentment at the substantially lower rates paid by his fellow property owners in the town's hinterland. However, census data relating to Navan's rural hinterland in the decades after 1850 certainly reflect a dramatic fall in the numbers of houses. Unsurprisingly, the largest falls were in the 1850s and 1860s, but even in the years between 1871 and 1891 the number of houses in the rural areas of Navan parish fell by over 29 per cent, from 251 to 177. Metge goes on to describe that in spring and harvest time farmers could avail of this surplus labour, as 'persons who want labourers go into the Navan market, and those people are standing about, and they take them out in their carts 6 or 7 or 10 miles'.<sup>57</sup>

In describing the plight of the labouring poor in provincial towns during the depression of 1879-81 Gerard Moran highlights their chronically marginal position in the local economy.<sup>58</sup> In early 1880 Mullingar Town Commissioners reported that there were 200 destitute families in the town who were described as 'the starving poor', while in Kilkenny City as many as 2,500 persons were in need of relief due to a collapse in trade.<sup>59</sup> In Ennis 'there was large scale starvation in the town and deaths would have occurred if the clergy had not distributed private charity'.<sup>60</sup> Despite considerable employment in the construction of the Tralee to Newcastle West railway, there were 500 destitute families in Tralee and 500 children being fed by the local nuns and Christian Brothers.<sup>61</sup> One response to the crisis conditions was the formation of 'house leagues' in towns, initially in the West, and later across the country, to agitate for rent reductions and the end of evictions. Some campaigned for the building of artisan dwellings. But their cause, despite rhetorical support, was not taken up by the Land League, and town tenants

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<sup>55</sup> *Third report of her majesty's commissioners for inquiring into the housing of the working classes, 1884-85* [C.4547], p. 94.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Gerard Moran, 'The Land War, Urban Destitution and Town Tenant Protest, 1879-82' in *Saothar*, no. 20 (1995), pp 17-30.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 19-20.

failed to secure the gains made by agricultural labourers via the Labourers Act of 1883 and in subsequent amending legislation.

### **Property relations**

Across most towns, when local authorities came to discuss their first ventures into the provision of housing, councillors tended to castigate landlords for failing to provide adequate housing for their tenants. The expression of such views is hardly surprising given the likely political allegiances of most councillors and their own positions as tenants, often of substantial property interests. However, in the relatively small number of cases where landlords did make capital investments in housing, they tended to receive due credit from councillors. When Athy UDC discussed the passing of the Clancy Act in 1908 and proposals to undertake its first housing scheme, one of the councillors, Mr Malone, referred to a report sent by the council's Medical Officer of Health to the LGB which he described as 'so startling a nature about the condition of these houses that it fairly staggered the Council'.<sup>62</sup> He added that

the report was ordered to be printed and sent to each landlord. It was hoped that the mere reading of the terrible indictment made against them by the medical officer of health would as businessmen and as christian [sic] men have the desired effect. The report, however, ended in smoke. The landlords lit their pipes with it.<sup>63</sup>

When challenged by Mr Plewman, a fellow councillor and substantial landlord in the town, Malone remarked 'you did something but you could have done more'. Turning to the chairman, J.P. Whelan, a merchant and holder of a number of properties in the town, he added 'yourself (chairman) did everything that was necessary'. 'Mr Kelly improved his houses, Mr Nugent made very good improvements in his property...one of our house agents, Mr Anthony, showed a disposition to do everything in his power', he added.<sup>64</sup> In Fermoy in 1906 the council lamented the fact that the Abercromby estate, the principal owners of property in the town, had 'not spent any money on the improvement of the town property for many years past'.<sup>65</sup> The council's request to the estate to build thirty houses suitable for labourers was couched in the most polite terms but elicited no response.

In Drogheda, with almost four in ten of the population living in overcrowded conditions and an admission on the part of the sanitary officer that a quarter of the town's housing stock should be condemned, a complicating factor was that the corporation itself was the head

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<sup>62</sup> *Kildare Observer*, 6 February 1901.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Housing. Return on expenditure on No. 1 scheme, 1906 (CCA, CCCA/UDC/FY, Box 33).

landlord for much of the town's property. Its role, together with the failure of those holding building leases from the corporation to meet the housing needs of the town, exposes some of the factors that lay behind the relatively poor housing conditions in many provincial towns at this time. As we will see in Chapter 4, Drogheda Corporation initiated the building of several housing schemes in the 1890s under the Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890 and was quite early relative to most towns. However, the corporation had up to that point failed to manage its property effectively. In a letter from the Treasury in 1895 concern was expressed 'at alienation of Corporation property at nominal rents'.<sup>66</sup> Much of its property was in the possession of middlemen who held long building leases.<sup>67</sup> These leases are referred to regularly in minutes of corporation meetings, often in the context of the failure of the lessees to adhere to the terms of their leases. These terms included obligations to maintain existing houses in a good state of repair and, in some cases, to build new dwellings. As leases fell in towards the end of the 1890s, the corporation's building committee recommended that new leases should only be granted to those with the capacity to carry out extensive repairs.<sup>68</sup> Penal clauses were inserted into new leases, but there is little evidence that they were effective either in incentivizing the renovation of existing housing stock or in stimulating new building (other than commercial premises near the town centre). In fact Drogheda corporation felt obliged to revise its policy regarding these penal clauses by 1904 and to allow lessees up to two years rather than six months for the fulfilment of covenants to build. In the following months the town clerk was instructed to advertise all the available building sites to be let on a lease for 75 years but 'although the sites are most central, spacious and easy to access and it is well known that the building sites of the Corporation are let at a nominal rent no response to the advertisement was received'.<sup>69</sup> As an indication of the failure of this approach, by 1920, with the prospect of state funding for housing receding rapidly, the corporation again turned to this issue and 'directed the Building Surveyor to report upon dilapidated property held under lease from the Corporation with a view to compelling the lessees to comply with the repairing covenants contained in their leases'.<sup>70</sup> Over the years it appears middlemen had simply ignored these repair clauses, and the Building Surveyor was forced to admit

The practice of allowing a property to go into a dilapidated state prior to the lease failing out and shifting the responsibility onto the Corporation

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<sup>66</sup> Minutes of Drogheda Corporation meeting, 15 May 1895.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 3 July 1895.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 7 August 1907.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 3 July 1895.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 5 October 1904.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 6 April 1920.

to carry out extensive repairs when the property falls into your hands, is one which serious notice must be taken of.<sup>71</sup>

Although the records of Drogheda Corporation do not provide a comprehensive picture of those holding leases for property on which substandard housing was located, it is apparent that many held relatively small plots of land containing a dozen cottages or less. Some examples of these are shown in Table 2.9, the details being recorded in corporation minutes at the time when leases were falling in. With rents per house ranging from less than £3 10s. to £5 10s. per year, these properties did not generate substantial amounts of capital for the leaseholders, even if this income represented a high rate of return on the nominal rents they paid the corporation.

**Table 2.9**

**Drogheda Corporation lease-holders**

Lessee	Description of holding	No. Houses	Date in minutes
J Leland	Stockwell Lane	'dilapidated houses'	28 September 1898
Misses Fogarty	Thomas St, Sandyford Alley and Chord Rd	12 houses	8 August 1922
Mrs Carr	Trinity St	9 houses	3 July 1923
Patrick Winter	Newfoundwell Rd	'5 thatched cottages'	8 January 1924
Mr Waters	Platten Rd	'a number of houses'	10 December 1929
Mr Knagg	Hardmans Gardens	'4 or 5 dilapidated houses'	26 October 1931
Sarah Dolan	2 plots; Thomas Street and Prospect Avenue	19 houses	6 June 1933
Mrs D Johnston	Cherrymount	8 houses	7 May 1940

*Source: Minutes of Drogheda Corporation and minutes of Housing Committee, Drogheda Corporation*

The evidence from Drogheda, and more obliquely from other towns, is that there was little incentive for the type of landlords described above to invest in either improving their properties or in the speculative building of new, low-cost houses. The sole challenge to the continuing neglect of this housing stock arose in those towns which assumed the status of sanitary authorities under the Public Health (Ireland) Act of 1874, followed by the Public Health (Ireland) Act of 1878, under which town commissioners became responsible for public water supply, inspection of lodging houses and 'removal of nuisances'. Fraser points out that few towns

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 3 April 1923.



benefitted from the provisions of the Act until sample by-laws were published by the LGB in 1903 and, as we shall see in the Chapter 3, there was considerable variation in levels of commitment on the part of local authorities in fulfilling their statutory roles.<sup>72</sup> However, what was quite consistent across all towns was the extent to which landlords resisted the attempts by municipal authorities to force them to comply with legislation obliging them to have their rented properties reconstructed and made sanitary. Navan UDC seems to have been reasonably diligent in inspecting the town's streets and lanes and in serving landlords with sanitary notices. Describing Rafferty's Lane, a small lane of six tenements near the town centre, the Medical Officer of Health reported in 1901 that it contained

23 persons all of whom have no sanitary conveniences whatever in the line of sewerage, closet or ashpit and as a consequence they are obliged to throw their house refuse and slops out on the thoroughfare opposite their doors all of which flows into an open channel for about 60 yards.<sup>73</sup>

Having been served with sanitary notices by the council the landlord, Mr Selator, voiced his strong objections and threatened to report the local authority to the LGB for its failure to address the insanitary state of the town.<sup>74</sup> In a later correspondence his attitude to the council and his own tenants is revealed:

That the duty of sewerage etc. devolves upon the sanitary authority and [he] does not think that the alarming state of the Council's finances would justify the Sanitary authority in forcing a protracted lawsuit on his estate over such a place as Rafferty's Lane in which there are no important interest[s] to either party.<sup>75</sup>

The history of another lane near Navan town centre is illustrative of some of the factors that resulted in very sub-standard housing persisting into the twentieth century. In 1901 the Sanitary Sub-Officer described Keappock's Lane as

unsanitary and squalor is the prevailing element; there are no sanitary conveniences, human excrement here, there and everywhere, large families, 8 to 10 in number living in one small compartment with little or no furniture.<sup>76</sup>

The agent to the property was written to recommending that as each house, of which there were nine at the time, became vacant it must be attached to the adjoining one. As evidence that no action was taken, the lease on the lane plus two houses in the street leading to the lane were advertised in 1907 for sale. The nine separate houses in the lane formed part of the

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<sup>72</sup> Fraser, *John Bull's Other Homes*, p.70.

<sup>73</sup> Minutes of Public Health committee, Navan UDC, 6 December 1901 (MCL, NUDC/HHC/3).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 February 1901.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 April 1902.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 30 September 1901.

advertisement for a holding in the local newspaper which highlighted that the plot yielded a net yearly profit rent of £35. 16s. 5d, while its valuation was only £12. 5s. The advertisement added 'there is considerable demand for small houses in Navan'.<sup>77</sup> In 1909, at a housing inquiry conducted by the LGB, Keappock's Lane was described by one of the town's councillor's as 'a dreadful place, unfit for human beings' and it was admitted that the area had been condemned thirty years earlier.<sup>78</sup> Four years later, according to the 1911 census, there were still nine families living in the lane. The combination of the landlord's dismissive attitude to the council's entreaties, the relatively lucrative profits to be garnered, the scarcity of cheap housing and the failure of the council to enforce public health legislation resulted in this and similar areas in provincial towns remaining virtually untouched until the 1930s.

In response to sanitary notices served on them, landlords often indicated that the properties were simply not worth investing in. In 1918 in Ballina, George T. Bourke who owned houses in Duke's Lane and Garden Street and had been served with notices to provide closets and ashpits, replied via his solicitor that 'it would be impossible to put closets in these houses and if it were possible the houses would not be worth the expense'.<sup>79</sup> The council received a similar reply from Bourke in 1922 regarding houses he owned in Durkan's Lane, despite the council having extended the town sewer into the lane.<sup>80</sup> The council stated that it expected Bourke to carry out the work, but the houses remained without sanitation in 1928 and were demolished as part of a Clearance Order in the mid-1930s.<sup>81</sup>

Landlords renting cheap unsanitary housing recognised that councils were loath to see houses closed up and tenants evicted, given the shortage of accommodation in most towns. The result was inaction on the part of both landlords and councils. Councils issued notices to have sanitation provided or overcrowding addressed, but often failed to follow it through. In fact Navan's town clerk, acting as a witness at a housing inquiry conducted by the LGB in the town in November 1909, conceded that the council had ignored their own bye-laws and 'had been obliged to allow [their] tenants to sublet, and in most of the houses there were two families'.<sup>82</sup> Regarding the issuing of sanitary notices, J.P. Timmon, a member of the urban council, admitted that

in many instances we threatened the landlord, and he took no steps,  
and we had no option but to let him have his way and leave the people

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<sup>77</sup> *Meath Chronicle*, 9 November 1907.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 November 1909.

<sup>79</sup> Ballina UDC minutes, 15 May 1918 (Ballina Civic Offices).

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 February 1922.

<sup>81</sup> *Western People*, 8 September 1928.

<sup>82</sup> *Meath Chronicle*, 27 November 1909.

where they were...but where we tried to force the landlord to put the place in sanitary condition he said "Very well, let it be closed" ....We are between the devil and the deep sea.<sup>83</sup>

Having been the subject of some criticism by the LGB inspector at the inquiry for their failure to enforce public health legislation and their own bye-laws, Navan council at a subsequent meeting decided to bring to the LGB's notice details of a dispute between the council and the estate of the Baroness de Ros. The details of the dispute expose the balance of forces operating around housing conditions in provincial towns at this time. The de Ros estate included some of the poorer parts of the town at Brews Hill and Canon Row, consisting mostly of small thatched cabins. Sanitary notices were served on the Baroness de Ros in connection with a number of these houses and these were complied with. Subsequently, however, the tenants were served with notices to quit and, according to the council's report to the LGB

[these] would have been enforced if not for the influence of Rev. J.J. Poland and others who succeeded in stopping the matter on the understanding that in future no outlay would be made by the owner who will let the houses be cleared rather than incur any expense in sanitary improvements.<sup>84</sup>

The implication of the above is that landlords, whether owners of substantial estates such as de Ros or middlemen renting a dozen houses, saw little prospect of generating a return on investing in the renovation of small, dilapidated houses yielding relatively low rents. Many of the tenants were simply too poor to afford higher rents as became apparent when councils sought tenants for houses they built themselves. Giving evidence before the Commission on Town Holdings in 1886, the proprietor of the *Wexford People* newspaper argued that the short leases granted in New Ross was what lay behind the dilapidated state of the housing stock in the town. But when interrogated further he was unable to confirm that housing conditions were worse in New Ross than in Wexford where, he claimed, longer building leases were available. Ultimately he agreed with his questioner that overcrowding and lack of adequate housing in New Ross was due to the fact that 'the poor people who live in these overcrowded houses are not able to pay a high enough rent to enable them to get better accommodation'.<sup>85</sup> At a later point in the evidence, Mr Boyd, agent to Colonel Tottenham, the principal landlord in New Ross, denied that only short leases were given and claimed Tottenham was making a loss on small houses he had built – 'they

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Navan UDC minutes, 4 January 1910 (MCL, NUDC/M/2).

<sup>85</sup> *Report from the Select Committee on Town Holdings, together with the proceedings of the committee, minutes of evidence, and appendix.* p. 109, , H.C., 1886 [213] , xxii, 367.

are let at such low rents that they leave little interest for the money'.<sup>86</sup> He attributed the absence of speculative house building to the fact that

A private individual goes and builds a house and pays the cost of building that house, when he comes to set it, he gets too little for it by way of rent to induce him to build a second.<sup>87</sup>

Giving evidence relating to Tuam Mr Fahy, a prominent merchant in the town, describing its suburbs, remarked that 'I should think there is no town in Ireland that has so many [tumble-down houses]...They are nearly all tumble-down'.<sup>88</sup> Fahy sought to make the case before the commission that landlords should allow tenants credit for improvements they made to property they had rented. The absence of such allowances, he argued, acted as a disincentive to tenants such as himself to invest. On the prompting of one of the commissioners, he went on to extend this argument to 'the labouring man or one a little above a labourer' and suggested if such tenants were given security of tenure and allowance was made for improvements they would be incentivised to invest in their houses. This seems quite unlikely. The Town Tenants Act of 1906, for example, strengthened the protection for urban tenants against eviction and granted them some compensation for disturbance. Yet, as McNamara points out, it had little significance for weekly tenants and certainly proved irrelevant in encouraging the kind of investment described by Fahy.<sup>89</sup> Even those holding quite long building leases of 75 to 99 years from the corporation in Drogheda, and operating under a benign regime where they would not be penalised for improvements, failed to invest in housing even though they were legal obliged to.

### **Patterns of poor housing**

Patterns of poor houses varied across provincial towns but there are some features that reflected local circumstances and influenced how these conditions were addressed when councils became involved in the provision of housing. Below is a brief description of three areas in Tullamore, Drogheda and Listowel that represent a typology of poor housing in towns at the beginning of the twentieth century. Market Lane in Tullamore (Figure 2.4) typifies crowded laneways near the centre of many towns while Nun's Walk in Drogheda, with its long street of cabins, is representative of the suburbs of towns such as Tuam, Navan and Arklow. Charles

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 244.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 246.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

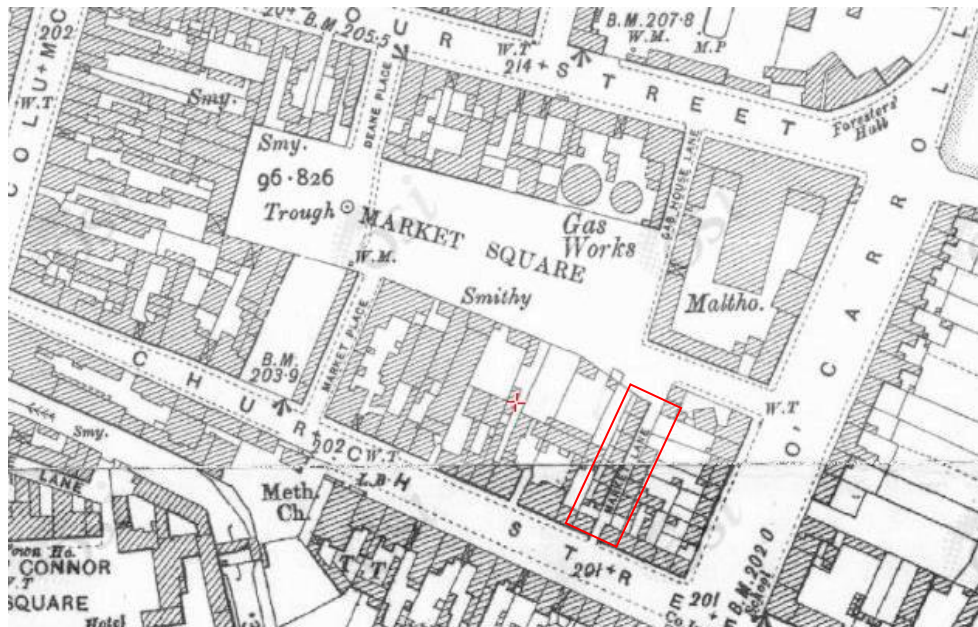
<sup>89</sup> Conor McNamara, 'A Tenants' League or a Shopkeepers' League?: Urban Protest and the Town Tenants' Association in the West of Ireland, 1909-1918' in *Studia Hibernica*, No. 36 (2009-2010), p. 157.

Street, on the other hand, was a once substantial street, by 1901 largely consisting of multi-occupancy tenements and had its parallels in Fermoy and Athy.

Every town had its back lanes similar to Rafferty's Lane in Navan described above. They were generally located off the main streets, sometimes entered through an archway as was the case with Old Market Lane in Killarney, shown in Figure 2.5. In some towns up to 20 per cent of the population lived in these densely settled places, hidden away behind the main thoroughfares.

**Figure 2.4**

**Tullamore town centre – showing Market Lane (bottom right)**



*Source: Ordnance Survey, 25 inch map, 1910*

**Figure 2.5**

**Old Market Lane, off High Street, Killarney**



*Source: Muckross House Research Library,  
<http://www.muckrosshousereseearchlibrary.ie/Towns.php> [accessed 17 January 2016]*

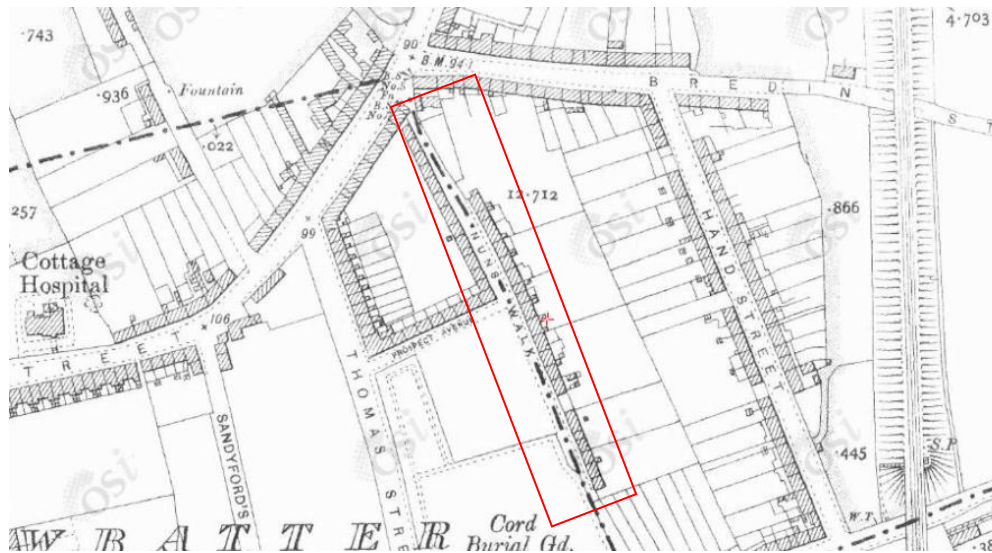
Several hundred lived in lanes near the centre of Tullamore, for example. In 1901 Market Lane (Figure 2.4), consisting of eleven two-roomed houses in a narrow lane, no more than eight feet wide, housed a mixture of young families and smaller households. Of the five households with young children, four were overcrowded. James Conroy, a worker in the town's brewery, his wife and seven children occupied two rooms. Based on the 1901 and 1911 census returns, it seems likely that at least eleven children were reared in the house, nine of whom survived. By 1911 levels of overcrowding in the lane had deteriorated and the twelve small houses were now home to 65 persons, compared to 39 in 1901. These included three families, each with eight children.

Nun's Walk on the eastern edge of Drogheda (Figure 2.6), consisted of 35 two-roomed thatched cabins, all without sanitation, and was typical of the suburbs of many provincial towns. Again, there is a mix of young families and smaller households. What is quite distinctive is that the majority of households were headed by a female. This can be linked to the fact that almost every household had a member who earned a livelihood in Drogheda's linen industry which employed almost 1,000 women. What is also distinctive about the suburbs of Drogheda is the quite high levels of employment compared to other towns. Young adults in families were almost all employed in the linen industry so that many households in the street had multiple wage

earners. Yet housing conditions in Drogheda's suburbs were, if anything, worse than in other towns. As the corporation began to build houses from 1898 onwards the pent-up demand for decent housing quickly became evident with hundreds of applicants for the first schemes. Much of the thatched suburbs of Drogheda remained intact into the mid-1930s. Figure 2.8 shows a cabin on North Road being thatched in 1933; these houses were demolished in 1937. Similar quality housing is shown in Appendix 3 located in Drogheda's northern suburbs.

**Figure 2.6**

**Nun's Walk, Drogheda**



Listowel was one of the most densely settled provincial towns with the population of over 3,500 in 1901 concentrated within a few streets. Charles Street, just to the north of the town centre (Figure 2.7), consisted of 63 houses and had a population of 443. 45 of the houses had four or more rooms and yet there was a significant level of overcrowding with 35 per cent of the street's inhabitants living more than two to a room. Fourteen of the houses were occupied by more than one household. The street had nine lodging houses. One of these was occupied by four young families and an elderly woman on outdoor relief. Another seven-roomed house was occupied by 21 persons, including two young families and twelve children. This pattern of reasonably substantial houses being converted into tenements and occupied by multiple households was a feature of high levels of overcrowding in towns such as Edenderry, Kilrush and Fermoy that, on paper, had relatively good housing stocks. The 'taking of rooms' by families and high levels of

subletting reflected both an acute shortage of accommodation and levels of poverty that induced individuals and families to share their often small dwellings.

**Figure 2.7 Charles Street, Listowel**



What has been described above suggests that in the early years of the twentieth century between a quarter and a third of the populations of Irish provincial towns outside north-east Ulster lived in either overcrowded conditions or in dwellings barely, if at all, fit for human habitation as defined by the standards of the time. Objective measures of conditions in terms of size of dwelling and density of occupation show that these towns were exceptional in the British Isles apart from the mining and industrial towns of north-east England and urban Scotland. But they were entirely exceptional in the sense that Irish towns were economically and demographically stagnant, whereas poor conditions elsewhere reflected burgeoning demand for housing driven by industrialisation and high levels of migration to rapidly growing urban centres. This pattern represents another strand in Irish exceptionalism discussed in the introduction.

Irish towns appear to have experienced higher levels of migration than is acknowledged in the literature. But many of those migrating were entering an oversupplied labour market where a quarter of the male workforce in most towns consisted of unskilled labourers. While a reluctance on the part of landlords to grant long building leases or give credit for improvements may have deterred the urban middle class from investing in housing, the lack of investment in working-class housing reflected the poverty of prospective tenants and the low levels of likely



returns. Towards the end of the nineteenth century public health legislation may have nudged some local authorities towards compelling landlords to invest in upgrading their properties. But the economics of installing sanitation or re-roofing crumbling cottages made little sense and, although difficult to demonstrate in quantitative terms, it seems likely that the housing stock available for private renting by low income households may have deteriorated in these years as old houses became structurally unsound and ultimately uninhabitable.

These are the contours of the 'housing problem' and set the context for the initial ventures into the provision of public housing by municipal local authorities in provincial Ireland from the final decades of the nineteenth century onwards. The wider political, institutional and legislative context is introduced in Chapter 3. This includes the evolving role of the state and the development of social policy, the adoption of the housing issue as part of the programme of Home Rule politics, the shape of the initial housing legislation and the reform of local government.

## Chapter 3

### Municipal authorities and early public housing, 1880-1922

*'Comparing the measures which have been adopted in England and on the Continent for improving the dwellings of the poorer classes with what has been done in Ireland, I venture to draw the conclusion that, relatively speaking, much more has been done in this country.'*<sup>1</sup>

In August 1905, T.P. Nolan, an officer of the LGB, travelled to a congress in Liège attended by 600 delegates dealing with the question of 'providing cheap dwellings for the poorer classes, more especially those residing in towns'. In his account of the congress, published in that year's LGB annual report, he included the remarks quoted above. Between 1890, with the passing of the Housing of the Working Classes Act, and 1905, about 1,000 houses had been built by local authorities in Irish provincial towns. This may not appear to be a particularly impressive statistic given that this represented a little over one percent of the housing stock in these towns and given the widespread overcrowding and the decrepit state of many dwellings as outlined in the previous chapter. However, the exceptional nature of the involvement of Irish local authorities in the direct provision of urban housing became evident to Nolan in the course of the congress as he reported that

On the Continent the municipalities, or communes, do not, as a rule, carry out the schemes for the provision of houses for the working classes, although in several countries the democratic parties are pressing for the adoption of that course by the communes.<sup>2</sup>

A review of the literature on state housing provision across Europe before World War I shows that while the demolition of dwellings deemed unsanitary, building regulations and rent control featured as elements of state housing strategy - if such existed at all - the actual direct provision of housing by the state and/or local authorities was extremely rare. Any measures that sought to impinge on the rights of private property were strongly resisted. Liberalist solutions to housing problems in France, such as the legislation passed in 1894, promoted private home ownership and envisaged a central role for charitable organisation and building societies.<sup>3</sup> This legislation had little impact on the provision of working-class housing as site and building costs

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<sup>1</sup> *Reports as to the providing at a cheap rate of houses for the working class in towns by T.P. Nolan, Annual Report for the Local Government Board for Ireland 1906, [Cd. 3102], p.264.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.259.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Lescure, 'France' in Pooley (ed.), *Housing Strategies*, p. 229.

were well beyond the means of all but the most skilled and highly paid workers, and only 1,400 dwellings were built under its provisions in the first five years.<sup>4</sup> The Ribot Act of 1908 allowed central government to provide loans to building societies for the construction of low-cost dwellings but, again, the impact was very limited. In Belgium, the country's first Housing Act passed in 1889 reflected Catholic social teaching, which sought to promote a property-owning working class.<sup>5</sup> A national savings bank provided loans to local building societies to which individuals could apply for finance, provided they could raise ten per cent of the purchase sum. Not surprisingly the benefits of the Act were largely confined to the relatively highly paid industrial workers in the Walloon region. In Germany co-operative organisations had a history stretching back to the mid-nineteenth century. These were given support via legislation passed in 1889, which also provided a legal framework for housing associations. According to Power, under this not-for-profit system about 125,000 dwellings were built in Germany up to 1913, equivalent to the number built by philanthropic trusts and model-dwelling companies in Britain in the same time.<sup>6</sup> From the turn of the century local authorities became more directly involved in housing, but only in providing low interest loans to co-operatives housing companies. Over 1,400 of these were operating in Germany by 1918 and they continued to play a central role in housing policy in succeeding decades, with the level of state subsidy varying over time as circumstances changed through the 1920s and 1930s. In Denmark housing co-operatives also played a role in housing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with some limited subsidies from the state. The vast majority of building in this period, however, occurred in the private sector with 900,000 flats constructed up to 1914. A property crash in 1908 led to the formation of two organisations, one a workers' housing association, the other a co-operative building association, which provided templates for the subsequent development of what, broadly defined, was social housing in Denmark.

The evolution of the housing systems in countries such as France, Denmark and Germany offer genuinely comparative perspectives when considering the Irish system, given their quite different histories. It underlines the point that up to 1914 there was no inevitability that state intervention would take the form of direct housing provision at subsidised rents, and that provision in urban Ireland, albeit limited, was exceptional. But after World War I most western European governments, including the British, reacted to the threat of social unrest and the stark evidence of a housing crisis by undertaking initiatives that entailed substantial financial

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<sup>4</sup> Power, *Hovels to High Rise*, p.35.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Van den Eeckhout, 'Belgium' in Pooley (ed.), *Housing Strategies*, p.200.

<sup>6</sup> Power, *Hovels to High Rise*, p.103.

commitments and more direct involvement in provision of working-class housing. The most direct link between radical politics and high quality public housing occurred in post-war Vienna, known between 1919 and 1935 as 'Red Vienna'. Prior to the war Vienna's housing was notoriously poor and the city was noted for its *Bettgehertrum* (overcrowded rented flats where even beds were sub-let). Related to these conditions, around the turn of the century tuberculosis was known on the continent as 'the Vienna disease'.<sup>7</sup> The Social Democratic Party gained control of the city in municipal elections in 1919 and in 1923, as the city gained a high degree of political independence. It initiated a programme of municipal socialism. This included an extensive flat building programme as part of an integrated approach to solving the city's housing crisis. Between 1923 and 1934 about 64,000 flats were built to high architectural standards in planned neighbourhoods with libraries, shops, kindergartens, healthcare centres and parks. Most of the funding was provided by a housing construction tax, largely imposed on luxury items and the rich.<sup>8</sup> Rents were kept low and amounted to only 3.5 percent of a skilled worker's wages.<sup>9</sup> The 'Red Vienna' model marked a particular kind of state intervention in housing provision which was informed by a democratic socialist politics. Housing was de-commodified and housing policy was viewed as part of a wider restructuring of society to meet the needs of the working class. As such, it represents a useful comparator against which to set other forms of state intervention.

If we take the period from 1919 to 1939, it is apparent that direct provision was still quite exceptional on the continent. Pooley notes that in countries such as Sweden, Denmark and France the state provided finance directly to municipal authorities for building houses only in very particular circumstances, and there was no sustained effort to address shortages of affordable working-class housing.<sup>10</sup> For example, in France after World War I legislation provided for subsidies for low cost housing (including owner-occupied dwellings), but due to the huge repayments on the national debt and falling levels of social spending little activity took place until 1928. By 1934 financial retrenchment resumed. In all, only 300,000 low-cost dwellings were built in France between 1919 and 1931, compared to 1,785,000 in Britain over the same period.<sup>11</sup> In Denmark the post-World War I housing crisis elicited a state response in

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<sup>7</sup> Wolfgang Förster, 'Austria' in Paul Balchin (ed.), *Housing Policy in Europe* (Oxford, 1996), p. 119.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>9</sup> Eve Blau, 'From red superblock to green megastructure: municipal socialism as model and challenge' in Mark Swenarton, Tom Avermaete and Dirk Van Den Heuvel (eds), *Architecture and the Welfare State* (London, 2015), p.30.

<sup>10</sup> Colin G. Pooley, 'Housing Strategies in Europe, 1880-1930: towards a comparative perspective' in Pooley (ed.), *Housing Strategies*, pp 325-348.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Lescure, 'France' in Pooley (ed.), *Housing Strategies*, p. 237.

the form of subsidised loans to housing associations and co-operatives channelled through local authorities, rather than direct provision.<sup>12</sup> This model, based on organisations with deep roots in their societies, was characteristic of the housing strategies of most continental western European countries and shaped their housing systems in a way that was quite distinctive from those in Britain and Ireland.

Even compared to England and Wales, where a similar though somewhat less favourable legislative framework for urban housing operated, Irish municipal authorities stood out as being exceptionally pro-active. For example, in England and Wales between 1910 and 1914, the years which marked the highest pre-war level of house building activity by municipal authorities, just under £2 million was drawn down in loans and 8,339 houses were erected.<sup>13</sup> In Ireland during these years the equivalent sum was just under £500,000. As Ireland's urban population was only a little over five percent of that of England and Wales, this indicates a level of activity five times higher on the part of Irish municipalities. All of this suggests that patterns of state and local authority intervention in addressing housing conditions in Irish towns were not pre-determined and that intervention itself was by no means inevitable. This point has been fairly well rehearsed in both the British and Irish literature on the history of their respective housing systems.<sup>14</sup> The value of Fraser's work is that it sets the relatively high level of State and local authority intervention in the Irish housing system before 1922 not only in the context of emerging British legislation relating to housing but in the context of the politics of Home Rule and the IPP's strategy of securing maximum electoral support in Ireland. These two perspectives serve as a useful framework in which to explore the first phase of the public housing in provincial towns in the years between 1890 and 1922.

The first piece of legislation adopted to explicitly deal with housing, Torren's Artisans' and Labourers' Dwelling Act of 1868, reflected the overriding concern with sanitary issues, public health and the moral dangers of the slum: its purpose was demolition rather than re-building. Gauldie sees its intention as an attempt to enhance the appearance of cities by removing the most squalid areas and dispersing their inhabitants.<sup>15</sup> The Act originally empowered local authorities to build houses for those displaced but the clause was permissive and, in any case, was deleted when the legislation went through the House of Lords. Seven years

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<sup>12</sup> Power, *Hovels to High Rise*, p.257.

<sup>13</sup> *Housing and Town Planning, Memorandum (No. 4) of the Local Government Board Relative to the Operation of the Housing, Town Planning & co. Act, 1909, 1915* [Cd. 7760], p.7.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Rodger, *Housing in Urban Britain*; Dauntton, *A Property Owning Democracy*; Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations*, Fraser, *John Bull's Other Homes*; Michelle Norris, 'Housing' in Callinan and Keoghan (eds), *Local Government in Ireland*, pp 165-188.

<sup>15</sup> Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations*, p. 267.

later the Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act, commonly known as the Cross Act, extended the provisions of the Torren's Act to deal with whole areas rather than single houses. Local authorities were strongly encouraged to lease sites that had been cleared to private developers or philanthropic companies and only to build houses themselves as a last resort. Again, the issue of building houses for those displaced was permissive and circumscribed in a manner that meant local authorities were most unlikely to pursue it. Together, the Torren's and Cross Acts, while ostensibly concerned with the provision of working-class housing, were, in their actual operation engines for the demolition of slums and the realisation of the visions of sanitary reformers. In introducing his bill in the House of Commons, Cross, the Home Secretary, stated that 'it is not the duty of the government to provide any class of citizen with any of the necessities of life...[but]... no one will doubt the propriety and right of the State to interfere in matters relating to sanitary laws'.<sup>16</sup>

In Ireland, the Cross Act had little impact outside of Dublin. Initially the Act had only applied to towns with populations of over 25,000, but this was amended to 12,000 in 1882. In Dublin, the Corporation built 230 dwellings in the 1880s at Benburb Street and Bow Lane. The flats and cottages were small and of poor quality with the emphasis on keeping costs low, so that the economic rents could be afforded by the poorest families not being catered for by philanthropic and semi-philanthropic initiatives.<sup>17</sup> In fact a significant impact of the Cross Act was Dublin Corporation's decision to subsidize the activities of the Dublin Artizans Dwelling Company (DADC), described by Fraser as 'the only sizeable semi-philanthropic company' to emerge in Ireland.<sup>18</sup> The DADC operated on the same basis as the Model Dwelling Companies in Britain, aiming to house the poor but provide a reasonable return on investment – hence the term commonly associated with them – five per cent philanthropy. Gauldie describes the companies as 'coming in on the tide of the sanitary idea'<sup>19</sup>, applying the numerous rules on tenants relating to cleanliness and temperance that reflected a moral reform agenda. In 1878 Dublin Corporation leased a site to the DADC in the Coombe for £200 per year on the understanding that the company would build 199 houses 'for the artisan and working class'.<sup>20</sup> It had cost the Corporation over £24,000 to acquire and develop the site; this included generous compensation to existing residents. By 1913 the Corporation had lost over £26,000 on the scheme, and this sum was, in effect, a subsidy to the investors and the relative financial success

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Yelling, *Slums and Slum Clearance*, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Fraser, *John Bull's Other Homes*, p. 76.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.71.

<sup>19</sup> Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations*, p. 221.

<sup>20</sup> Prunty, *Dublin Slums*, p. 127.

of the DADC had the effect of propagating the false belief that commercial returns could be made on capital invested in housing the poor. No semi-philanthropic housing companies emerged in provincial Ireland in these years.

The publication in 1883 of the pamphlet *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*, detailing the horrors of London's slums, heightened public interest in housing reform and, along with a recognition that the Torren's and Cross Acts had been largely ineffectual, led to the setting up of the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes in 1884. Following lobbying from Irish MPs the Commission collected evidence in Ireland, and this formed volume three of the final report. In the most general terms it recognised low wages as a primary cause of poor housing, thus stepping beyond the prevailing wisdom which placed sanitary and moral reform centre stage. The immediate legislative response to the publication of the report was the 1885 Housing Act, which attracted the usual entrenched opposition from property interests. In the Lords, Weymss and Brandwell, leading figures in the Liberty and Property Defence League, argued that private enterprise would be stifled by state interference in the property market. Lord Salisbury, along with Richard Cross in the Commons, were the principal promoters of the bill. In response to Weymss, Salisbury argued that no one claimed that the principle of *laissez-faire* was violated when the state took something (as with the clearance schemes), only when it gave something.<sup>21</sup> Notwithstanding these philosophical arguments, the bill contained no new principle. Some of the new provisions, however, did have an impact in Ireland despite the fact that Irish housing conditions hardly featured in the debate surrounding the bill. Public loans were made available at 3.5 per cent over 50 years, and its provisions were applied to smaller towns than those covered by the Cross Act. As we shall see below, this spurred some municipal authorities outside the larger cities to undertake the direct provision of housing. Altogether outside of Dublin, 11 municipal authorities built about 570 dwellings during the 1880s, ranging from 90 in Cork to just 3 in Trim, County Meath. As Fraser points out, this meant that prior to 1890 Irish urban housing was municipalised at a rate five times higher than in Britain.<sup>22</sup>

The Housing of the Working Classes Act (1890) marked a decisive break with previous legislation in that it addressed the question of the shortage of housing independent of the issues of slum clearance and sanitary reform. Overall, its provisions were not particularly radical but Part III of the Act allowed local authorities to build houses on green-field sites.<sup>23</sup> The financial

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<sup>21</sup> *Hansard* 3, ccc, 632-65 (31 July 1885). The debate is discussed in Anthony S. Wohl, *The Eternal Slum: Housing and Social Policy in Victorian London* (New Jersey, 2002), p. 247.

<sup>22</sup> Fraser, *John Bull's Other Homes*, p. 77.

<sup>23</sup> The Housing of the Working Classes Act 1890 (53 & 54 Vict. c. 70), Part III.

terms made available were also improved, with loan terms extended to 60 years and the interest rate reduced to 3.1 per cent.

Earlier housing acts, starting with the Torrents Act of 1868, made provision for the compulsory purchase of insanitary dwellings for demolition or improvement and this became a feature of all subsequent housing legislation.<sup>24</sup> Predictably, the notion of compulsory purchase elicited opposition from propertied interests in parliament but the public health agenda swayed the debate. During the second reading of the bill in the Lords, Lord Chemsford argued

let them by all means respect private property; but to what species of property did this measure relate? To houses unfit for human habitation, and which were therefore likely to engender disease. Such houses were unfit for human habitation, either by reason of originally improper construction, or from want of proper repair; and in either case, the fault being in the proprietors or lessees, who had promoted an evil which was beyond the power of the law, it would be monstrous that there should be no power to abate the nuisance.<sup>25</sup>

While this was the first occasion when compulsory purchase was explicitly link to housing, the compulsory acquisition of land by the state and other bodies had numerous precedence going back to the sixteenth century.<sup>26</sup> As Crossman points out, the Labourers Act of 1883 went much further than previous legislation in relation to compulsory purchase in that it enabled rural sanitary authorities to acquire land for cottages on the representation of just twelve ratepayers.<sup>27</sup> Parts I and II of the 1890 Act largely consolidated the provisions of the earlier acts in relation to insanitary dwellings and compulsory purchase. Part III, however, not only allowed municipal authorities to build houses on virgin sites, it gave them powers to acquire land compulsorily to do so. Until the 1930s the issue of compensation, which proved costly when this provision was used, had the effect of deterring most councils from pursuing this route.<sup>28</sup>

This set the template for the provision of public housing in Ireland even after independence, and references to the Act are to be found in Irish housing legislation right through the twentieth century. However, despite this new emphasis on housing provision, slum clearance, sanitary reform and all that these terms implied continued to be the central concern

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<sup>24</sup> Artizans and Labourers Dwellings Act, 1868, (31 & 32 Vict. c. 131).

<sup>25</sup> *Hansard* 3, cxcii, 899-916 (26 May 1868).

<sup>26</sup> William D. McNulty, 'The Power of "Compulsory Purchase" Under the Law of England' in *Yale Law Journal*, xxi, no.12 (June 1912), pp 339-54. McNulty identifies rights to water as the earliest spur to compulsory purchase. Re-building after the Great Fire of London in 1666 involved legislative provision for compulsory purchase as did Dublin's Wide Streets Commission in the eighteenth century. See O'Leary, *Sense of Place*, pp 27-30.

<sup>27</sup> Crossman, *Politics, Pauperism and Power*, p. 151.

<sup>28</sup> See details of a town centre scheme where the compulsory purchase of the site proved very expensive see Fermoy Town Commissioners minutes, 18 August 1897 (CCA, CCCA/UD/FY Minutes 7).



for those involved in devising and implementing housing policy for towns in Ireland. Any exploration of public housing provision in Irish provincial towns over the next half century must assimilate these perspectives.

### **The Labourers Acts**

The legislative developments relating to urban housing outlined above had their genesis and were shaped by circumstances in Britain. The Labourers Acts, however, were uniquely Irish in that they were designed to address the very poor housing conditions of Irish rural labourers and, initially at least, were a political response to the land wars of the early 1880s and the activities of the IPP at Westminster. The debate surrounding the first Labourers (Ireland) Act of 1883, the expansion of the provisions of the Act in subsequent legislation through to 1906, and the manner in which the Acts were implemented all cast light on the parallel, if much less ambitious, programme of state housing in provincial towns.

The Land Act of 1881 marked a redefinition of the relationship between landlord and tenant farmer in rural Ireland by introducing fair-rent control, fixity of tenure and freedom of sale. Rural labourers had not been involved in the land wars of the preceding two years and the Act did little to address their concerns. Some clauses in the Act made reference to the provision of labourers' cottages but, as Fraser point out, 'the terms were too limited and found only minimal application'.<sup>29</sup> Through 1881 and 1882 the growing militancy of labourers found expression in the formation of local labour leagues, mass meetings and strikes.<sup>30</sup> Some of this activity was directed against farmers, a development which Parnell and the Land League recognised as a threat to the united front they sought to present to landlords and to the government at Westminster. Virginia Crossman has made clear the opposition of farmers to taking responsibility for housing agricultural labourers and their particular aversion to granting them plots of land.<sup>31</sup> However, Parnell recognised the necessity of delivering some tangible benefit and spoke in the House of Commons in 1881 in favour of the newly established Land Commission taking responsibility for the re-housing of labourers.

Throughout the summer of 1883 the House of Commons and the Lords discussed the first Labourers Act, introduced initially by the IPP in the spring. The bill received cross party

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

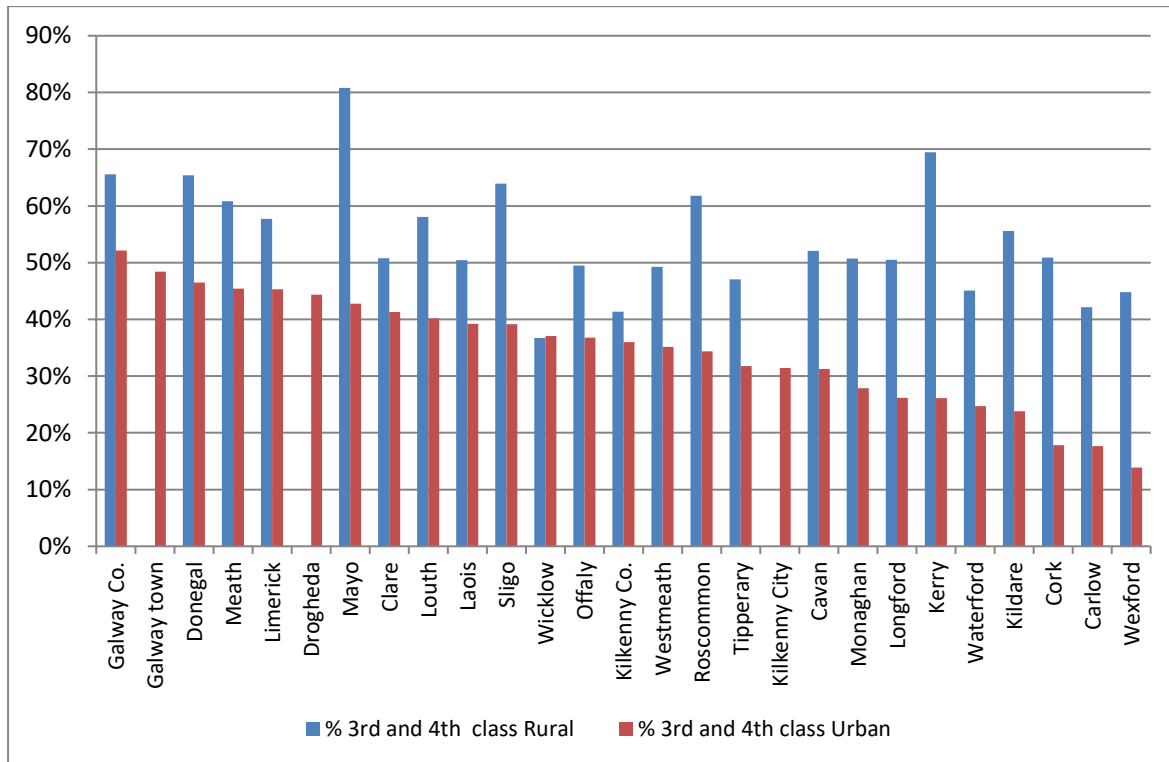
<sup>30</sup> Fintan Lane, 'P.F. Johnson, nationalism and Irish rural labourers, 1869-82' in *Irish Historical Studies*, 33, no. 130 (2002), pp 204-7.

<sup>31</sup> Crossman, *Politics, pauperism and power*, p. 147.

support in both houses with many speakers acknowledging the exceptionally poor state of housing in rural Ireland.

**Figure 3.1**

**Third and fourth class housing in urban and rural areas, 1881**



Source: *Census of Ireland 1881, Vol i – iv*

Fraser has argued that housing conditions in parts of rural England were as bad as those in Ireland and that the adoption of the Act and its subsequent impact was due to ‘political factors’ rather than a concern about addressing housing conditions.<sup>32</sup> Gauldie certainly documents poor conditions across rural England, but more objective measures suggest that the scale of the problem was of a completely different order in Ireland.<sup>33</sup> As shown in Figure 3.1, across most of rural Ireland in 1881 upwards of half of the housing stock was classified as being of either third or fourth class. Based on the classification system we can say that, almost without exception, these houses had three or fewer rooms. Data relating to housing was first published in the English census in 1891 where the number of dwellings with a specified number of rooms was reported at the town and rural sanitary district level. Fraser specifically refers to ‘appalling [housing] conditions’ in rural East Anglia, but an analysis of census returns for rural sanitary

<sup>32</sup> Fraser, *John Bull’s Other Homes*, p. 27.

<sup>33</sup> Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations*, pp 28-57.

districts such as Cosford (West Suffolk), Risbridge (Essex and West Suffolk) and Thingoe (Norfolk and West Suffolk), which appear to have had the poorest housing in the region, shows that dwellings of three or fewer rooms represented just 30 per cent of all dwellings.<sup>34</sup> Poor rural housing, at least as measured in rooms per house/dwelling, were far more ubiquitous in rural Ireland than in rural England and the debate around the Labourers Act reflected this. However, although both Liberal and Tory members of parliament facilitated the passing of the Act, their emphasis on the uniquely poor housing conditions in rural Ireland was, in part at least, informed by a determination to ensure that demands for similar state initiatives on rural housing in England received no oxygen. In this important respect the discourse around the Labourers Act pre-figured the debate on state support for urban housing, particularly in the years 1907-8. Apart from an ideological aversion to providing direct state support for housing or obliging ratepayers to make a contribution, governments at Westminster were acutely aware that the financial implications of acceding to IPP demands for subsidies would be that English municipalities might demand equal treatment.

The establishment of the Congested Districts Board (CDB) in 1891 represents another strand in the pattern of state intervention designed to ameliorate conditions in Ireland. Breathnach identifies the crucial role of chief secretary Arthur Balfour and Constructive Unionism in its promotion and suggests that the role of writers and pamphleteers in raising awareness of west of Ireland poverty 'forced the government to deal with it'.<sup>35</sup> Balfour proved an able advocate for its establishment having conducted a personal tour of the region of 1890 and his experience as Secretary for Scotland impressed upon him the necessity of addressing the conditions that bred rural unrest in Ireland and made him 'acutely aware of the bad example the Irish agitation was setting for the Scottish and English poor'.<sup>36</sup> In two interesting respects the establishment of the CDB and the manner in which it operated differed from the way in which the state's role in housing evolved. Firstly, its establishment was very much a government initiative and did not arise from either local agitation or political pressure on the part of the IPP. In fact, its passage through the house of commons coincided with the Parnellite split and elicited no immediate response from the IPP.<sup>37</sup> Secondly, at local level parish committees were devolved responsibility for the administration of projects, thereby by-passing existing bodies such as

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<sup>34</sup> *Census of England and Wales 1891*, Vol. II [C 6948-I], pp 338-46. Given that this data records the number of dwellings rather than the number of houses, as recorded in the Irish census, the contrast between rural Ireland and rural East Suffolk is even more marked.

<sup>35</sup> Ciara Breathnach, *The Congested Districts Board of Ireland, 1891-1923: Poverty and Development in the West of Ireland* (Dublin, 2005), p. 21.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

Grand Juries, Poor Law Guardians or, after 1899, rural district and county councils. These committees comprised members of the local clergy, landlords and elected ratepayers. Significantly, local shopkeepers were explicitly debarred from membership given their decisive role in the economy of isolated rural communities.<sup>38</sup> Unsurprisingly, Catholic clergy came to dominate the operation of these committees but Breathnach's claim that 'by promoting organisation at community level with parish committees the board broke down pre-existing hegemonies, which in some respects ripened conditions for the running of local government' remains to be fully explored.<sup>39</sup>

The actual implementation of the original Labourers Act of 1883, the successive expansion of the provisions in subsequent Acts and amendments of 1885, 1886, 1891 and 1906, and their cumulative impact pre-figure many of the issues associated with urban housing provision. Perhaps the most significant of these for our purposes is the extent to which housing provision actually addressed the plight of those in the worst conditions. There is a widespread recognition in the literature that by 1914 the Labourers Acts had delivered very substantial benefits for labourers in rural Ireland to the extent that their housing conditions in most areas were now superior to those of small farmers. Indeed Aalen notes that by 1914 'Irish agricultural labourers could claim to be the best housed of their class in Europe'.<sup>40</sup> But Crossman's work makes clear the crucial role of Poor Law guardians as the arbiters over whether particular schemes of cottages were initiated. She links this to the shifting balance of forces on these boards and the growing electoral influence of labourers as the franchise was extended in the wake of the Local Government (Ireland) Act of 1898. Cousins tentatively links patterns of provision with the incidence of Nationalist or tenant-controlled boards.<sup>41</sup> Crossman and Cousin's work, by focusing on implementation of the enabling legislation, places local bodies such as such as Poor Law boards of guardians centre stage. In the area of urban housing it directs us to an examination of the local municipal authorities as the key agencies conferred with the power to shape building public housing under the early housing acts.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>40</sup> F.H.A. Aalen, 'Ireland' in Pooley (ed.), *Housing Strategies in Europe*, p. 141.

<sup>41</sup> Crossman, *Politics, pauperism and power*, pp 159, 166-73; Mel Cousins, *Poor relief in Ireland 1851-1914* (Bern, 2011), pp 154-59.

### **The capacity of municipal local authorities**

Potter describes the expanding role of municipal government in urban Ireland from 1800 as a 'revolution'.<sup>42</sup> Certainly from the 1840s the old order dominated by the Tory and Protestant interests was gradually overturned as part of a wider modernisation and bureaucratisation of public institutions. The Municipal Corporations (Ireland) Act of 1840 and the Town Improvements (Ireland) Act of 1854 precipitated changes in the composition of those elected to municipal authorities and also the range of responsibilities conferred on them.<sup>43</sup> The latter legislation extended the franchise to householders occupying premises valued at £4 or more and codified a set of responsibilities such as public lighting and the cleaning of streets that had featured in earlier provisions. In addition, it enabled municipal authorities to borrow finance secured on the rates in order to invest in public water supplies or to erect public baths and wash houses. Two other pieces of legislation complete the framework within which town corporations and town commissioners operated in the final two decades of the nineteenth century. The first was the Local Government Board Act of 1871 which brought the LGB into existence as a central authority overseeing the operation of the various elements of local government.<sup>44</sup> One of the most important effects at the local level was that Town Commissioners could now more easily break free from the clutches of Grand Juries, which up to that point controlled the construction and maintenance of roads and other public works within town boundaries and had the power to levy rates to finance such work. As Potter points out, the level of supervision exercised by the LGB over municipal authorities was low by modern standards but the relationship could be fraught. This often reflected a tension between officials in the Board seeking to ensure that legislation passed at Westminster was implemented while town commissioners sought to control the level of rates. This tension becomes more apparent as the range of activities undertaken by municipalities expanded in the 1870s and 1880s, in particular when they assumed the role of sanitary authorities under the Public Health (Ireland) Acts of 1874 and 1878.<sup>45</sup> The 1874 Act divided the country into sanitary authorities and conferred on them responsibility for water and sewerage. Boards of guardians were the designated sanitary authorities for rural areas and for towns with populations of less than 6,000. Following the passing of the 1878 Act, smaller towns could apply to assume the role of sanitary authorities and many did so over the following decade. This Act codified the responsibility of

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<sup>42</sup> Potter, *Municipal Revolution in Ireland*.

<sup>43</sup> The Municipal Corporations Act (Ireland) 1840 (3 & 4 Vict. c. 108); The Towns Improvement (Ireland) Act 1854 (17 & 18 Vict. c.103).

<sup>44</sup> Local Government Board Act, 1871 (34 & 35 Vict., c.70).

<sup>45</sup> Public Health (Ireland) Act 1874 (41 & 42 Vict. c. 52); Public Health (Ireland) Act, 1878 (41 & 42 Vict. c. 52).

sanitary authorities regarding water supply and sewerage, street cleansing, slaughterhouses, infectious diseases and burial grounds. It also made provision for the employment of additional staff including a Medical Officer of Health, a Sanitary Officer and Sub-Officer. Ultimately these developments had the potential to increase the capacity of urban municipalities to address both public health and, later on, housing issues in their towns.

It would be misleading, however, to mistake the passing of legislation at Westminster or the exhortations of the LGB on matters of public health for a transformation of conditions in Irish provincial towns. The manner in which municipal authorities in provincial towns responded to these developments in the 1870s and 1880s provides some clue both to their capacity and their stance in relation to increased public spending. Potter describes the growing role of urban local authorities in these years as ‘municipalisation’ and points out that their total expenditure more than doubled between 1866 and 1885, from £463,489 to £1,004,297.<sup>46</sup> Growth in expenditure in provincial towns shows a broadly similar pattern. For 46 towns for which data is available from the LGB annual reports across the period, expenditure grew from £24,459 in 1869 to £37,864 in 1879 and to £53,003 in 1890. While the increase may seem impressive, the level of expenditure in most towns right through into the 1880s was very low.

### **Patterns of expenditure**

Despite the Public Health Acts passed in the 1870s and the additional responsibilities that were conferred on those towns assuming the role of Urban Sanitary Districts, direct expenditure in this area appears to have been quite low. An examination of expenditure of 66 towns in 1890 shows that over half their budgets was absorbed by the paving and lighting of streets and in the payment of rents, salaries and taxes. Less than half of the towns spent anything on ‘water supply’ as recorded in the returns on local taxation for 1890. Although it is difficult to define exactly what this category included it is worth noting that the more prosperous townships around Dublin such as Rathmines and Rathgar, Pembroke and Kingstown expended thousands of pounds, while towns such as Tullamore, Mullingar, Dungarvan, Ballina and Cavan spent nothing. Of the 66 towns, 34 were Urban Sanitary Districts and their local authorities had, in theory at least, assumed responsibility for the range of sanitary issues described above.

It is worth noting, however, that the municipal authorities in 12 fairly substantial towns including Athy, Arklow, Ballina, Castlebar, Longford, Mullingar, Naas, Tipperary and Tullamore

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

through the 1880s and into the 1890s decided against asserting their independence from the local board of guardians, which continued to have responsibility for sanitary matters. The reticence with which the councils in these towns approached the question of assuming additional responsibilities reflected their innate conservatism and their primary concern to maintain rates at as low a level as possible. Arklow Town Commissioners, for example, first considered the issue of applying for Urban Sanitary District status in 1896 but only pursued the matter seriously some thirteen years later in 1909. Although a smaller town, the Town Commissioners of Tuam refused to apply to become an Urban Sanitary Authority throughout the period as this would have obliged them to levy a rate. The decision, as we shall see, had serious implications for public health in the town and for their housing programmes in the early decades of the twentieth century.

For major infrastructural projects such as water, sewerage and housing, Corporations and Town Commissioners turned to Board of Works loans which required approval by the LGB, and it seems reasonable to use the data on loans raised as a surrogate for infrastructural expenditure. In tabulating these loans the annual reports of the LGB state that ‘in both urban and rural districts a considerable part of the expenditure on sewerage, water-supply, and other local improvements is defrayed by means of loans to the sanitary authorities’.<sup>47</sup> Between 1885 and 1914 66 provincial towns from our cohort of 74 towns raised such loans, totalling £1,165,534. For some of the towns much of the increased expenditure between 1879 and 1890 reflected repayments on Board of Works loans. So, for example, 34 per cent of Dundalk Town Commissioners’ expenditure in 1890 consisted of repayment on a loan of £24,000 raised in 1885 to fund a new water scheme.

Figure 3.2 attempts to illustrate patterns of investment in infrastructure and housing by municipal authorities in provincial towns between 1885 and 1914 as reflected in their propensity to draw down loans approved by the LGB. The x-axis represents the wealth of towns in 1891 as measured by their rateable valuation per capita. The y-axis represents their propensity to borrow as measured by the total loans drawn down per capita between 1885 and

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<sup>47</sup> *Annual report of the local government board for Ireland for the year ended March 1900*, [Cd. 338], p. lxii. A table of loans to municipal authorities was published in each year’s LGB annual report. It is apparent that these lists may not be complete as the totals derived from them do not correspond to figures for total loans outstanding published annually by the LGB in the Returns for Local taxation in Ireland. However, for most towns the records of loans drawn down appears to be reasonably accurate and is a good basis on which to calculate levels of investment on the part of municipal authorities. The total loans drawn down between 1885 and 1914 by 62 towns under the Housing Acts of 1885, 1890 and 1908 totalled £555,154 as detailed in the full list of loans sanctioned by the LGB (see, for example, Appendix E, Loans sanctioned to 31<sup>st</sup> March 1914, II, pp 115-18).

1914. Towns to the right, therefore, are 'richer'; towns higher up the y-axis have a greater propensity to borrow. As one might expect, local authorities of 'richer' towns tended to be more open to investment. The higher rateable valuations in these towns in 1885 reflected both public and private investment up to that point and also provided a basis on which future revenue could be generated.<sup>48</sup> Towns such as Dundalk, Birr and Carlow are typical of 'rich' towns in 1891 that experienced above average levels of public investment. On the other hand, Tullamore, Castlebar and Kilrush were 'poorer' towns that invested less than average. The graph's value is that it helps identify some interesting outliers such as Listowel, Tullamore and Kilrush that require further investigation and serve as a pointer to the stance of their urban councils towards the provision of public housing.

The graph also points up a fairly strong regional pattern with towns in Connacht and Munster borrowing proportionally less than those in Leinster and Ulster. Towns such as Ballina (ratio of 2.4), Castlebar (1.3), Carrick-on-Suir (2.5), Nenagh (2.2) and Kilrush (0.4) had few equivalents in Leinster with the exception of Enniscorthy (2.8) and Tullamore (2.0). The relatively small towns of Ulster such as Castleblayney (7.1), Letterkenny (6.4), Clones (6.2) and Monaghan (5.1) all had reasonably substantial loans approved for water schemes. Leinster towns such as Dundalk, Carlow, Longford and Navan invested in both water and housing. These regional trends show up at the provincial level as illustrated in Table 3.1.

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<sup>48</sup> The data on which these comments are based have some weaknesses. The data on loans refer to loans approved by the LGB. It is not clear the extent to which these loans were drawn down. For example, Listowel UDC had a loan of £4,500 approved for housing in 1910 but the loan was not availed of and no houses were built. In a small number of towns the aggregate value of loans approved between 1885 and 1914 is less than the value of loans outstanding and reported in 1914 suggesting omissions in the former. This is the case for Wexford where total loans approved are only £18,600 which loans outstanding are £29,500. The position of smaller towns on the graph may reflect a single loan. For example, Castleblayney UDC had a loan of £7,500 approved for a water scheme in 1907, thus elevating it to its high position. A further issue is the fact that municipal authorities assumed the status of sanitary authorities (and the associated capacity to borrow) at different times. Total loans drawn down by each town, therefore, to some extent reflect the length of time they possessed this capacity to borrow. Arklow is excluded from the data as it only acquired UDC (and sanitary authority) status in 1910.



**Table 3.1**

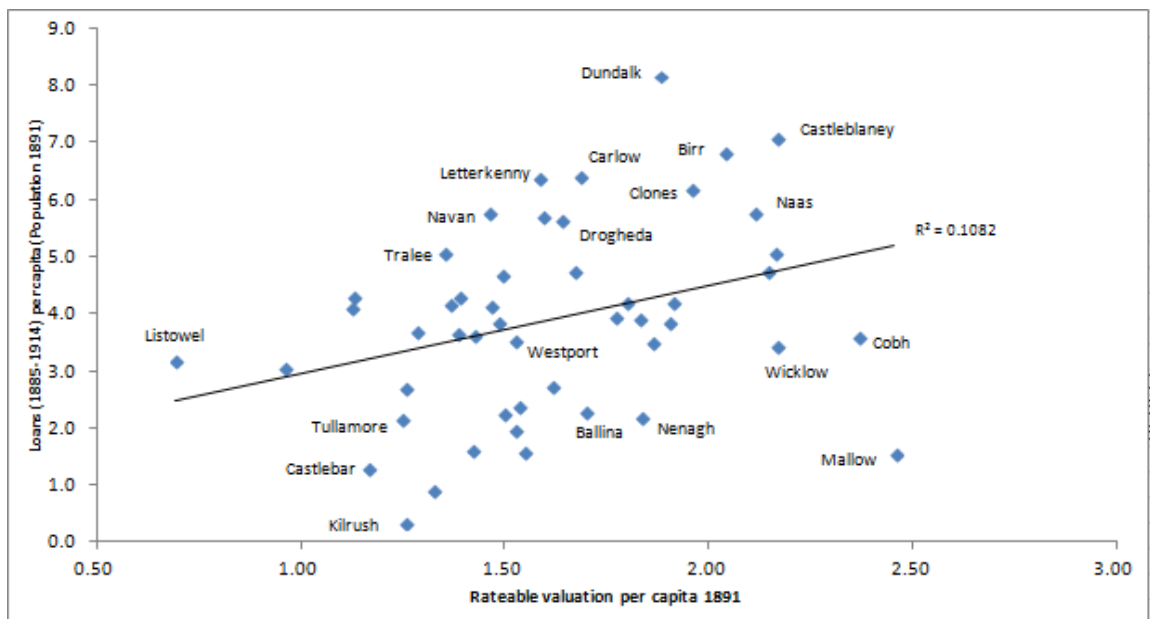
**Loans raised by municipal authorities by province, 1885-1914**

	Total loans (1885-1914)	Population 1911	Ration Loans : Population
Leinster (n=16)	495291	102717	4.8
Munster (n=22)	363527	107148	3.4
Connacht (n=6)	125150	41190	3.0
Ulster (n=7)	73431	13758	5.3
<b>Average</b>			<b>4.1</b>

*Source: Annual reports of the LGB, 1885-1914*

**Figure 3.2**

**The propensity of provincial towns to borrow related to their wealth, 1885-1914**



*Source: Source: Annual reports of the LGB, 1885-1914*

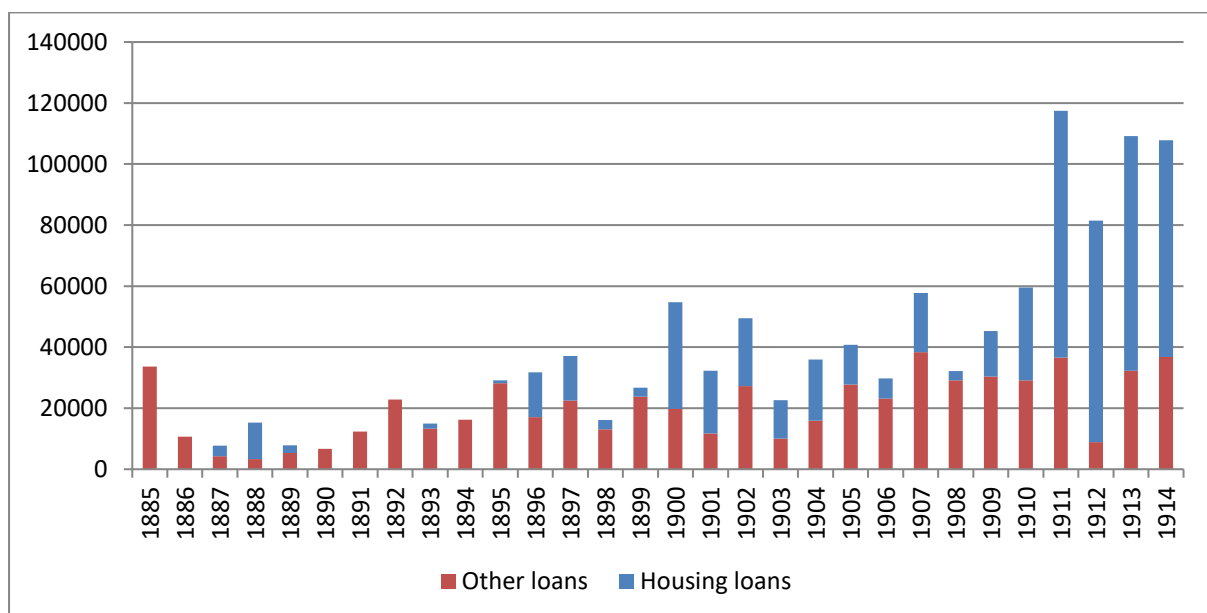
Figure 3.3 shows a trend towards higher levels of investment over the thirty-year period with total loans of £148,299 in 1885-94, rising to £335,941 in 1895-1904 and to £677,294 in 1905-14.<sup>49</sup> Up to 1899 over half of all loans were raised for investment in the provision of water

<sup>49</sup> Some of the increase reflects the additional responsibilities undertaken by towns as they applied for and were granted Urban District Council status as part of the provisions of the Local Government (Ireland) Act of 1898. These included Athy, Ballina, Carrickmacross, Castlebar, Castleblaney, Cavan, Longford, Middleton, Mountmellick, Naas, Nenagh, Skibbereen, Tipperary, Tullamore and Westport.

supplies with a further ten per cent in sewerage systems. 20 per cent of loans were raised for the provision of housing under the Housing of the Working Classes Act. Patterns of investment changed quite dramatically from the late 1890s onwards with housing loans representing 43.6 per cent of all loans in 1895-1904, rising to 51.6 per cent in 1905-14. This pattern underscores the point made earlier in this chapter highlighting the relatively significant scale of direct housing provision by municipal authorities in Ireland up to 1922. Just under 3,500 houses were built in 55 towns (all but about 350 of them before 1915 when Treasury loans were suspended). Of course this represented only a small dent in the scale of the problem outlined in the preceding chapter.

**Figure 3.3**

**Board of Works loans to municipal authorities in Irish provincial towns, 1885-1914**



*Source: Annual reports of the LGB, 1885-1914*

The capacity of municipal local authorities to undertake infrastructural work such as water and sewerage schemes and, ultimately, public housing, was of course constrained by the almost ubiquitous poverty of Irish provincial towns as discussed in Chapter 2. Relatively low property valuations in most towns defined the baseline on which rates could be levied. The borrowing powers of municipal authorities were also constrained by legislation. The Public Health (Ireland) Act of 1878 provided that the amount borrowed by sanitary authorities for the purposes of the Act should not exceed twice the annual valuation of the area involved.<sup>50</sup> Irish Party MPs at Westminster on occasion complained that this limit constrained the ability of municipal

<sup>50</sup> Public Health (Ireland) Act 1878 (41 & 42 Vict. c. 52).

authorities to invest in their towns. In 1900, for example, James Shee, MP for Waterford West, queried whether the borrowing limit 'in many cases preclude[s] these authorities from undertaking schemes for water supply, drainage and the better housing of the poor'.<sup>51</sup> In reply for the government, John Atkinson pointed out that few municipal authorities had approached their borrowing limits. An analysis of their annual accounts appears to confirm this point and identifies a fairly widespread reticence to borrow on the part of municipal authorities, rather than the borrowing limit in the Public Health Act acting as a more significant brake on investment. Put simply, many councils could have been more ambitious in investing in infrastructure and housing in these years.

Table 3.2 presents data from 1903-4 for a number of towns that had been sanitary authorities for at least 13 years and therefore ones that had full responsibility for the provision of water, sewerage and other services under the 1878 Health Act. Of the case-study towns, only Drogheda exceeded the borrowing limits set down in the legislation and this related to the Drogheda Corporation Act (1896) which extended its borrowing powers.<sup>52</sup> Towns such as Carrick-on-Suir, Enniscorthy, Dungarvan and Athlone had significant latitude to raise additional loans but chose not to do so.

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<sup>51</sup> Speech reported in *Longford Leader*, 3 March 1900.

<sup>52</sup> Drogheda Corporation Act, 1896 (59 & 60 Vict. c. 210).

**Table 3.2**

**Loans outstanding and rateable valuation of selected towns, 1904**

Town	Loans outstanding	Rateable valuation	Loans as % of valuation
Clones	8195	5207	157%
Drogheda	79958	24101	332%
Enniscorthy	4236	8147	52%
Fermoy	18197	10618	171%
Listowel	4984	5027	99%
Navan	10411	6450	161%
Tralee	24134	15017	161%
Carrick-on-Suir	415	8796	5%
Athlone	12935	12053	107%
Dungarvan	7329	10202	72%
Dundalk	44267	30170	147%
Ennis	11409	7417	154%

*Source: Returns for local taxation in Ireland, 1903-4*

The fact that those striking the rate in the pound were invariably amongst the town's largest ratepayers meant that the level of revenue generated from rates in the 1880s and 1890s was very low. Some local authorities managed to avoid striking a rate at all, relying instead on income from rents from municipal land and/or tolls. Drogheda and Kilkenny corporations are the best examples of municipalities with extensive land banks, and despite annual expenditure of over £4,000 annually in each case during the 1890s, neither struck a rate until obliged to do so once the Local Government (Ireland) Act came into operation in 1899.

### **Municipal government in transition**

Potter uses the term 'the shopocracy' to describe the class that came to dominate municipal authorities through the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>53</sup> His account of the impact of the more liberal electoral franchise introduced by the Town Improvements Act of 1854 on a group of Irish towns shows Catholic, Home Rule interests gradually taking control by the 1880s.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Potter, *Municipal Revolution*, pp 71-74. The term 'shopocrat' was used as early as the 1830s in Chartist circles and appears in Helen Macfarlane's 1850 translation of Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, where the original German 'kleinburger' is used. See David Black, *Helen Macfarlane: A Feminist Revolutionary Journalist and Philosopher in Mid-Nineteenth Century England* (Oxford, 2004), p. 94.

<sup>54</sup> The Town Improvements Act of 1854 provided for the election of commissioners under a broader franchise (householders with a £4 instead of £5 annual valuation) and from a wider pool of ratepayers (£12 instead of £20 valuation). The £12 stipulation continued to exclude working class membership of

The old landed interests that had controlled town corporations and boroughs into the 1840s in some cases actively opposed the adoption of the 1854 Act, as in the case of Ballina where Colonel Knox-Gore argued that the Act would result in higher town rates.<sup>55</sup> In Tullamore, the adoption of the Act divided opinion, with middlemen interests opposing it. The result was that only the provisions relating to lighting and cleaning were adopted.<sup>56</sup> Although Tuam was one of the first towns to adopt the 1854 Act the decision was opposed by the larger ratepayers on the basis that 'Tuam was simply a market town with no industries or factories' and 'a good deal of decay about it'.<sup>57</sup> In the 1870s the total expenditure of Tuam Town Commissioners, apart from salaries, was just £40 per year for cleaning the streets.<sup>58</sup>

Hester's work on the governance of Leinster towns between 1835 and 1865 shows the membership of the new Town Commissioners as dominated by merchants, shopkeepers and professionals.<sup>59</sup> Although the 1854 Act reduced the property qualification from £20 to £12, the overwhelming majority of commissioners in eight Leinster towns examined by Hester still were occupiers of property valued at more than £20, which would have been a benchmark for a reasonably substantial shop in the town's main street. Hester suggests that

one can picture such a thirty-year old shopkeeper stand importantly outside his premises, or, perhaps, saunter arm in arm with his wife to mass at the local church, secure in the knowledge that he was perceived by his fellow inhabitants as their natural organic town commissioner.<sup>60</sup>

Town Commissioners' minutes consistently record the caution with which they approached increasing spending and their willingness to defer to ratepayer interests.

Drogheda Corporation, with the advantage of having rental income of over £4,000 per year, showed a stubborn determination through the 1880s and 1890s to avoid imposing rates. The corporation fell under nationalist control in the early 1880s and its membership consisted largely of the town's prominent merchants, industrialists and shopkeepers. Between 1884 and 1900 the mayoralty was held by Patrick Connolly (brewer), Richard Kennedy (hotelier), Simon Jordan (merchant), Peter Lynch (merchant) and L.J. Elcock (auctioneer). As outlined in the previous chapter, outside of north-east Ulster, Drogheda was the country's most industrialised provincial town. With hundreds of women employed in the textile industry, its economy had

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municipal authorities until it was removed in 1898. See Towns Improvement (Ireland) Act 1854 (17 & 18 Vict. c.103).

<sup>55</sup> Potter, *Municipal Revolution*, p. 123.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>57</sup> O'Connor, 'A comparative study of local government', pp 76-77.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>59</sup> Hester, 'From corporations to commissioners', Appendix 2.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

more in common with towns to the north than with provincial towns of similar size such as Kilkenny, Wexford and Galway. Through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the town had faced northwards and eastwards with its linen industry tied to that of Ulster and historic links in trade in agricultural produce and food with Newry, Lurgan and Armagh. With high debt repayments and a growing recognition that the town was falling behind its rival Dundalk in terms of investment in infrastructure, the Corporation first considered issuing stock in 1892.<sup>61</sup> In the following year the LGB refused the Corporation permission to issue stock beyond twice the rateable valuation of the town, which then stood at just over £19,000.<sup>62</sup> The dispute hints at the LGB's displeasure at the Corporation's failure to levy rates. Two years later the Corporation's finance committee concluded that 'the necessary steps be at once taken to carry out the financial scheme [and the issuing of stock] as they believe that the imposition of a borough rate is more likely to be thus avoided'.<sup>63</sup> Prominent businessmen in the town lobbied for investment with Elcock, an auctioneer and councillor, writing to the *Drogheda Independent* in 1895 on 'the necessity of stimulating the town'.<sup>64</sup> He pointed out that in the summer of 1893 water supply was restricted to just one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening.<sup>65</sup> A Chamber of Commerce was founded in 1894 and it urged the Corporation to press forward with the Act. At a meeting in October 1895, support for the Act was almost unanimous with only a Mr Harbison opposing on the grounds that he had a 'lack of faith in public bodies'.<sup>66</sup> The managing of the Act through parliament appears to have been quite a costly affair with fees associated with each reading of the bill, together with legal and advertising costs. A fee of £108 is referred to in the *Drogheda Independent* of 22 February for the second reading of the bill, and a fee of £150 for the third reading in the following month.<sup>67</sup> The overall cost of having the Act adopted amounted to the not inconsiderable sum of £1,429<sup>68</sup>

In 1896 the Corporation had the private act passed at Westminster, allowing it to borrow up to £100,000, and this allowed it acquire both the waterworks and gasworks which had been in private hands for a combined price of almost £50,000. The Corporation was eventually obliged to introduce rates as part of the reform of local government after 1898, but

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<sup>61</sup> Drogheda Corporation minutes, 4 May 1892.

<sup>62</sup> See Drogheda Corporation minutes, 3 May 1893 and *Return of Local taxation in Ireland for the year 1892*, [CD 7219], Table XXI.

<sup>63</sup> Drogheda Corporation minutes, 9 May 1895.

<sup>64</sup> *Drogheda Independent*, 23 February 1895.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 October 1895.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 February 1896 and 23 March 1896.

<sup>68</sup> *Annual Report of the Local Government Board for Ireland 1898* [C. 8958], p. 192.

ratepayers were well served by the earlier investment in the gas and water works: both were generating profits by 1900.<sup>69</sup>

Alongside the financial imperatives and economic interests that shaped the activities of municipal authorities during this period, one also has to consider the organisational and cultural factors that influenced the translation of legislation passed at Westminster into actual change 'on the ground' in Irish towns. A reading of town commission minutes across seven different towns shows that varying levels of nepotism, petty corruption and incompetence were endemic. That such was the case is hardly surprising given that the bureaucratisation of local government was a new and evolving process. In addition, the only template for exercising power that the rising shopocracy had, apart from the formal legal framework defined by acts of parliament and instructions issued by the distant LGB in Dublin, was the local experience of living in towns administered by grand juries and the old corporations which Potter argues were characterised by sectarianism, oligarchy and corruption.<sup>70</sup> The report of the select committee on local government in towns, published in 1878, highlighted the moribund state of local governance in some towns and its capture by vested interests in others.<sup>71</sup> Crossman notes that town commissioners in both Mallow and Killarney 'had practically abdicated their functions'.<sup>72</sup> Through 1876 and 1877 evidence had been taken relating to the operation of municipal authorities in the main cities but also in smaller towns such as Newry, Sligo, Cashel, Wicklow and Trim.<sup>73</sup> In the case of Trim it is apparent that much of the property and land of the Town Commissioners had become alienated as it followed the precedence of the earlier corporation in granting long leases at low rents to those connected by family or other ties.<sup>74</sup> Until the implementation of the Local Government (Ireland) Act of 1898 grand juries continued to have responsibility in many towns for roads and public works.<sup>75</sup> As outlined by Crossman, grand juries, particularly in the early decades of the nineteenth century, were a by-word for nepotism and corruption and attempts to reform them generated stiff resistance from in parliament from

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<sup>69</sup> Drogheda Corporation minutes, 21 November 1900. Millward argues that in England 'a driving force behind municipalisation was the desire of local councils to get their hands on the surpluses of these trading enterprises and use them to "relieve the rates"'. See Robert Millward, 'The political economy of urban utilities' in Daunton (ed.) *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, p. 333.

<sup>70</sup> Potter, *Municipal Revolution*, p. 22.

<sup>71</sup> *Report of the local government and taxation of towns, (Ireland)*, H.C. 1878 (262), xvi.

<sup>72</sup> Virginia Crossman, *Local government in nineteenth century Ireland* (Belfast, 1994), p. 69.

<sup>73</sup> *Royal Commission to inquire into Local Government and Taxation of Towns in Ireland, Report, Minutes of Evidence, Appendices*, HC 1876, x (352); HC 1877, xxxix [c. 1787] [c. 1696] HC 1877, xl. 1[c. 1755] HC 1877, xl.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, [c. 1755], HC 1877, xl, pp 167-86.

<sup>75</sup> Crossman, *Local government*, p. 71.

prominent Irish landlords.<sup>76</sup> Their ability to control expenditure and exercise patronage through the grand jury system meant they were its greatest beneficiaries.

Writing in the 1940s, Richard Hilliard, proprietor of a large drapery and shoe business in Killarney, offers some rare insights into the corruption he believes to have been endemic in town councils in the early part of the century. Richard's father, John, was elected to the council, 'most probably put in by the labour vote. As a great employer he was to a certain extent respected.'<sup>77</sup> Hilliard relates his father's opinion that 'the scandal of contracts in the first quarter of the 20th century in Killarney was scandalous but perhaps no worse than other towns in the south'.<sup>78</sup> He quotes a councillor's attitude to the profits to be made from being awarded council contracts as 'a man would be a bloody fool if he did not make money when he had a chance. I am sorry to say that that was the view of most of the town councillors.'<sup>79</sup> Hilliard describes a number of ruses operated by the councillors for their financial benefit. This included reduction in the rateable valuation of certain properties in the town connected to councillors' families. In one instance Hilliard discovered that no rates had been collected on a house and garage allegedly occupied by the mistress of the chairman of the council!<sup>80</sup> In a ruse designed to keep as much tourist business in the town as possible a number of councillors with commercial interests arranged to have the road to Kate Kearney's Cottage at the Gap of Dunloe closed to buses.<sup>81</sup>

Many of the early housing programmes built in towns in the years up to 1915, as we shall see, were blighted by incompetence on the part of all those involved - from town commissioners and councillors, town clerks, to surveyors and builders. Some of this simply reflected local practices being given precedence over statutory regulations and the standards set down by central government. An interesting example occurred in Longford, which merits a footnote in the history of women's suffrage. Each year elections were held to fill one third of Town Commission seats. In October 1894 four candidates were elected to Longford Town Commissioners, but in December a case was brought by two petitioners before the Courts of Queen's Bench claiming that the elections had been conducted in an irregular manner. The petitioners appear to have been anti-Parnellites, while at least three of the four successful candidates were in the opposing camp. The petitioners claimed that the poll had only been open

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 28-41.

<sup>77</sup> Scrapbook containing newspaper cuttings, photographs, documents, letters, programmes etc., assembled by Richard M. Hilliard, page Y (TCD, IE MS 9828).

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.



from 9am to 4pm rather than the twelve hours stipulated in the relevant legislation. In addition, women had been allowed to vote. The respondents admitted that

women were allowed to vote, but this had been the invariable practice in Longford for many years, and no objection was made to it by the petitioners, who were themselves supported by female votes.<sup>82</sup>

The petitioners won the case and the elections were re-run in February 1895. The same four candidates won seats as in the October election. There are no reports as to whether female votes were a feature of this election.

### **Early housing programmes – exploring the rationale**

Figure 3.3 shows that there were distinct phases in the impact of the 1885 and 1890 Housing Acts on municipal activity in the provision of housing. Between 1885 and 1890 there was little happening other than in 1887 when just under £13,000 was secured in loans by town councils including Kilkenny (£7,000), Wexford (£2,500) and Kinsale (£1,800). The response to the passing of the 1890 Act emerged in 1896 when five towns had housing loans totalling £14,730 approved by the LGB – Longford (£5,700), Midleton (£3,230), Kells (£3,000), Wicklow (£1,700) and Skibereen (£1,100). In the following year a similar sum was approved for housing in Kilkenny (£5,360), Fermoy (£4,000) and Wexford (£3,500). It is significant, however, that in 1898 and 1899 only two towns – Drogheda (£5,000) and Thurles (£3,000) - had loans approved and that the first really significant impact of the 1890 Act coincided with the implementation of the Local Government (Ireland) Act of 1898 and municipal elections in early 1899.<sup>83</sup> In the three years 1900-01 to 1902-03 almost £78,000 was allocated in 25 separate housing loans to 20 different towns. While the apparent link between the reform of municipal authorities in 1899 and this upsurge in housing activity merits exploration, it is also of interest to examine in some detail why and how the unreformed councils had implemented the 1890 Act up to that point.

A theme running through the early provision of public housing was that municipal authorities regarded it as an investment that would generate a return for ratepayers or, at the very least, would not be a burden on the rates. This, of course, had implications for the level of rents that could be set and for the economic status of tenants that could be housed. But it is also part of the explanation for their initial enthusiasm for availing of Board of Works loans and assuming the role of public landlords. Fraser notes that Waterford Corporation, availing of a loan under the 1866 Irish Housing Act and in anticipation of making a profit, built 17 terraced

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<sup>82</sup> *Longford Independent*, 22 December 1894.

<sup>83</sup> This data is taken from the annual reports of the LGB for the years 1896 and 1897.

houses at Ballybricken in 1869.<sup>84</sup> While these hopes were not realised, the prospect of a return on investment also informed Sir Charles Cameron's proposals made in 1879. He argued that two-roomed houses could be built without loss and let at rents not exceeding 2s. per week. He accepted, however, that there were thousands of families in Dublin who could afford no more than 1s. 6d. for a two-roomed dwelling and such housing could only be provided through subsidy by the ratepayers.<sup>85</sup> Cameron's view proved to be prophetic as municipal authorities, in the absence of subsidies from the rates and/or the state, generally failed to provide housing at rents affordable for those living in the poorest conditions.

As described in Chapter 2, the quality of housing in Drogheda was amongst the poorest of any provincial town in Ireland with over 40 per cent of the stock in 1901 consisting of one- to three-roomed thatched cottages. Through the 1890s the Corporation was heavily preoccupied with the municipalisation of the waterworks and gasworks, funded through the issuing of stock following the passing of the Drogheda Corporation Act in 1896. Prior to its decision to pursue the passing of the 1896 Act, the Corporation had applied to the LGB to have its borrowing limits raised above the 'twice the rateable valuation' threshold. In doing so it set out plans to build 40 'labourers' dwellings' which it envisaged would generate a net profit of £200 per annum.<sup>86</sup> On that basis the Corporation resolved to 'study carefully the prospect of building houses so that no loss shall accrue on the outage'.<sup>87</sup> In 1898-9 a loan of £20,000 was secured and 62 small cottages were built, mostly at the northern edge of the town at Windmill Road (24) and Patrick Street (26). Rents were set at a relatively modest 2s. and 2s. 6d. per week and, although there is no evidence as to whether the scheme were self-financing, it seems likely a ratepayer subsidy was required.

In Longford, the Town Commissioners were equally fortunate in their proposed housing schemes in that Lord Longford provided sites on 999 year leases at a nominal rent.<sup>88</sup> In early 1895 the Commissioners formulated a plan to build 60 houses, 40 of which would have a living room, scullery and two bedrooms and 20 with a kitchen, scullery and three bedrooms. When discussing adoption of Part III of the 1890 Act, one councillor said 'he understood that the

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<sup>84</sup> Fraser, *John Bull's Other Homes*, p. 74; Labouring Classes Lodging Houses and Dwellings (Ireland) Act, 1866 (29 & 30 Vict. c.44).

<sup>85</sup> *Report of the Royal Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Sewerage and Drainage of the city of Dublin and other matters connected therewith, together with Minutes of Evidence, Appendix, Index etc.* [Cd. 2605], H.C. 1880, xxx, p. 54.

<sup>86</sup> Drogheda Corporation minutes, 8 April 1893.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 January 1897.

<sup>88</sup> *Longford Independent*, 11 August 1894.

scheme would not throw any extra expenses upon the rates'.<sup>89</sup> However, at the same meeting the town clerk presented figures which indicated the larger houses would cost £85 each to build and the smaller ones £75, and at rents of 2s. and 1s. 6d. per week this would involve a subsidy of £276 from the rates.<sup>90</sup> In fact when the tender for the scheme was finally accepted in June 1895 the larger houses were costed at £105 each and the smaller at £85, and the Commissioners were obliged to borrow an extra £1,000 in addition to the £4,700 for which they had initially applied. As early as 1892 Kilrush Town Commissioners were discussing the prospect of building houses under the recently passed 1890 Act. The commissioners received reports from Dr Counihan, the Medical Officer of Health, that the sanitary condition of the houses he inspected 'were in a deplorable condition'.<sup>91</sup> Mr Morrissey, the Town Commissioners' engineer assured the meeting that any houses built under the 1890 Act 'would incur no loss whatever'.<sup>92</sup> Despite this assertion neither Kilrush Town Commissioners nor the Urban District Council which succeeded it built any public housing until the 1920s. Similar sentiments were expressed when Ballina UDC first discussed the prospect of providing housing in 1904. When proposing that a housing scheme be adopted, Councillor Muffeny asserted that 'it is not the intention of any one member of this board that a ratepayer in Ballina should suffer or pay one penny of the cost or expense of these houses'.<sup>93</sup>

As town commissioners and corporations across a number of towns initiated housing programmes through the 1890s, they invariably encountered the difficulty of housing those being displaced by slum clearance while at the same time minimising the level of ratepayer subsidy that the new housing entailed. This mirrored the dilemma faced by the 'five percent philanthropy' movement whose housing associations struggled to generate a financial return when rents were set at levels that the poorest could afford. And the notion of ratepayer subsidy generated its own opposition. Much of this opposition manifested itself at LGB-conducted inquiries that were held when municipal authorities applied to raise loans under the 1890 Housing Act. The format of these inquiries, which invariably received widespread coverage in local newspapers, saw witnesses from the municipal authority, often including the chairman of the body, the town clerk, the authority's solicitor and the Medical Officer of Health provide evidence regarding housing conditions in the town and a statement of the authority's financial status. Those objecting to the loan application were often those whose property was the subject

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 9 February 1895.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 5 May 1892.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> *Western People*, 3 October 1903.

of a compulsory purchase order linked to land earmarked for housing, prominent ratepayers and private landlords. The loan application made by Longford Town Commissioners resulted in such an inquiry being held in the town in March 1895, conducted by R. O'Brien Smith CE, a LGB inspector. Mr Maxwell, the Town Commissioners' solicitor, described the appalling housing conditions in the yards close to the town centre where former sheds and stables were now home to numerous families:

The priests and doctors whose duty brought them there pronounced them to be a disgrace to civilisation. In some of these places there were numerous families living in a single apartment, so many as 13 people had at times been bundled together in a single room. Of course they were in a most insanitary condition, having no privies or other conveniences.<sup>94</sup>

A letter signed by 44 of the town's ratepayers objected to the proposed housing on four grounds. They argued that there was no necessity for additional housing, that the houses were not suited to the requirements of the working classes, that their erection would 'unduly prejudice the property of the ratepayers', and that it would mean a large increase in the burden of rates.<sup>95</sup> The chief spokesman for these ratepayers was Kieran Delaney who owned 39 houses in Chapel Lane, an area of the town consisting of small, two-roomed dwellings where two-thirds of the inhabitants lived in overcrowded conditions.<sup>96</sup> The Town Commissioners' scheme represented a threat both to Delaney as a provider of housing for the poor section of the town's population and as one of the town's largest ratepayers, so his objections, in terms of self-interest, were well founded. Maxwell pressed the Town Commissioners' case by pointing out that Delaney was the subject of legal proceedings regarding the sanitary condition of his property and asked rhetorically 'what arrangements [the objectors] were going to produce in favour of allowing such a disgraceful state of things as now prevailed in Longford to continue to exist'.<sup>97</sup> Later in the spring the LGB approved the Town Commissioners' loan and 40 houses on St Michael's Road and 20 on St Mel's Road were completed and occupied in 1897.

Opposition to early public housing schemes was also evident in Fermoy where it found expression amongst the Town Commissioners themselves and exposed sharp divisions amongst them. It also points to the shifting balance of forces in the town as the Town Commissioners changed position at least five times between 1892 and 1895 on the question of building houses. Fermoy Town Commissioners was one of the first municipal authorities to consider availing of the provisions of the 1890 Act. This initiative may have been prompted by William O'Brien, MP

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<sup>94</sup> *Longford Independent*, 16 March 1895.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Data derived from the 1901 census returns.

<sup>97</sup> *Longford Independent*, 16 March 1895.

for North East Cork in these years, who had a longstanding interest in the housing question. Initial plans were drawn up for quite an extensive scheme of 64 houses in 1892, later amended to 36 houses.<sup>98</sup> There appears to have been extensive lobbying against the scheme by local landlords and leaseholders. At a Town Commissioners meeting in November one of the commissioners, Thomas Magnier, himself a prominent landlord, proposed that further meetings be held with local landlords and that in the meantime 'further proceedings in the matter be abandoned'.<sup>99</sup> The chairman accused Magnier of believing 'there is no necessity for the dwellings at all', while another commissioner claimed Magnier was 'a man who has fattened on the people and wants to block a scheme for their benefit'.<sup>100</sup>

Early in 1894 the Commissioners attempted to resurrect the scheme and arranged a meeting with Sir Robert Abercrombie, the town's principal landlord, with a view to persuading him to provide a loan that would allow them proceed. Although all at the meeting were agreed that 'something must be done' there is no evidence that Abercrombie took any action.<sup>101</sup> In April a Town Commissioners' meeting received a deputation from the towns' 'working classes' urging the commissioners to proceed with a housing scheme. Michael McCarthy, representing the town's plasterers, said that 'it would be most inhumane to have the working classes housed as at present'. The chairman, William Eager, argued that they would be 'neglectful if they did not proceed with the scheme' and added that it had the support of the LGB. Henry Barry, a commissioner and auctioneer (and possibly a brother of one of those whose land had been identified as a possible site for housing) then suggested that the sites chosen were unsuitable, while John Sheehan argued that as a number of ratepayers were unable to pay the existing rates 'they should be slow to put on an increased tax'.<sup>102</sup> Those concerned with the sites chosen and the prospect of higher rates succeeded in defeating the chairman's motion to proceed with the scheme. By 1895 the Town Commissioners were again proposing the 36-house scheme to be spread over three sites. Opposition now focused on notices of compulsory purchase issued to acquire these sites and the levels of compensation sought. Eventually, in 1897, twelve houses for artisans and twelve for labourers were built on two separate sites.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 30 May 1892.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 November 1892.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 January 1894.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 April 1894.

<sup>103</sup> Fermoy Town Commissioners minutes, 18 August 1897 (CCA, CCCA/UD/FY Minutes 7).

### **The public health agenda**

These accounts of early housing public housing schemes in Longford and Fermoy identify some of those whose interests were challenged by the provisions of the 1890 Housing Act. The relatively large scheme in Longford was pushed through by the Town Commissioners despite stiff opposition from some of the town's ratepayers and its private landlords. In Fermoy a minority, and at times a majority, of the Town Commissioners appear to have been in principle opposed to the notion of public housing and aligned themselves with prominent local figures in blocking and ultimately reducing the scale of public housing provision up to 1900. The question arises then as to the identity of the actors promoting public housing at the local level. The 1890 Act had provided a framework for housing provision and few municipal authorities could have been unaware of the sub-standard and insanitary conditions in which some of their populations lived. And yet there was a wide variation in the extent to which the legislation was utilised from 1893, when the first housing loans were approved, through to 1920.

It appears that in the first phase, up to 1898, the public health agenda as promulgated by the LGB at national level and by Medical Officers of Health at the local level was an important factor in prodding municipal authorities into considering the question of public housing provision. From 1898 onwards the wider franchise, delivered as part of local government reform, resulted in poor housing conditions becoming part of the political discourse and, as we shall see, certainly influenced the activities of local councils. The passing of the Clancy Act in 1908 triggered the third phase and mirrored the enhanced provisions of the Labourers Act of 1906. Throughout the whole period, however, the threats posed by 'the slum', whether in the spheres of health or morals, continued to be a prime concern when the issue of housing came to be considered.

The LGB had an oversight but not a coercive role in the implementation of the Health Acts of 1874 and 1878, and over the rural and urban sanitary authorities that had responsibility for enacting their provisions. Periodic surveys of the sanitary condition of towns by LGB inspectors generated a significant volume of correspondence to town commissioners and corporations in which there was considerable reference to poor housing conditions, inadequate and polluted water supplies, and the lack of proper sanitation. An outbreak of cholera in Europe in 1892 affected parts of France and Germany, with upwards of 8,500 dying in the city of Hamburg. This generated a renewed focus on the part of the LGB on the sanitary condition of Irish towns, and inspectors visited all parts of the country to assess their susceptibility to a cholera outbreak. The reports emanating from these inspections were not encouraging. While most focused on inadequate scavenging and suspect water supplies, poor housing was also

identified as a risk factor. The report on Navan is typical of the assessment of many towns.<sup>104</sup> It stated that the sanitary condition of the town was 'far from satisfactory'; that 'water supply from pumps [was] in almost every instance polluted'; that 'owing to the want of a constant supply of water the flushing of the sewers depends on the rainfall'; that 'the housing of the working classes [was] particularly bad' and that 'should cholera be introduced the number of persons attacked would be very large in Navan'.<sup>105</sup> Despite this quite dire warning, the commissioners 'did not come to any final discussion about procuring a water supply or erecting houses and think the ratepayers should be consulted previous to deciding'.<sup>106</sup> Work on the town's first public water scheme did not commence for a further five years and it would be ten years before Navan's first public housing scheme was completed. However, through the late 1890s the town had an active Public Health committee which acted as a Public Health and Housing Committee when the Town Commissioners started to consider building houses in 1898.

Periodic inspections of towns by officials from the LGB or the local authority's own Medical Officer of Health sometimes had the effect of simply educating councillors about conditions in their own town. Prior to 1899 those sitting on local councils as town commissioners were invariably of a different social class to those living in the town's back lanes and dilapidated suburbs. Reports on housing conditions in these areas, when tabled at council meetings, often elicited surprise or even shock on the part of councillors. In preparation for applying for a loan under the 1890 Act, Dundalk Town Commissioners invited an LGB inspector to conduct a survey of the town's housing needs. Subsequently the chairman reported at a Town Commissioners' meeting:

I may state that when Dr Flynn, Local Government Board Inspector, was here Thursday, we accompanied him through the town. We visited all these places; and I never imagined for a moment that human beings were living in such hovels.<sup>107</sup>

Apart from exposing the chairman's lack of familiarity with conditions in the town, later remarks that he made suggest that the local Medical Officer of Health, Dr Sellar, had been less than assiduous in reporting on the scale of insanitary housing in the town. 'The number of houses mentioned in Dr Sellar's representation', he added, 'is nothing at all to the number that is

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<sup>104</sup> *Annual Report of the Local Government Board for Ireland being the Twenty First Report Under the Local Government Board (Ireland) Act, [C-7073]*, p. 21.

<sup>105</sup> Minutes Navan Town Commissioners meeting, 13 December 1892 (MCL NTC/6).

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Dundalk Democrat*, 26 November 1898.

required. There are other areas in the town that require to be replaced as well as those described by him'.<sup>108</sup>

Longford and Navan were 'early adopters' of public housing provision with their councils building 106 and 100 respectively under the 1890 Act up to 1920. This meant that about 12 percent of the housing stock in both towns was council-built by the end of this period. These high levels of activity placed Longford first and Navan third in terms of the number of council houses per capita and can be linked, particularly in the case of Navan, to the pro-active roles played by its Medical Officer of Health and sanitary officers and the influence they appeared to exercise. In Longford the donation of sites for housing at nominal rents by Lord Longford certainly encouraged the Town Commissioners to draw up their initial housing plans in 1894. But their early deliberations centred on issues of public health. In February of that year during a discussion on possible sites, one commissioner suggested 'some of the back yards should be closed for the sake of the health and morality of the people living in them and the townspeople generally'.<sup>109</sup> The minutes of Navan Town Commissioners' Public Health and Housing Committee are one of the few sets of minutes of such a committee in a provincial town that survive for this period. As a result it is difficult to judge how typical Navan was in having a fairly active regime of inspection of the town's sanitary condition and housing. However, it is perhaps significant that towns such as Athy and Ballina, whose councils were relatively inactive in implementing the provisions of the Health Acts, were also late adopters of the 1890 Housing Act and only seriously considered house building after the passing of the Clancy Act in 1908. In Navan, on the other hand, the regular reports on insanitary housing conditions made by the Sub-Sanitary Officer and the Medical Officer of Health to the Town Commissioners and the Urban Council are clearly linked to decisions that resulted in 100 houses being built between 1902 and 1914. Those who occupied both positions from the late 1890s through to 1914 provided vivid descriptions of the appalling conditions in parts of the town and the Medical Officer of Health, in particular, was regularly critical of the inaction of his employers. Their reports recommended the closing up of houses as unfit for human habitation but, given the shortage of housing, this was seldom acted upon. Giving evidence at an LGB inquiry in the town in 1900 in connection with the Council's first application for a housing loan, the town clerk outlined its intention

to put the better class tenant into the new houses and to put those who are wretchedly housed into the houses that the better class tenants

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> *Longford Independent*, 10 February 1894.



would leave, so that the Council would be able to close up those that are unfit for human habitation.<sup>110</sup>

The Urban Council chairman, John Spicer, informed the inspector conducting the inquiry that 'it was the LGB Medical Inspector's reports that made the Council take up the question'.<sup>111</sup> This remark might be interpreted as an attempt to ingratiate the Council with the inspector given that the LGB had reported unfavourably on housing conditions in the town some eight years previously. However, it does indicate that the LGB was active in encouraging municipal authorities to address the housing question. In the years that followed, the council's Medical Officer of Health criticised the 'trickle up' housing strategy described at the inquiry and complained that those in insanitary housing continued to be neglected. Following an outbreak of scarlatina in 1911 in Barrack Lane and Keappock's Lane, two notoriously insanitary areas of the town, he urged the Council to allocate the inhabitants houses in a soon to be completed housing scheme, adding

You can no longer say, as you said before, 'we have no place to put these slum inmates', and I wish to intimate that you cannot shirk this business any longer. Any competent solicitor will direct you how to proceed.'<sup>112</sup>

The Council completed a scheme of 46 houses in early 1912 and while some of the residents of the very poorest parts of the town were allocated houses, Barrack Lane and the adjoining Sandymount continued to be inhabited until the 1930s.

In contrast to Navan, the Town Commissioners in Athy adopted a much more laissez-faire approach to their responsibilities as a Sanitary Authority and the issue of housing featured much less prominently in its deliberation until 1908. In all only 22 houses were built by the municipal authority in Athy up to 1920 despite being a larger town than Navan. This gives it a rank of 48<sup>th</sup> out of the 74 provincial towns that form the basis of this study. At a council meeting in 1903 one of the councillors queried why no report had been received from the Medical Officer of Health for a considerable period. The town clerk stated that Dr Kilbride sent his reports to the LGB on a quarterly basis and these were returned to the council.<sup>113</sup> The council's complacency regarding the sanitary state of the town and its poor housing conditions which subsequent reports described are confirmed by one councillor's remarks at the same meeting commenting on the work of the Medical Officer of Health:

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<sup>110</sup> *Meath Chronicle*, 24 February 1900.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Minutes of Navan UDC meeting, 31 October 1911 (MCL NUDC/M/6).

<sup>113</sup> *Kildare Observer*, 15 August 1903.

I don't think he has much to report just now. The town was never so free from sickness. We have no cases of fever in the hospital. The nurses have nothing to do there now.<sup>114</sup>

Three years later Dr Kilbride was commissioned by the LGB to carry out a comprehensive report on sanitary conditions in Athy. His report stated that almost all the houses in the town occupied by the working class lacked sanitation and 'if the poor people had any place to go [they] should be closed as unfit for human habitation'.<sup>115</sup> Arising from the report, Kilbride issued a series of recommendations which, he claimed, were largely ignored by the town's landlords. He threatened to make no further reports to the Council as it had failed to enforce its statutory obligations. Again, the Council's response was marked by complacency best expressed by one councillor who remarked

we don't want to rush the matter on the landlords, but we expect that they will do their best, and that things will go on in a satisfactory manner. In future we hope the recommendations of the doctor will be carried out in a satisfactory manner.<sup>116</sup>

Partly reflecting this lack of urgency, Athy Urban Council only managed to build 20 houses by 1913. The Council continued to receive correspondence from the LGB regarding the defective housing and sewerage in the urban district arising from visits by the board's medical inspector.<sup>117</sup> And while the Council responded that 'these matters are engaging the attention of the Council, and that the Council is taking steps as rapidly as possible in connection with the housing scheme', it prevaricated over its next scheme and was refused funding by the Treasury in October 1914 due to the outbreak of war.<sup>118</sup>

Ballina provides a further case-study where, despite repeated sharp criticism by the LGB on matters of public health, the Council failed to address both the poor sanitary condition of the town and its poor housing. At the first meeting of the new UDC held on 23 January 1900 the housing of the working classes in the town was identified as a priority by the councillors.<sup>119</sup> A committee was set up to identify sites for building in 1901 but the first houses actually built by the Council, at St Muirdeach's Terrace, were not occupied until 1916. In the early years of the century Dr Laing, the Medical Officer of Health, made repeated complaints to the Council regarding the ineffectiveness of its Sub-Sanitary Officer (SSO). These complaints reached the LGB, which in turn sought the SSO's removal. Despite an outbreak of typhus in the town in 1902

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 8 July 1911.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 26 December 1908.

<sup>117</sup> Athy UDC minutes, 15 September 1913 (Kildare County Library).

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 15 September 1913 and 2 November 1914.

<sup>119</sup> *Western People*, 27 January 1900

and a report from Sir Acheson McCullagh, LGB inspector, that the SSO did not understand his duties, the Council refused to sack him.<sup>120</sup> In early 1904 the Medical Officer of Health described the town as 'insanitary', which the councillors considered 'rather exaggerated'.<sup>121</sup> The following year Sir Acheson McCullagh issued a fairly damning report on the sanitary condition of the town stating that

The lanes and back yards of the town are not kept clean. Heaps of refuse are allowed to remain too long on the streets. Night soil is thrown out on the streets. Pigs are kept in very unsuitable yards. A good many of the dwelling houses of the district are without sanitary conveniences. There is no regular cleaning of privies... The bye-laws are not enforced.<sup>122</sup>

In 1907 Dr Moore acted as temporary Medical Officer of Health and his report on the town on his departure reveal both the neglect of the Council and the less than assiduous manner in which Laing had fulfilled his role, despite his complaints regarding the SSO. Moore's remarks cast light on living conditions in many towns at this time:

There are three diseases very prevalent at present in the town, namely, whooping-cough, measles and broncho-pneumonia. I have also seen some cases of diphtheria and one of typhus which I have just reported. All last summer whooping cough and bronchitis were very prevalent and for that reason the children are dying in numbers from any disease that they are getting now having no stamina to fight against them.

With the passing of the Clancy Act, Ballina UDC finally adopted Part III of the 1890 Housing Act in 1909 which allowed it acquire sites for building independently of slum clearance. However, the Council entered a protracted series of negotiations with occupiers regarding sites around the town, and tenders for 44 houses were only advertised early in 1913. Ballina's lack of endeavour in the provision of housing, similar to the case of Athy, mirrored a complacency regarding conditions in the town. It displayed extreme caution in seeking out sites for housing with the result that a period of sixteen years elapsed from initial discussions and the houses finally ready for occupation. Its fiscal conservatism meant that by 1914 Ballina had the capacity to borrow almost £10,000 and still adhere to the LGB's rules. Navan and Longford, on the other hand, with lower rateable valuations each had loans outstanding that were twice those of Ballina.

Circulars issued by the LGB to municipal councils relating to housing were invariably couched in the language of public health and its inspectors, such as McCullagh, could be scathing

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<sup>120</sup> Minutes of Ballina UDC, 29 October 1902.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 23 January 1904.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 December 1905.

regarding the inaction on the part of councils. In some councils the public health agenda was actively promoted by Medical Officers for Health. The evidence from the minutes and reports of council meetings is not inconclusive, but there appears to be a correlation between councils engaging with issues of public health and those that were 'early adopters' of public housing. Navan UDC is perhaps the best example. However, the correlation may be somewhat spurious and simply reflect the fact that councils that sought to address sanitary conditions in their towns and those that built public housing were simply proactive bodies that recognised the benefits of investment. The ongoing criticism on the part of Navan's Medical Officer of Health of the council's failure to close up condemned housing, despite building new schemes, points to a disconnect between the public rhetoric regarding housing and allocation of housing to those in the poorest conditions.

### **The housing issue and local politics**

The question arises as to whether a lack of political pressure in and on the Council to address the town's housing issues can help to explain its inactivity. It also raises the wider question regarding the impact of local political agitation on the stance of municipal authorities towards public housing provision. Potter notes that elections to the new UDC in Ballina left the old shopocracy in place and that Bernard Egan, a prominent merchant and nationalist politician, continued to act as chairman having served in that role with the old Town Commissioners.<sup>123</sup> A report on the filling of four seats on the Council in an election in 1906 remarked that the electorate was much reduced as 'a little over 400 of the poorer classes having been knocked off for unpaid rates.'<sup>124</sup> One of those to lose his seat was Arthur Muffeny who was one of the few councillors exercised by the housing issue and who had correctly predicted at the Council's first meeting in January 1900 that the Council was destined to prevaricate indefinitely on whether or not to build houses. Ballina's local politics in these years lacked effective leadership on the housing question to confront the vested interests of the town's landlords, particularly for those living in the small, insanitary houses that constituted 40 per cent of the town's housing stock.<sup>125</sup> McNamara's work on the Town Tenants League in the west of Ireland has concluded that 'local branches often served as vehicles for various forms of discontent, which militated against any sustained unity of purpose'.<sup>126</sup> Even allowing for this, the League appears to have been largely inactive in Ballina, compared to neighbouring towns such as Westport, Ballina and Ballyhaunis.

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<sup>123</sup> Potter, *Municipal Revolution*, p. 235.

<sup>124</sup> *Western People*, 20 January 1906.

<sup>125</sup> 40 percent of the town's housing was classified as third class in the 1901 census returns.

<sup>126</sup> McNamara, 'A Tenants' League or a Shopkeepers' League?', p. 148.

There is evidence of some correspondence between the League and Ballina UDC, but a report on a large League meeting in the town in April 1910 provides good insights into the organisation and the conflicting interests it struggled to represent. The meeting was addressed by J.M. Coghlan Briscoe, one of the League's national organisers, and attended by most members of Ballina UDC including its chairman, P.J. Walsh and the doyen of the Council, Bernard Egan. Walsh chaired the gathering, and in an apparent attempt to pre-empt criticism of his own council's inactivity he admitted that 'the [Housing] Act had not been pushed forward with the same amount of vigour as it should. It was deplorable to see the hovels in which poor people had to live in the town'. Seeking to direct attention towards the town's landlords, he added 'it was awful to expect those weekly tenants to pay rent and rates for those miserable little houses and have the town landlords sheltering themselves behind the law'.<sup>127</sup> He described the difficulty in acquiring sites in the Ballina area and, while committing himself to a council-building programme, he suggested the ultimate prize was home ownership 'which would bring peace, contentment and prosperity to many a miserable home'.<sup>128</sup> In the speeches which followed, Peter O'Brien, secretary of the local branch of the League, was less than complimentary regarding the local council and claimed that

while schemes for cottages have been advanced in Westport and Castlebar, it is nothing short of a scandal to find that Ballina Urban Council have done next to nothing so far though aware of the crying need to build decent cottages.<sup>129</sup>

Mr Gilboy, a League activist and chairman of Westport UDC, delivered a not so subtle criticism of the Ballina councillors when he suggested

so much dust had been thrown at election time in the faces of the workers in Ballina that he wondered they were not blind... but it was their bounden duty at the next election to put men on the Urban Council who would provide them with decent housing accommodation.<sup>130</sup>

Of course much of this was little more than rhetoric, as Westport UDC only managed to build ten houses prior to World War I and Castlebar was little better with 25.

By the end of the 1890s over 14,000 cottages had been built in rural Ireland under the Labourers Acts with almost £2 million in loans sanctioned. Under the 1885 and 1890 Housing Acts loans of £475,000 had been advanced for urban housing. Given that just 31 percent of the population lived in towns of more than 1,500 these figures do not suggest any gross imbalance

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<sup>127</sup> *Western People*, 23 April 1910.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

in the treatment of rural and urban areas. When we turn to parts of provincial Ireland, though, the picture is somewhat different as shown in Table 3.3.

**Table 3.3**

**Housing provided through state loans in towns and corresponding rural districts up to 1899**

	Houses built in rural district (Labourers Acts)	Houses built in town (Housing of the Working Classes Act, 1890)
Athy	170	0
Edenderry	26	0
Enniscorthy	198	0
Fermoy	271	24
Kilrush	31	0
Listowel	226	0
Longford	100	60
Navan	270	0
Tralee	156	0
Tullamore	119	0

*Source: Annual report of the LGB, 1890-99, Minutes of Fermoy and Longford Town Commissioners*

Those living in dilapidated and overcrowded conditions in the towns could look with some envy at the level of provision of labourers' cottages in the surrounding countryside where the issue had been adopted by the IPP.

In smaller towns loose groupings of artisans and labourers sprang up and disappeared through the early and mid-1890s, mostly focused on issues of employment. The prevarication displayed by Fermoy Town Commissioners, described above, in pushing forward with their housing plans generated some organised opposition. In 1894 a large public meeting of 'artisans and labourers', together with some commissioners, passed a motion condemning the Town Commissioners for their recent decision to 'veto the erection of improved dwellings under the Housing of the Working Classes Act'. It was pointed out to the meeting that 'they were building houses in Dungarvan where the rates were 8s. in the pound while the rates in Fermoy were only 4s. 6d.'.<sup>131</sup> Ultimately, though, the trajectory of house building in the town does not seem to

<sup>131</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 19 April 1894.

have been influenced by such gatherings. John Cunningham's work on towns during this period shows that 'town labourers were relatively compliant', and it was only the prospect of elections to the new town councils towards the end of the decade that generated increased activity.<sup>132</sup>

Through the 1880s and 1890s in some of the larger provincial towns such as Drogheda and Dundalk, Trades Councils brought together representatives of organised labour to campaign on working conditions and wider social issues. This was also the era of 'new unionism' with the growth of unions devoted to organising unskilled labourers.<sup>133</sup> The combined impact of these developments was that housing conditions, and particularly the conditions endured by urban labourers and industrial workers, began to feature on the agenda of those representing urban working class interests. The traditional role of craft unions and guilds as benefit societies concerned to control entry to the occupations they represented was complemented by a new attention given to wider issues affecting living conditions, including housing. It is important, however, not to over-emphasise the influence of labour organisations at local level on the behaviour of town councils at this time. Following dispiriting defeats in strikes in 1890-91 and the Parnellite split, the initial surge in new unionism atrophied. The majority of those active in, and represented by, trade unions did not qualify to vote in municipal elections. This meant that Trades' Councils and other workers' organisations were reduced to passing resolutions calling for improved housing, resolutions that could be publically adopted by their town commissioners, but ultimately ignored. In 1893 Drogheda Trades' Council successfully sought the support of the Cardinal Michael Logue in petitioning the Corporation 'to provide suitable artisans' dwellings in the borough' but it was a further five years before the Corporation sought its first housing loan.<sup>134</sup> Similar rhetorical support for a resolution arising from a meeting of 'workingmen' in Ennis in favour of 'the better housing of the working classes' was forthcoming from the Bishop of Killaloe. The resolution was subsequently accepted by Ennis Town Commissioners, but no housing loans were applied for until 1901.<sup>135</sup> In 1894 a large May Day demonstration organised by Dundalk Trades' Council, attended by a number of Louth-based labour organisations, called on Dundalk Town Commissioners 'to at once take steps for the erection of artisans' dwellings to replace those condemned by the Local Government Board Inspector'.<sup>136</sup> A housing loan was eventually applied for by the new Urban Council in 1900-01.

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<sup>132</sup> John Cunningham, *Labour in the West of Ireland* (Belfast, 1995), p. 133.

<sup>133</sup> See Emmett O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland, 1824-2000* (Dublin, 2011), pp 50-73.

<sup>134</sup> *Dundalk Democrat*, 20 May 1893.

<sup>135</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 9 October 1896.

<sup>136</sup> *Dundalk Democrat.*, 12 May 1894.

The framing of the Drogheda Corporation Act (1896) provides some insights into the priorities of the local Trades' Council and how it viewed the prospect of having its agenda implemented. From the early 1890s, when the raising of a substantial loan by the Corporation was first mooted, the provision of housing, together with the municipalisation of the water and gas works, an extension of the sewerage system, and improved lighting and paving were the areas identified for investment. However, when the Act came to be discussed by the Trades' Council much of the debate centred on the need to have a clause inserted which would reform the very restrictive franchise which meant that less than 300 ratepayers qualified to vote in elections to the corporation. In February 1895 the Trades' Council made representations to the Corporation seeking to have a reduction in the franchise to £4 included in the Bill, which would result in the electorate being increased to 2,000. Although the majority on the Corporation 'thought they should not jeopardise the bill by the inclusion of this clause', the provision was eventually included.<sup>137</sup> A clause reducing the property qualification for membership of the corporation from £20 to £10 was also included despite some opposition. Councillor Slevin argued that 'if men [possessing property valued less than £20] were admitted they'd soon bankrupt everyone with a bit of property in the town'.<sup>138</sup> Subsequent to the Act being passed in the summer of 1896, the Trades' Council continued to insist that the Corporation prioritise the provision of housing. But it was also aware that even the reformed franchise effectively excluded its members from election to the corporation. The £10 qualification it argued was 'evidently intended to shut out working men from representation'.<sup>139</sup>

### **Impact of the Local Government (Ireland) Act of 1898**

The passing of the Local Government (Ireland) Act in 1898 and the prospect of elections the following year based on a greatly expanded franchise had the effect of recasting the balance of power at local level, at least as perceived in the period leading up to elections. The vote was granted to all male householders and those occupying part of a house aged 21 and over. Women aged 30 or over meeting the same criteria could also vote. The property qualification for councillors was also abolished. Trades' Councils and less formal groups of labourers' associations that had been futilely passing resolutions urging municipal authorities to build houses were now be in a position to influence the composition of the new councils. Evidence from provincial newspapers suggests a burgeoning level of activity on the part of town-based

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<sup>137</sup> *Drogheda Independent*, 23 February 1895.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 March 1896.

<sup>139</sup> *Dundalk Democrat*, 5 September 1896.



working class groups with demands for housing featuring prominently on their agendas. Cunningham, referring to towns in Connacht, suggests that 'it was the capacity of the new Councils to initiate house-building that stimulated labour interest'.<sup>140</sup> Urban labourers may indeed have believed that the newly elected councils would acquire new powers to provide housing associated with the 1898 Act. This misconception may have reflected the almost complete lack of activity on the part of councils in Connacht up to 1898 with the sole exception of Sligo Corporation. It may also reflect the campaign promises of candidates in the municipal elections as they sought to attract the support of newly enfranchised electors.

During 1898 at least some members of municipal authorities viewed the upcoming elections with concern, while others sought to promote their credentials as supporters of working-class interests by identifying with calls for the provision of housing. Some editorials in provincial newspapers expressed the fear that the old order would be completely overthrown and that the new permissive franchise would threaten the councils with financial ruin. In the interests of stability the conservative *Leinster Express* encouraged existing members of councils to put their names forward. Its editor hoped that

Though much strife and enmity is inculcated by leaders of the "new voters", perhaps the very unwise advice will not be followed, and it might yet turn out that these votes have minds and wills of their own.<sup>141</sup>

The *Kerry Weekly Reporter* also seemed to anticipate an overwhelming victory for the 'labour interests' in Tralee. It noted

The labour element... has not been inactive, and we certainly commend them for taking timely steps to avail... of the privileges conferred on them by the terms of the Local Government Act. But the working class in Tralee are far too intelligent and liberal minded to seek to have the new Board constituted exclusively of labour representatives.<sup>142</sup>

The editorial urged support for the 'old, experienced, level-headed men whom years of attention to municipal matters have made past masters of the administrative management of the Board'.<sup>143</sup>

Fears that the old order would be overturned appeared to be well founded, at least in some towns, given the level of activity on the part of Trades Councils, and of branches of the Trade and Labour Association and the Land and Labour Association. The latter had been successful in parts of Munster and Leinster in campaigning for the implementation of the

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<sup>140</sup> Cunningham, *Labour in the West of Ireland*, pp 133-34.

<sup>141</sup> *Leinster Express*, 24 December 1898.

<sup>142</sup> *Kerry Weekly Reporter*, 31 December 1898.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

Labourers Acts, while branches of the former sprang up in towns in 1898 with the prospect of influencing the outcome of the impending elections and having its candidates elected to the new councils. In towns such as Drogheda, Dundalk, Tralee, Killarney, Thurles, Queenstown [Cobh], Roscommon, Ballinasloe and Bandon, lists of candidates pledged to support demands including public housing were agreed at meetings held in the weeks leading up to the elections. In the larger towns such as Drogheda and Dundalk that had active Trades' Councils, the candidates tended to be men who can be identified as activists within trade unions. And the platforms on which they ran were distinctively centred on working-class concerns, including housing. In smaller towns, public meetings held ostensibly to select candidates from the 'artisan and labouring classes' were either dominated by contributions from sitting town commissioners or had their agendas broadened to include issues that went beyond the immediate concern of 'the new voters'. In Tralee a 'largely attended meeting of the working classes', hosted by the Gaelic League, adopted a programme for the elections that included 'to support candidates only who first pledge their support to the Irish language movement'.<sup>144</sup> At a public meeting in Thurles in early January 1899, two out-going town commissioners came to blows when accusations were traded as to who could claim credit for the twenty houses built in the town under the Housing of the Working Classes Act, 1890.<sup>145</sup> At a Trade and Labour Association meeting, held shortly before the elections, the out-going chairman sought to explain why a loan for a new Town Hall had been sought in 1896 before any artisan houses had been built. He also sought to claim credit for the recently built scheme.<sup>146</sup> The out-going Midleton Town Commissioners were one of fifteen who were in a position to point to completed housing schemes. At its final meeting before the election, the chairman there proudly asserted that 'we were the first to avail of the Working Class Act [sic] of 1894 and this scheme was carried out without any cost to the ratepayers'.<sup>147</sup> In Navan, although the out-going Town Commissioners were in the initial stages of acquiring a site for public housing in 1898, a group of candidates under the banner of the National Independent League stated this was mere posturing and claimed 'we now hear a good deal about "Cottages for the Working Man" but not much heretofore'.<sup>148</sup>

It is certainly understandable why out-going commissioners and councillors were keen to advertise their commitment to the housing question; it consistently headed the list of

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<sup>144</sup> *Kerry Sentinel*, 14 December 1898.

<sup>145</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 6 January 1899.

<sup>146</sup> *Nenagh Guardian*, 11 January 1899.

<sup>147</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 3 January 1899.

<sup>148</sup> *Meath Chronicle*, 14 January 1899.

demands drawn up at meetings of the 'new voters' in the weeks immediately preceding the elections. The consistent message was that 'up to this point the voice of the labourer had been ignored', and this was invariably followed by a reference to inadequate housing as in Queenstown where it was claimed 'there was not a decent house for the working man'.<sup>149</sup> The trend in housing loans and the number of towns securing such loans shown in Fig 3.4 indicates a significant increase in 1899, with seven towns securing loans of over £34,000. This might suggest that the result of the municipal election in January of that year, with working class and trade union representatives elected for the first time, spurred councils into action on the housing question. This may be partially the case, but many of the loans secured in 1899 and 1900 reflected council decisions made two or more years earlier. An indication of the lapse between the decision on the part of a municipal authority to build houses under the Housing of the Working Classes Act, the securing of a loan, and the actual building of the houses is evident in Navan and Killarney. Navan Town Commissioners first considered the matter in the summer of 1898 and a number of possible sites were discussed in September.<sup>150</sup> In February 1900 a housing inquiry was conducted by the LGB in connection with the UDC's application for a loan, and the loan was approved in August 1901. In February 1902 a field on the Kells Road was acquired and plans for 20 two-storey brick houses were drawn up. Building commenced in the summer of 1902 and applications for tenancy were invited in the following November. The difficulty in securing a site, an issue discussed further below, certainly extended the gap between the initial proposal to build and the scheme's final completion. In Killarney the outgoing Commissioners adopted part 3 of the Housing of the Working Classes Act (1890) in September 1898, and the new council secured a housing loan in November 1900. Most of the scheme was completed in 1902. Similarly, in Dundalk, the substantial loans secured in 1900 and the 70 houses built can in fact be traced back to late 1898 when the Town Commissioners adopted the Housing of the Working Classes Act.<sup>151</sup> Overall, it appears that by far the greater part of the £62,273 secured in loans in 1899 and 1900 (see Table 3.5) funded housing the plans for which had been put in place before the critical elections of January 1899. This suggests that the relatively high level of provision of public housing in provincial towns in the years 1899 to 1901 owed less to the influence of councillors elected under the banner of various working-class organisations than might be anticipated. Instead, it reflected the strategy of the members of some of the old pre-1899 municipal authorities as they sought to appeal to the numerous newly enfranchised voters who threatened to sweep away their control of town governance. The

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<sup>149</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 5 January 1899.

<sup>150</sup> Navan Public Health and Housing Committee minutes, 22 September 1898 (MCL NTC/HHC/1).

<sup>151</sup> *Dundalk Democrat*, 26 November 1898.

result was a short term spurt in house completions in the early years of the new century but not the sustained commitment to public housing that the rhetoric of the 1899 elections implied.

Potter's analysis of the outcome of the January 1899 elections highlights many of the gains made by what he terms 'local Labour parties'.<sup>152</sup> In Drogheda, the three Trades Council candidates topped the poll in each of the three wards and were elected as senior aldermen. In Dundalk, candidates sponsored by the Trade and Labour Association took 8 of the 18 seats, and in Killarney the result was described as a 'great Labour victory' with candidates supported by the local Labour Association winning 7 of the 12 seats.<sup>153</sup> In Listowel seven of the twelve councillors elected had labour affiliations.<sup>154</sup> In the years that followed, though, a group of councillors committed to keeping a tight rein on expenditure gained control and the labour influence faded. The council was faced with quite high rates, usually over 12s. in the pound with over half of this accounted for by the poor rate.<sup>155</sup> When a housing scheme was proposed in 1910, the LGB refused to sanction a loan, and while various proposals were discussed in the years up to 1914 the councillors insisted that 'we have no intention or desire that the ratepayers should suffer over the project'.<sup>156</sup> Ultimately, no public housing was built in Listowel until the 1930s.

More typical election results were recorded in towns such as Tralee (4 labour-related councillors out of 21), Clonmel (4 out of 24) and Bandon (5 out of 18), towns where candidates on labour-supported lists won small but significant numbers of seats. Overall, though, the apprehension expressed before the elections in some newspaper editorials and by some sitting town commissioners and councillors that the extended franchise would visit chaos and upheaval on the governance of Irish towns proved unfounded. In the election's aftermath the editorial in the *Leinster Express* heaved a symbolic sigh of relief when admitting that 'it was feared, and not without reason, that the overwhelming "labour" vote would alter the composition the entire composition of our governing bodies'. It had been anticipated that 'where labouring men candidates presented themselves they would be accorded the undivided support of their brother labourers'. Instead, it continued 'this has not been the case in many instances, and labourers as candidates have been relegated to ignominious positions on the results lists'.<sup>157</sup> Even in towns where labour-supported candidates secured seats, the old shopocracy described

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<sup>152</sup> Potter, *Municipal Revolution*, pp 200-05.

<sup>153</sup> *Kerry Weekly Reporter*, 21 January 1899.

<sup>154</sup> J. Anthony Gaughran, *Listowel and its vicinity since 1973* (Dublin, 2004), p. 23.

<sup>155</sup> See *Local taxation (Ireland) returns. Returns of local taxation in Ireland for the year, 1910-1911* [Cd. 6084], pp 18-21.

<sup>156</sup> *The Kerryman*, 21 October 1911.

<sup>157</sup> *Leinster Express*, 21 January 1899.

by Potter continued to be the dominant influence. Drogheda's three senior aldermen soon became frustrated at the Corporation's progress on the housing question, and in February 1900 Alderman Keeley complained that 'they [the Corporation] had found money to pay for the gas and waterworks and to concrete the streets but the housing scheme, the most important of all, had been left for last'.<sup>158</sup> In fact the Corporation failed to build any further houses, beyond those planned prior to 1899, until 1911.

Although, as Cunningham points out, some local organisations that were formed to campaign in the municipal elections continued to exist after January 1899, their concerns were not homogeneous and there is little evidence that they succeeded in persuading the newly elected councils to initiate public housing schemes.<sup>159</sup> Between 1899 and 1901 fifteen towns secured housing loans totalling £53,270, which resulted in 397 houses being built. We can assume that the initial proposals relating to these loans were formulated in the period leading up to the January 1899 elections. On the other hand, twelve towns secured loans for the first time in the years 1902-04, totalling £38,410 and ultimately funding 175 houses. These loans are more likely to relate to plans for housing first proposed in the post-election period. Then in the following two years, 1905-06, loan approvals almost ceased, with only Dundalk (£2,000) and Youghal (£1,500) securing funding which resulted in just twenty houses being built. This data would tend to support the view that the perceived threat of the labour interest in the pre-election period had greater impact in persuading the old municipal authorities to address the housing issue than had the mostly limited number of 'labour supported' councillors on the new councils.

### **The Clancy Act (1908)**

Figure 3.4 provides a good overview of the trends in the level of housing loans approved and the number of provincial towns active in building public housing between 1885 and 1919. In particular, it highlights the significant upturn in housing provision from 1909 onwards. Fraser's account of shifts in the balance of power in Westminster and the adoption of urban housing as a key issue for the IPP sets the relevant context.<sup>160</sup> The Liberal Party, with an overwhelming majority following the general election of December 1905, determined not to pursue the issue of Home Rule given the certain vetoing of any legislation by the House of Lords. In these

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<sup>158</sup> *Drogheda Independent*, 24 February 1900.

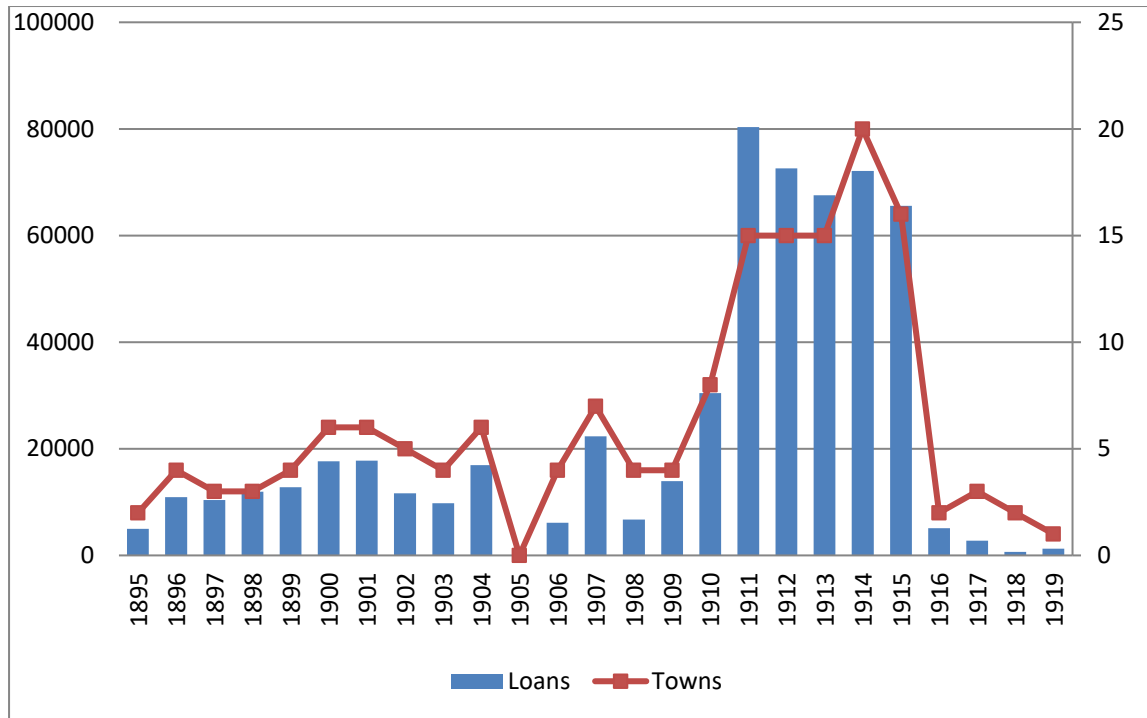
<sup>159</sup> Cunningham, *Labour in the West of Ireland*, pp 134-35.

<sup>160</sup> Fraser, *John Bull's Other Homes*, pp 40-45.

circumstances the IPP was obliged to concentrate on the amelioration of economic and social conditions to continue to secure its political support.

**Figure 3.4**

**Levels of housing loans secured and number of towns securing loans, 1885-1919**



Source: *Annual reports of the LGB, 1885-1919*

The IPP's first substantial success was the Labourers Act of 1906, which secured an unprecedented level of state subsidy for rural housing with a dedicated loan fund of £4,250,000. The 1907 annual report of the LGB sets out the financial benefits, with the Treasury meeting 36 per cent of loan repayments. This meant that rural authorities could generally rent at less than 1s .6d per week with no loss to the ratepayers.<sup>161</sup> It was anticipated the new Act was capable of funding the provision of up to 30,000 rural cottages. The Act had a dramatic, if not immediate, effect. Between 1903 and 1906, 4,475 cottages were built. This actually fell to 4,013 in the years 1907 to 1909, but in 1910 to 1912, as the provisions of the Act worked their way through the system, 14,594 cottages were provided.

<sup>161</sup> *Annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland, for the year ended 31st March, 1907*, 1907 [Cd. 3682], pp xxxvii-xxxix.

Despite the anticipation of some town commissioners and councillors that public housing would generate a surplus for the ratepayers, a report on the operation of the Housing of the Working Classes Act, published in 1906, showed that of the 34 towns that had completed public housing schemes, 24 were sustaining losses.<sup>162</sup> These averaged about £1 16s per house per year or 8d. per week. The essential problem was the extreme difficulty in obtaining economic rents from those in low wage and casual employment who were most in need of re-housing. Even in the case of Drogheda, where the Corporation owned the sites and built relative cheap two- and three-roomed houses, an annual loss of about £2 10s per house was incurred because rents were set at low levels. In Fermoy the council sustained a loss of £40 per year on the 24 houses it had built in 1896-7. It was only in exceptional circumstances that a surplus was generated. The 84 houses built by Kilkenny Corporation produced an annual surplus of £71, which reflected in part the fact that it owned the sites on which the schemes were built. In Navan, the original intention was to set rents at 3s. per week for the 24 houses in its first scheme built in 1901-02. However, the council's Public Health Committee recommended that 'as we consider it against the principle of equity to ask the occupier to pay for houses which ultimately become public property we recommend that the proposed rent be 2s. 6d. per week'.<sup>163</sup> In fact this scheme was one of the few to generate a surplus as the site contained a gravel pit from which the council could sell sand and gravel.

The scale of the losses being sustained by municipal councils on their housing stock were relatively small in relation to their overall expenditure. For example, Longford UDC made a loss of £91, but this was in the context of total expenditure of more than £2,500. Dundalk's loss of £216 represented only 1.3 percent of its expenditure. However, by 1906 there were three factors that placed the issue of state subsidy for urban housing centre stage. The first was the unprecedented scale of the subsidy for rural housing that had been secured as part of the Labourers Act of that year. The second was the clear evidence now available to municipal authorities that the provision of housing invariably imposed a burden on the rates. While the size of that burden was small, the optimistic scenario of profits being generated from housing, envisaged by many town commissioners and councillors when planning the early schemes in the 1890s, had by 1906 proved to be unfounded. This meant that any initiative to emulate the obviously successful rural housing programmes under the Labourers Acts would place an additional burden on urban ratepayers. This has to be set against a newly emerging threat to

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<sup>162</sup> *Housing of the working classes act: A return showing particulars as to the return of Local Authorities in Ireland under the Acts, compiled to 31<sup>st</sup> day of March, 1906*, [Cd 337], pp 12-29.

<sup>163</sup> Navan Public Health Committee minutes, 10 June 1901 (MCL NUDC/HHC/1).

the hegemony of the IPP at local level in the form of Sinn Féin, with some prominent defections to that party in 1906 and 1907.<sup>164</sup> Sinn Féin councillors on Dublin Corporation, such as Thomas Kelly and William Cosgrave, may have opposed the notion of housing subsidies from Westminster, but the IPP nevertheless needed to demonstrate its legitimacy as a genuinely national party representing all interests, including those of the urban working class.<sup>165</sup>

As Fraser makes clear, however, the forces ranged against the IPP's campaign for an 'urban subsidy' were formidable. Chief amongst them was the understandable apprehension of the Treasury of creating a costly precedent that would encourage large municipal authorities in Britain to push for similar treatment. Early in 1908 a private members Housing Bill, devised by J.J. Clancy, MP for North Dublin, proposed the diversion of £5 million from the Irish Post Office Savings Bank and the setting up of an Irish Housing Fund to provide an annual subsidy of £40,000. The Liberal government refused to countenance subsidy of this level but throughout 1908 Clancy negotiated with the Treasury, seeking to manufacture a compromise. In December the Irish Housing Act, known as the Clancy Act, was passed. Its provisions relating to subsidy represented a significant retreat on the part of the IPP with an Irish Housing Fund receiving about £6000 per year from the proceeds of £180,000 of investments in the Suitors Fund and from the Dormant Suitors Fund.<sup>166</sup> The IPP had invested heavily in the issue of urban housing, so it was now obliged to trumpet the provisions of the Act as a victory rather than the minimalist concession on the part of the Treasury it actually represented. John Redmond, in a remark that revealed much about the party's pursuit of the issue, claimed that 'with the great question of the Housing of the Working Classes practically settled, the decks are clear for Home Rule'.<sup>167</sup>

Apart from the question of subsidy, the 1908 Act did include a number of provisions that ameliorated the financial terms available to municipal authorities. These included the exclusion of loans for housing as reckonable in determining the limits of council's borrowing capacities, the deferral of the repayment of interest on loans for the first two years, the extension of loan periods in some circumstances to 80 years, and the improvement of loan terms to match the lowest rate available from the Local Loans Fund. Figure 3.4 shows that the Act had a quite significant impact, with the level of loans secured by provincial towns rising from £43,000 in the three years 1907-09 to £183,391 in 1910-12. But despite the improved financial terms in the Clancy Act, it is possible to argue that the upturn in public housing provision had

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<sup>164</sup> James McConnel, *The Irish Parliamentary Party and the Home Rule Crisis* (Dublin, 2013), pp 57-58.

<sup>165</sup> Fraser, *John Bull's Other Homes*, p. 87.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>167</sup> Quoted in Fraser, *John Bull's Other Homes*, p. 90.



rather more to do with politics than economics. An appendix to the Dublin Housing Enquiry of 1913 shows that most municipal authorities were sustaining losses on their housing programmes, despite the subsidies available through the Act.<sup>168</sup> However, the IPP's political investment in urban housing meant that it had to be seen to promote the Act and encourage town councils to avail of its provisions. Even before the Act was passed, heightened expectations were evident in council's discussions on housing. In March 1908 Drogheda Corporation members resolved that 'if passed into law it will enable public bodies throughout Ireland to erect spacious and sanitary dwellings for the working classes and remove the many filthy and unsuitable hovels in which a large proportion of our people are compelled to dwell'.<sup>169</sup> Within weeks of the Act being passed in December 1908, councils across the country were giving consideration to the Act, suggesting a level of coordination on the part of the IPP in seeing its claimed victory in Westminster reap a political dividend.

Translating these discussions into plans, tenders and houses was, in most cases, quite a protracted process. Exploring developments in two provincial towns casts light on the factors at local level that both promoted and resisted the provision of dwellings. Athy UDC, despite coming under sustained criticism from its own Medical Officer of Health regarding conditions in the town, had ignored the possibility of building public housing under the 1890 Act. However, in February 1909, a council meeting heard impassioned arguments in favour of availing of the provisions of the Clancy Act and in support of the building of fifty houses. Proposing the motion, Councillor Michael Malone, a member of the Town Tenants League, claimed 'it was the most important motion that has ever been moved in this room'.<sup>170</sup> In addressing the meeting he displayed a detailed knowledge of the provisions of the Clancy Act. He went on to castigate the council for its inaction to date and accused the town's landlords of 'lighting their pipes' with the sanitary orders which the council had served on them regarding their slum property. Supporting the proposal, M.E. Doyle made the astute observation that 'the erection of houses for the labouring classes would create a healthy competition with the landlords, and make them build and keep houses so that people can live in them'.<sup>171</sup> Although supporting the spirit of Malone's motion, the council favoured a much more cautious approach, with Thomas Plewman of Woodstock House, a prominent local landlord, arguing that too many council cottages had been built in the hinterland and that Carlow UDC had sustained substantial losses on their housing.

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<sup>168</sup> *Report of the Departmental Committee into the Housing Conditions of the Working Classes in the City of Dublin*, 1914 [CD 7273], Appendix xxxvi.

<sup>169</sup> Drogheda Corporation minutes, 18 March 1908.

<sup>170</sup> *Kildare Observer*, 6 February 1909.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

He suggested 'an experiment' of five or ten houses. Through 1909 the council was divided as to whether it should apply for a loan of £6,000 to build forty houses or a loan of £3,000 to build twenty. By the summer of 1910 it was decided to build sixteen 'better class houses' across two sites and five labourer's cottages across at Meeting Lane, close to the town centre. A second phase, with twelve 'better class houses' and eight labourer's cottages was also agreed and the £6,000 loan was applied for in November. The high cost of a town centre site at Meeting Lane resulted in over £100 being added to the cost of each of the five houses built on the site, thereby underlining the difficulty associated with clearing and redeveloping town centre sites when landlords and leaseholders could claim relatively high levels of compensation. Tenders were awarded for the building of the houses in July 1912 after a protracted wrangle between the council and the LGB, which refused sanction for water closets as these would discharge sewerage directly into the River Barrow. Eventually 22 houses were built, 17 of which were six-roomed dwellings let at 5s. per week. The new tenants included the vice-principal of Athy's technical school, the widow and family of a prominent shopkeeper, the senior clerk in the post office and a maternity nurse.<sup>172</sup> The houses were occupied in the summer of 1913, at which point the council began considering proposals for a further 40-house scheme. Perhaps in recognition of the fact that the first scheme had proved extremely costly and had largely consisted of six-roomed dwellings attracting higher rents, the new scheme would contain 35 three-roomed houses with 'no water supplies or water closets to be estimated for'.<sup>173</sup> Although the council moved ahead quite rapidly in drawing up plans for this new scheme and published invitations to tender in June 1914, the outbreak of war in August intervened. A £7,000 loan was sought from the Board of Works in September, but two months later the council was informed by the secretary of the Office of Public Works that 'the Lords Commissioners of His Majesty's Treasury have intimated that they are not disposed to grant loans during the present crisis'.<sup>174</sup> No further schemes were undertaken in Athy until 1924 when eight cottages were built. The financing of the first scheme of 22 houses proved expensive for the council. A report drawn up by the town clerk in 1915 showed that annual loan repayments amounted to £338, with a further £30 for maintenance and rent collection. Rents totalled £220, representing only 60 percent of the economic rent. In addition, the council received £70 subsidy from the Irish Housing Fund, so the ratepayers contributed £78.

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<sup>172</sup> This information is sourced from Athy UDC minutes of 20 March 1913 and from 1911 census returns.

<sup>173</sup> Athy UDC minutes, 16 June 1913.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 November 1914.

The pattern of events in Athy from 1909 to 1914 shows that despite the promotion of the Clancy Act by some councillors, proposals to address the town's chronic shortage of housing – almost 35 percent of its population lived more than two to a room in 1901 – were approached with great caution by the council and encountered resistance from landlords and leaseholders of property in the town. The scheme that was eventually built did little to address the town's housing needs and the inclusion of six-roomed houses appears to have reflected the council's perception that 'better quality' houses were less likely to be a drain on its finances. Back in March 1909, when the scheme was initially being considered by the council, Thomas Plewman argued that 'a cheaper house would be a great loss on the rates, and a larger house less of a loss'.<sup>175</sup> The high levels of compensation that the council was ultimately obliged to pay for the acquisition of sites meant that all of the houses in the scheme were relatively expensive and that the Clancy Act had much less impact in Athy than in many other towns in the years up to 1922.

Data from the 1901 census shows that Tuam had amongst the poorest housing stock of any provincial town with 50 percent of dwellings consisting of small, thatched cottages. After the passing of the Local Government Act of 1898, Galway County Council advised Tuam Town Commissioners to apply for urban council status as this would relieve it from responsibility for sanitary issues in the town; however, they refused.<sup>176</sup> Assuming urban council status would have involved striking a rate and the Town Commissioners, which derived most of its income from tolls collected on the extensive fairs and markets held in the town, was resolutely opposed to that prospect. In 1907 the St Vincent de Paul built fifteen houses in Tuam, but it soon emerged that many of them had fallen into the hands of middlemen with the original tenants selling their interests. The controversy around this issue highlighted the role of middlemen in the town and the significant profits to be made from sub-letting small, insanitary dwellings.<sup>177</sup> The Commissioners took no immediate action following the passing of the Clancy Act, despite its provisions being portrayed positively in an editorial in the *Tuam Herald*. Instead, they asked Tuam Rural District Council to build cottages in the town. In November 1911 James Daly, clerk of Tuam poor law union and a Sinn Féin commissioner, proposed the adoption of part 3 of the 1890 Act and that the commissioners should build fifty houses for artisans. The chairman, James McDonnell, a wealthy farmer and businessman, questioned 'were they really required in Tuam?' as the Rural District Council had built cottages on the edge of the town. It was pointed out that

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<sup>175</sup> *Kildare Observer*, 6 March 1909.

<sup>176</sup> O'Connor, 'A comparative study of local government', p. 163.

<sup>177</sup> *Tuam Herald*, 12 October 1907.

only four had been built. A report in the *Connacht Tribune* the following summer entitled 'Some stories of Tuam's under-world' described dozens of houses in the Barrack Street, Tierboy and Cloontoa area where 'large families were occupying a single room and old sacks fastened on crossbars served the purpose of partitioning off a small corner in which a bed, stretched on the cold, damp floor, served as the only family resting place'.<sup>178</sup> In proposing a 50-house scheme in March 1912, Daly urged that the housing needs of skilled men in the building trade and those working on the railways needed to be addressed as many with families were living in overcrowded lodgings.<sup>179</sup> An LGB enquiry was conducted in February regarding the raising of a loan and the acquisition of sites. A letter of support for the scheme from the Archbishop of Tuam, Rev John Healy, was read although local priest, Fr. McDermott, which suggested that 'for the sake of security they should go for a lesser scheme'.<sup>180</sup> The LGB sanctioned 30 houses to be built at two locations, on Ballygaddy Road and Dublin Road, and in October 1913 the LGB sanctioned a loan of £6,000. The contract for £5,250 was awarded to a local builder called John McNally and the two two-storey terraces, McHale Terrace on the Ballygaddy Road and Parkmore Terrace on the Dublin Road, were completed in the spring of 1915 and tenancies were allocated that May.

There are three issues relating to Tuam Town Commissioners' first scheme that cast light on public housing provision in the pre-1922 period. The first relates to the quality of the housing provided, the poor supervision of the construction, and levels of incompetence and petty corruption in the local authority. Although the plans for the two terraces in Tuam were of standard construction – two up/two down, built of concrete – the LGB inspector's report submitted to the Town Commissioners in January 1916 catalogued a series of problems. The report pointed out that the builder had departed from the plans by building stud and lathe internal partitions rather than concrete, that many of the houses were damp with cracked plaster and ill-fitting doors and windows, and that the drainage at the Parkmore Terrace site was inadequate with the yards flooded with waste water that flowed onto the street.<sup>181</sup> A further report in December 1916 identified the use of lime plaster and pebble dash on the external walls of the McHale Terrace houses as 'not sufficient to prevent moisture getting through the walls'.<sup>182</sup> In response to an LGB survey of the town in 1919 the Commissioners themselves admitted that they were 'finished with building schemes for some time; the last one

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<sup>178</sup> *Connacht Tribune*, 29 June 1912.

<sup>179</sup> *Tuam Herald*, 16 March 1912.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> Tuam Town Commissioners minutes, 4 January 1916 (Galway County Archives)

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 December 1916.

wasn't such a success'.<sup>183</sup> Although McNally claimed to address these problems, the tenants engaged in a rent strike in 1920 and 1921 in protest at the continuing dampness and flooding.

At one level Tuam's first housing scheme benefited from the expertise of one of its commissioners – James Daly who was clerk of the Tuam Union and had considerable expertise in communicating with the LGB. He displayed an excellent working knowledge of the various Housing Acts at meetings and was the driving force behind the initial application for funding for the scheme. On the other hand, both the actual building phase and the subsequent administration of the scheme displayed poor management and even petty corruption that was not untypical of local authorities in these years. The initial plans for the houses specified concrete interior walls, but these were changed to stud and lathe by the engineer employed by the commissioners without reference back to the LGB. The builder failed to construct these walls properly and considerable remedial work had to be carried out after the tenants took up residence. In 1917 the auditor's report pointed out that the town clerk had failed to lodge the rents from the new houses for several months but, instead, paid the wages of men working on the roads.<sup>184</sup> Ten years later the same town clerk still occupied the position. When due to assist in conducting the annual audit for 1927 he absconded with the accounts, showing £144 in revenue that had not been lodged to the Town Commissioners account and £78 in insurance stamps owed to employees. The auditor then concluded 'the clerk has not a proper conception of his duties and responsibilities and that he is quite unfit for the position'.<sup>185</sup>

Instances of nepotism and maladministration in connection with housing are evident in all the case-study towns and appear to substantiate Hilliard's remarks based on his experience in Killarney. A few examples from Fermoy UDC in the early years of the century are typical. In 1907 the council was drawing up plans for a 28-house scheme. At a meeting in November, at which only five councillors attended, a Mr O'Mahony was appointed engineer and clerk of works for the scheme.<sup>186</sup> At a subsequent meeting one of the councillors objected to this appointment as it had not been advertised and the chairman was a foreman in O'Mahony's employment. The objector, however, found no support.<sup>187</sup> Some months later, when the details of the scheme

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<sup>183</sup> *Tuam Herald*, 10 January 1920.

<sup>184</sup> Tuam Town Commissioners minutes, 11 December 1917.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 September 1928. When the clerk indicated he was unable to repay the money he owed, the Town Commissioners proposed an imaginative solution when suggesting the Department of Local Government and Public Health pay him a pension. The suggestion did not find favour in the Department but is revealing regarding the commissioners' view of central funding and their toleration of poor management and the misappropriation of public funds.

<sup>186</sup> Fermoy UDC minutes, 29 November 1907 (CCA, CCCA/UDC/FY Minutes/16).

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 December 1907.

were submitted to the LGB, it was found they contained a basic arithmetic error. In adding up the cost of 11 artisan cottages (£1,925) and 17 labourers' cottages (£2,700) the submission gave a total of £3,645 rather than £4,645. As a result, six labourers' cottages were cut from the scheme.<sup>188</sup> And finally, when the council required a new solicitor, Mr Troy was elected to the position by a 6 to 5 margin with the assistance of his father's vote who was a sitting councillor.

Tuam Town Commissioners' refusal to apply for urban district status and assume the responsibilities of a sanitary authority were at least partly responsible for problems with their first housing scheme. The lack of adequate drainage related to the complete absence of sewers and drains beyond the main streets and reflected a lack of investment in the sanitary infrastructure of the town. Sewerage from McHale Terrace seeped into adjoining lands resulting in neighbouring property owners threatening to sue the Town Commissioners. This illustrates the impact of disjointed urban administration as Town Commissioners had responsibility for urban housing under the 1890 Housing Act, but, as they were not sanitary authorities, water supply and sewerage fell under the control of poor law unions and, later, county councils. The result was interminable 'book passing' between Town Commissioners and the County Council.<sup>189</sup>

### **'Suitable tenants'**

The third insight arising from the story of Tuam's first public housing scheme relates to the allocation of tenants to the Town Commissioners' houses in 1915. When the scheme was initially discussed the term 'artisans' dwellings' was used consistently and the difficulties encountered by relatively well-paid men in the town in obtaining suitable accommodation was the context in which the proposal to build 30 houses was put forward. At a public meeting in November 1911 the local curate stated that 'while they have done their part by the labouring classes they will now set about alleviating the distressful conditions of the artisans in the towns'.<sup>190</sup> Under the Labourers Act, the Rural District Council had built 33 houses on the outskirts of the town, but only six of these were within the urban boundary. However, these houses allowed the

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 6 April and 14 April 1908.

<sup>189</sup> A typical example occurred in 1922 when Tuam Town Commissioners passed a resolution calling for a new sewerage system for the town. When the issue was raised at Tuam Rural District Council the chairman remarked that 'we will approve of any suggestion they may make provided they are willing to pay for it'. In the circumstances where the Town Commissioners' revenue largely consisted of monies raised from the farming out of tolls and customs and amounted to only £650 a year, both parties were fully aware that calls for new infrastructure for the town was little more than rhetoric. This flaw in the administration of the town assumed a higher profile in the 1930s as the housing question became a key issue alongside the establishment of the sugar factory.

<sup>190</sup> *Connacht Tribune*, 25 November 1911.

Commissioners assume that the housing problem for labourers was being addressed by the Rural District Council when in fact most of those living in the poorest housing in the town were non-agricultural labourers. Of the thirty houses allocated to tenants in 1915 we can ascertain the occupation and marital status of about half. Six had RIC connections, included the sergeant from Shrule, three local constables and two RIC pensioners. Two were single women, and other houses were allocated to a teacher, a railway clerk, a slater, a stonecutter, and a master baker.<sup>191</sup> In 1911 none, apart from the stonecutter and his family, lived in overcrowded conditions or in houses that may have been condemned. The scheme was explicitly built for 'artisans' and it is clear that no residents from the Barrack Street, Tierboy or Cloontoa areas described above was catered for. Reporting on the state of housing in the town in 1919 a LGB inspector remarked that, despite an increasing population, the number of houses in Tuam was decreasing 'owing to the number that were allowed to fall into ruin and mainly occupied by the labouring class'.<sup>192</sup>

In terms of who could apply to become a tenant of a house built by a municipal authority, neither the 1890 nor the 1908 Acts offer definitions of 'working class'. However, the 1903 Housing Act, even though it did not apply to Ireland, included a definition which became a reference point in council discussions when questions of eligibility arose:

... mechanics, artisans, labourers and others working for wages; hawkers, costermongers, persons not working for wages but working at some trade or handicraft without employing others, except members of their own family, and persons other than domestic servants whose income in any case does not exceed an average of 30s. a week.<sup>193</sup>

This gave local authorities very wide scope when granting tenancies as very few skilled workers, shop assistants, clerks, teachers or policemen could aspire to earn more than 30 shillings per week. In both Athy and Tuam the first public housing schemes were largely tenanted by skilled workers in steady employment who were in a position to pay rents that were generally beyond those living in the poorest housing conditions. The appendices to the Dublin Housing Inquiry provide a breakdown of the public housing built by Irish municipal authorities up to 1913 as to whether the houses were allocated to artisans or labourers, although this distinction had not been made in the legislation. Reporting across towns was very even: about half of the 2,273 houses tenanted at that time were described as being occupied by labourers. However, the data in the same report outlining levels of rents in each scheme suggests that housing for labourers represented only a minority of dwellings. In Tralee, for example, of the 88 houses built up to

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<sup>191</sup> 1911 Census Returns, Tuam Urban.

<sup>192</sup> *Tuam Herald*, 10 January 1920.

<sup>193</sup> Housing of the Working Classes Act, 1903 (3 Ed. VII, c. 90).

1913, 64 are reported as being occupied by labourers. However, only ten of the houses there were let at less than 3s. 6d. per week which would have been beyond the level that labourers could afford. In Nenagh, the eighteen houses built by the council were let at 3s. per week and the comment describing the class of tenant noted, 'rents excessive for labourers. Occupants – police, teachers, com[mercial] agents and few artisans'.<sup>194</sup> In Dungarvan, of the 45 houses let by the UDC, 25 were let to 'artisans and labourers', the remainder to 'policemen &c.'.<sup>195</sup> Towns such as Arklow (12), Ballinasloe (32), Castlebar (25) and Westport (10) built houses under the Clancy Act which were all let at rents of 3s. 6d. or more. By 1913 Navan UDC had built 84 houses and reported that all but six of them were let to labourers. Cross-checking tenants names against the 1901 and 1911 census suggests that about half were labouring families but with a good number of clerks, council and hospital staff as well. Councils, of course, had a strong incentive to appoint tenants who were in secure employment and less likely to default on their rents. Some required those applying for tenancies to have ratepayers post sureties on their behalf. Such was the case in Navan. When considering tenants for its first housing scheme in 1902, Navan UDC rejected an applicant, stating 'not satisfied to have family as occupiers', implying a lack of 'respectability'.<sup>196</sup> In Fermoy in November 1915 the councillors interviewed all 37 applicants for the ten houses they were about to allocate. While the definition of 'working class' was a permissive one, a significant clause in the 1890 Act debarred those in receipt of outdoor relief from being tenants of council housing. The stipulation tends not to feature in council documentation as applicants would have been aware of it but the provision is certain to have acted as a barrier to those in some of the poorest housing.

Apart from occasional remarks regarding potentially 'unsuitable' tenants, it is difficult to uncover evidence regarding councillors' attitudes to housing those in the poorest existing housing, many of whom were not in regular employment. Patterns of allocation of tenancies, though, give us some clues. Half the houses built between 1890 and 1913 were designated for 'artisans' and much of the remainder, designated for labourers, were set at rents levels the poorest could not afford. Navan UDC, along with Longford, was the most pro-active council in building houses prior to 1922 and, proportionately, appears to have housed more labouring families than most other towns. Yet, much of the very poorest housing in the town remained untouched. Councillors were constantly made aware of the desperate housing conditions in parts of the town thanks to their very active Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Ryan. In 1913 the

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<sup>194</sup> *Report of the Departmental Committee into the Housing Conditions of the Working Classes in the City of Dublin*, 1914 [CD 7273], Appendix xxxvi, p. 374.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p.372.

<sup>196</sup> Navan UDC Health and Public Housing committee minutes, 22 December 1922 (MCL, NUDC/HHC/3).



council purchased the military barracks in the town with a view to housing residents of condemned dwellings in nearby Barrack Lane and Sandymount. It was envisaged that this could be done with little alteration to the barracks and that rents could be set at 2s. or less. However, the LGB insisted that only five families could be accommodated and that significant alternations would have to be made to the building. The UDC balked at this and councillors criticised Dr Ryan when he returned to the plight of those in condemned houses. Following an inspection, he stated they were 'far worse than pig sties and a disgrace to Navan'.<sup>197</sup> One of the councillors remarked 'these houses are in Barrack Lane for the past 25 years, and were no better and no worse'. The chairman added 'looking at these houses it strikes one that there will always be such people. Dr Ryan does not understand the ways and means but really we are doing our best'.<sup>198</sup> Navan UDC had certainly done more than most to house the town's working class and by 1913 the ratepayers were subsidising its housing schemes to the tune of £242 a year. But the comments outlined above reflect were, one can reasonably speculate, widely held opinions as to the futility in attempting to provide housing for those who had little prospect of paying economic rents. The 3,500 houses built by municipal authorities in provincial towns up to 1920 certainly had an impact on housing conditions, varying from town to town. But a disinclination to over-burden the rates by subsidising uneconomic rents, a preference for 'respectable' tenants, and a usually implicit belief in the meme as expressed in Navan that 'there will always be such people' meant that thousands of condemned houses remained standing, and inhabited, when most building ceased in 1915.

### **The 1919 Housing Act and housing surveys**

In January 1919 urban councils and town commissioners were invited by the LGB to submit housing plans to coincide with the passing of a new housing act. Of course the entire context in which these proposals were tabled had been transformed since 1914 when the last substantial loans for housing were approved. The Easter Rising, the end of the war and the stunning Sinn Féin victory in the 1918 general election meant that the political objectives of the British government regarding housing went well beyond questions of public health or appeasing the Irish Parliamentary Party. The ill-fated Irish Convention, which brought together British, Home Rule and Unionists interests during 1917-18, represented an attempt to reach an agreed constitutional settlement. Housing figured quite prominently in its deliberations and before it collapsed in disagreement in early 1918 the British Treasury had agreed to provide £5 million

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<sup>197</sup> *Meath Chronicle*, 29 March 1913.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

over ten years as a subsidy to a Home Rule government's housing fund.<sup>199</sup> By 1918 British government thinking was also influenced by two other related considerations – the requirement to address the housing needs of demobilised soldiers after the war, often referred to as 'homes for heroes', and the need to quell working-class unrest inspired by the Russian Revolution. All of this would involve conceding the principle of subsidies for working-class housing in Britain for the first time and, inevitably, considerable State expenditure. The 1919 Housing (Ireland) Act when it was published set a target of building 50,000 urban cottages over a three-year period.<sup>200</sup> The political ground, however, was shifting in Britain and, of course, to an even greater extent in Ireland. Sinn Féin was declared a proscribed organisation in the autumn of 1919 and, together with the Labour Party, went on to gain control of the vast majority of local authorities in the local elections of January 1920. During 1919 Dáil Éireann, dominated by Sinn Féin, had recommended that local authorities apply for funding to the LGB under the 1919 Housing (Ireland) Act, despite the fact that these funds would obviously come from the British Treasury. This position reflected Sinn Féin's need to maintain the alliance with the Labour Party and organised labour, which placed housing high on their agendas. By the summer of 1920, with IRA units active in different parts of the country, the Cabinet in London insisted that local authorities in Ireland give their sole allegiance to the Dublin Castle administration, while Dáil Éireann insisted that they swear allegiance to it. This effectively ended the prospect of any houses being built under the 1919 Housing Act. Ultimately only 30 dwellings were built in Ireland, outside of north-east Ulster, under the Act.

The housing survey carried out by many municipal authorities in 1919 at the behest of the LGB provides some useful information on how councils viewed the housing question in their own towns and also underlines how keen they were to avail of the more generous subsidies it promised. In total, the surveys identified a need for 42,000 new dwellings. In Athy where the council had only managed to build 22 houses before the war, within the space of a few weeks in September and October 1919 it drew up plans for 200 new houses across ten different sites and proposed raising a loan of £200,000.<sup>201</sup> Urban councils that had been more active in building houses up to this point appear to have taken a more considered approach, Navan and Longford being the best examples. In January 1919 Navan UDC's housing committee put forward proposals for the building of 93 houses on three sites while, in October, Longford UDC submitted

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<sup>199</sup> Fraser, *John Bull's Other Homes*, p. 179.

<sup>200</sup> Housing (Ireland) Act 1919 (9 Geo. 5 c. 45).

<sup>201</sup> Athy UDC minutes, 15 September and 28 October 1919.

plans for 34 houses.<sup>202</sup> In Ballina in early September the UDC criticised the financial provisions of the 1919 Act and unanimously decided to build no houses as doing so 'would impose a burden on the rates of the town for 60 or 70 years'.<sup>203</sup> By November the council was discussing a 250-house scheme but demanding that increased subsidies should mean that the cost to the ratepayer should be no more than 1d in the pound. In Drogheda the stark nature of the housing crisis in the town was exposed in the survey carried out by the Corporation in connection with the 1919 Act. The borough surveyor reported that 200 houses had fallen down in the previous ten years, with a further 640 houses 'rapidly approaching dilapidation'.<sup>204</sup> His suggestion that 'for an immediate scheme of about 224 houses a loan of over £100,000 would be required and for a general scheme of 850 houses about £500,000 would be necessary' was accepted and a loan for that amount was requested from the LGB.<sup>205</sup>

The ambitious plans put forward by municipal authorities in 1919 reflected a number of factors. Impending local elections in January 1920 no doubt encouraged councillors to address the housing question, particularly in the context of fairly widespread militancy on the part of trade unions and other labour organisations. Council minutes at this time are replete with reports of wage increases to staff being conceded.<sup>206</sup> The Labour Party committed itself to running candidates in all local authorities. The plans also reflected the more generous subsidies that the 1919 Act offered, although all shades of public opinion in Ireland from the Ulster Unionists to the IPP demanded equality with English municipal authorities who, it was perceived, would benefit from more favourable terms. The formulation finally arrived at in the autumn of 1919 regarding subsidies was that for every £1 collected in rents, a £1 5s. subsidy would be payable by the Treasury. This would rise to £1 7s. 6d. for authorities with particular challenges. Perhaps this may have inspired councils such as those in Athy and Ballina to promote expansive schemes when, up to 1914, they had been relatively subdued in addressing their housing problems.

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<sup>202</sup> Navan UDC Housing Committee minutes, 10 January 1919 (MCL, NUDC/HHC/3); *Longford Leader*, 18 October 1919.

<sup>203</sup> Ballina UDC minutes, 3 September 1919.

<sup>204</sup> Drogheda Corporation minutes, 15 January 1919.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>206</sup> See, for example, Ballina UDC minutes, 5 November 1919.

## **An overview**

Underlying all of the above is the fact that the 3,500 houses built by local councils under the 1890 and 1908 Housing Acts constituted about 5 percent of the housing stock of provincial towns in 1922. This can be set against the fact that up to 30 per cent of houses were classified as third or fourth class, based on data from the 1901 census.<sup>207</sup> And, of course, the level of activity on the part of municipal authorities was highly variable. Appendix 5 provides a complete breakdown of building activity across all 74 provincial towns up to 1922 and highlights that variability. Patterns of provision were shaped by the interplay of the factors discussed in this chapter. These include shifting balances of power at local level, the influence of individual councillors and council officials such as Medical Officer of Health, the financial capacity of councils to raise loans, and their administrative capacity to manage their affairs. What we can say quite definitively is that the pattern of provision was only weakly related to actual housing conditions. This point is well made by Figure 3.5 which charts the proportion of third and fourth class houses in 1901 against the level of public housing provision prior to 1922 in the fifteen case-study towns. Towns such as Longford, Fermoy and Enniscorthy ‘over-performed’ in terms of provision, while Kilrush, Listowel, Edenderry and Tuam ‘under-performed’. Of the four case-study towns that built no houses, Clones is typical of Ulster towns which, in general, had superior housing stocks compared to the rest of the country as outlined in Chapter 2. From the 1901 census returns we know that in the case of Kilrush and Listowel, both towns had areas of poor and chronically over-crowded housing. In the case of Kilrush, the council appears to have largely neglected its responsibilities as a sanitary authority and ran up significant losses of over £2,000 on the operation of its gas works.<sup>208</sup> In 1913 the council was threatened with a default order by the LGB due to the deficient water supply in the town and it continued to refuse loans for housing until an approved system was put in place. Ongoing disputes between the UDC, the Rural District Council and the LGB prevented any investment in a water scheme until potential funds became unavailable due to the war. A scheme was finally adopted in 1925 but no public housing was built in Kilrush until the 1930s. As discussed above, high rates, a refusal on the part of the LGB to sanction loans, and a determination to control expenditure meant that Listowel was also one of the few medium-sized UDCs that failed to build any public housing in these years.

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<sup>207</sup> 28.1 percent of houses were classified as third or fourth class in the fifteen case-study town in 1901 based on data extracted from B.1 forms.

<sup>208</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 5 September 1912.

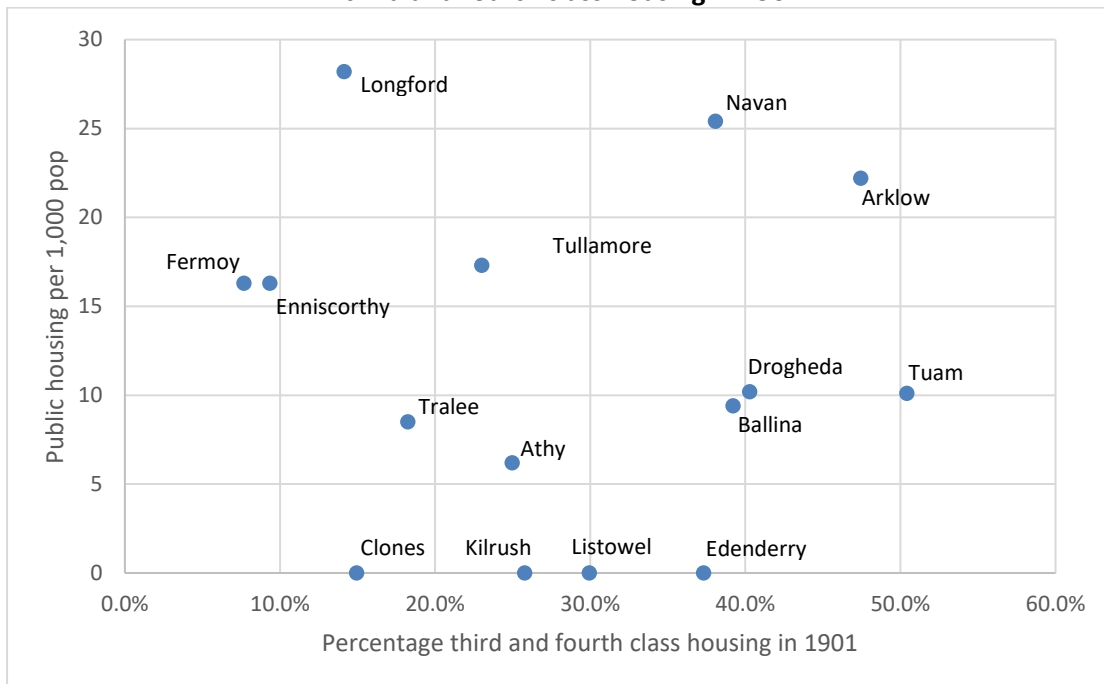
What does this pattern of provision say about the notion of the benevolent state? The Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890 and the Clancy Act of 1908 provide the legislative framework that give expression to the state's role. These provisions need to be set alongside the legislation relating to public health, such as the Public Health Acts of 1874<sup>209</sup> and 1878, as the state's involvement in housing was itself framed within a sanitary agenda. Part III of the 1890 Act may have marked the first step towards general housing provision but the LGB's interaction regarding housing with municipal councils and the discourse within councils themselves was dominated by the issue of insanitary housing. LGB inspectors, on occasion with the support of local Medical Officers for Health, urged councils to address poor housing conditions in their towns as illustrated above in the case of Ballina, Navan and Athy. Both sanitary and housing legislation was permissive, reflected in both the varying levels of investment in water and sewerage infrastructure and in the provision of public housing in provincial towns. Patterns of provision tend to undermine the notion of the benevolent state at the local level. As Figure 3.5 illustrates, the housing stock in Ballina was significantly inferior to that in Longford, yet the former council built almost three times more houses per capita than the latter. Navan and Drogheda had equally poor housing yet Navan UDC's rate of housing provision was more than twice that of Drogheda Corporation. The notion is also undermined by patterns of allocation of new housing in all the towns examined. The belief adopted by local councils that a 'trickle up' policy, whereby allocating houses to 'respectable' applicants would free up housing for those in the poorest dwellings, conveniently aligned with their need to secure the interests of ratepayers by securing solvent tenants. Its failure to address the needs of those in the poorest housing, as noted above by Navan Medical Officer of Health, underlines the critical role of competing local interests in understanding the implementation of state policy.

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<sup>209</sup> Public Health (Ireland) Act 1874 (37 & 38 Vict. c. 93).

Figure 3.5

Public housing provision prior to 1922 v proportion of third and fourth class housing in 1901



Source: *Census of Ireland, 1901, Pt I, Vol. I-IV; Annual report of the DLGPH, 1929-30, Appendix xxxix*

Compared to the transformative impact of the Labourers Acts on housing conditions in parts of rural Ireland in these decades, the impact of the Housing of the Working Classes Act (1890) and the Clancy Act (1908) on provincial towns was much more limited. 3,500 houses were built by municipal authorities in provincial towns up to 1922 compared to 48,000 cottages in rural areas. Nevertheless, a dozen councils in medium sized and larger provincial towns built more than 15 houses per 1,000 population, which is equivalent to levels of provision under the Labourers Acts across much of rural Ireland. Some municipal authorities were spurred into action by the prospect of working class votes and candidates in the 1899 elections. Others viewed council housing as a financial investment while some were confronted by repeated urgings of their Medical Officers of Health and LGB inspectors to act. Councils in these towns demonstrate the scale of what was possible and, conversely, expose the decisions of many councils to ignore or take a minimalist approach to the opportunities the housing acts offered. The expansive housing plans drawn up in the context of the 1919 Housing Act in part reflected what remained to be done.

## Chapter 4

### New Beginnings, 1922-32

*It is clear that the provisional government cannot adopt any policy of financial assistance which may involve the future government of Saorstát na hÉireann in financial commitments extending over a long period of years; and the minister is confident that local authorities will not expect any such policy to be announced at this juncture.<sup>1</sup>*

In March 1922, just weeks after the Dáil voted in favour of the Treaty and the British authorities vacated Dublin Castle, W.T. Cosgrave was in communication with municipal authorities across the country announcing that £1 million was being made available as an Exchequer subsidy for housing. Six weeks earlier, as Minister for Local Government, he had received a deputation from the Association of Municipal Authorities in Ireland (AMAI) demanding that the provisional government address the housing issue immediately by making available subsidies at a more generous level than those in the 1919 Act. As discussed in the preceding chapter, housing assumed a high profile in political discourse in the turbulent years between 1918 and 1922 and the issue continued to influence the policy of the Saorstát government when it first assumed power. Expectations on the part of local authorities were raised by the British government's use of the housing issue to attract support in Ireland for a Home Rule-based settlement and quell the rise of republican separatism. In 1917-18 the deliberations on housing in the ill-fated Irish Convention, attended by prominent members of the AMAI, raised the prospect of £2 million per year over seven years becoming available for housing subsidies from the Treasury. The provisions of the 1919 Housing Act, passed in August of that year, although subject to widespread criticism as being less generous than those available to British municipalities, offered further encouragement that state assistance was imminent. And, as outlined in Chapter 3, the housing surveys carried out by many municipal councils at the behest of the LGB had crystallised the extent of the housing problem and increased the anticipation that funds would become available to address it. In Britain, while the 1919 Act failed to deliver the promised 500,000 houses, local authorities built about 170,000 dwellings up to the summer of 1921.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Circular signed by T.W. Cosgrave on behalf of the Irish Provisional Government 16 March 1922, (LCA, DBC/HSG/001/001/001).

<sup>2</sup> Daunton, (ed.), *Councillors and tenants*, pp 9-11.

Following local elections in January 1920, Sinn Féin, in combination with Labour, controlled the majority of municipal councils outside what was to become the six counties of Northern Ireland and, when called to do so some six months later, they pledged their allegiance to the Dáil. Soon afterwards the LGB warned councils that unless they submitted their accounts to it for audit they would be debarred from receiving public loans. The ‘housing slum problem’ was the subject of extensive debate at the annual conference of the AMAI in September 1920, with clear evidence that many councillors viewed the loss of British Treasury funding with dismay.<sup>3</sup> Delegates from Tipperary, Dundalk and Pembroke, together with a number from towns in Ulster, called for improved levels of subsidy from the British government, claiming that these funds represented ‘money that they believed was their own’.<sup>4</sup> The reality, however, was that events had moved beyond the possibility of British state funding for municipal authorities that had now refused to recognise the authority of that state. Indeed across much of the country an insurgency was actively undermining that authority. The difficulty for the First Dáil was that it had nothing concrete to offer Sinn Féin or Labour councillors in towns across the country who had spent much of the previous two years drawing up plans for housing and demanding more generous funding from the British Treasury. In response to an application for a housing loan, the provisional Ministry of Local Government informed Nenagh UDC that they were ‘alive to the urgency of the Housing problem and they hope that at a later stage it may be found possible to make provision for affording financial assistance to local bodies in dealing with it’.<sup>5</sup>

This, then, is the context in which Cosgrave announced what has become known as ‘the £1 million scheme’. The politically astute branding of the programme reflected the significant pressure exerted on the Provisional Government regarding the housing question, and also Cosgrave’s own intimate knowledge of the issues involved given his long tenure as a member of Dublin Corporation. Daly suggests that Cosgrave announced details of the £1 million scheme without consulting the Department of Finance or, presumably, his cabinet colleagues.<sup>6</sup> During this time all government departments operated in something of a hiatus pending the formal transfer of powers as were agreed with the British on 1 April.<sup>7</sup> It is clear that some of his fellow ministers were less than convinced regarding its provisions, and favoured direct subsidies to speculative builders rather than channeling funds through local authorities and imposing additional taxation on ratepayers. In a Dáil adjournment debate on housing in May 1923, Earnest Blyth, Minister for Finance, argued that ‘an

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<sup>3</sup> *Irish Times*, 16 September 1920.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Fraser, *John Bull’s Other Homes*, pp 230-31.

<sup>6</sup> Daly, *Buffer State*, p. 207.

<sup>7</sup> Fanning, *Department of Finance*, pp 30-35.



enormous amount can be done by private builders ... and if it is found we cannot undertake to have costs brought down in undertakings by municipalities, then perhaps it would be found necessary to drop subsidies to the municipalities altogether'.<sup>8</sup> He went on to suggest that 'building by private builders does not touch certain aspects dealt with by municipalities. I believe there are certain fringes of the problem that would always have to be dealt with by municipalities'.<sup>9</sup> In replying to the debate, Cosgrave stated 'I am not at all satisfied that the local authorities are the best possible institutions for solving the housing problem', and went on to promote the role of 'public companies'.<sup>10</sup> A close examination of how the scheme was implemented at the local level and how it was managed by the DLGPH in the years 1922-24 suggests that, despite the relatively generous state subsidies, it reflected Cumann na nGaedheal's ideological stance towards public spending and the role of the state, and pre-figured the increasing support for home ownership evident in government housing policy through the rest of the 1920s.

In formulating the £1 million scheme, Cosgrave rejected the form of subsidy available in the 1919 Act, which pegged levels of funding to levels of rent. This, he argued, would encourage local authorities to build houses attracting high rents in an attempt to maximise levels of subsidy. Instead, the scheme offered a two-thirds subsidy on the capital cost of construction. One quarter was to be raised by council's through commercial loans and the remaining twelfth through a special housing rate. These details were accompanied by a memorandum from which the above quotation is taken and whose apparent intent was to dampen expectations that the scheme would be a recurring one. At the same time councils were encouraged to proceed with due haste and, where relevant, utilise plans that had been submitted under the 1919 Act. Owners of sites were encouraged 'to recognise their responsibility for facilitating in every way this attempt to grapple with the housing problem, the solution of which has been so much delayed'.<sup>11</sup> House types and designs published and circulated by the LGB in 1919 in connection with the Housing Act of that year were simply adopted by the new Department of Local Government. These set down minimum space requirements for bedroom, kitchens and parlours and recommended the provision of running hot and cold water (see Appendix 6). The adoption of these standards had implications for costs and, as we shall see, this became a site of conflict between the department and municipal authorities as building tenders were submitted for approval.

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<sup>8</sup> *Dáil Debates*, 4 May 1923, Vol 3, No. 10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Circular March 1922 Miscellaneous, (LCA, DBC/HSG/001/001/001).

Although a distinctive policy initiative on the part of the new Free State government, the £1 million scheme has received limited attention in the literature. Fraser incorrectly states that just 20 local authorities availed of its provisions, a figure repeated in Daly's *Buffer State*. Fraser also mistakenly reports that the state contributed £500,000 to the scheme, matched by £500,000 raised by municipal authorities.<sup>12</sup> His assertion that the houses built were 'mainly in Dublin and the surrounding townships'<sup>13</sup> may be broadly accurate but omits to reference the fact that almost 800 of the 2,090 houses completed were in over 60 towns and cities.<sup>14</sup> The large 428 house scheme at Marino which features in McManus's work, was perhaps the most tangible impact of the state's £1 million investment and marked a very significant stage in the suburbanisation of the city.<sup>15</sup> This outcome has influenced the scheme's treatment in the modern literature, which has tended to set it in the context of the garden city movement or to see it as 'a burst of energy' before 'housing policy marked time'.<sup>16</sup> O'Sullivan's exploration of the role of politics in determining the cost and design of housing links Cumann na nGaedheal's social conservatism and ideological commitment to home ownership to the 'villa style' houses built under the scheme in Cork city.<sup>17</sup>

By September 1922 Ernest Blythe reported to the Dáil that 77 of the 94 urban authorities in the state had expressed an interest in availing of the scheme. The scale of what might be undertaken was effectively determined by each town's valuation and by the level of housing rate the local authority was willing to impose, as this would generate one twelfth of the overall cost of the houses built. Having calculated how much the housing rate could raise, the council could then approach a commercial bank for a loan equal to three times that amount and apply to the Department for the subsidy equal to eight times the amount. The application of this formula in practice placed a ceiling of about fifteen houses that councils in medium-sized provincial towns could build if they limited themselves to imposing a special rate of 2s in the pound.<sup>18</sup> The likely limited impact of the scheme soon became apparent. At the end of April 1922 Cosgrave was obliged to answer questions in the Dáil regarding why only seven houses were being built in Carrick-on-

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<sup>12</sup> Fraser, *John Bull's Other Homes*, p. 280; Daly, *Buffer State*, p. 208.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1929-30*, Appendix xxix, pp 216-19.

<sup>15</sup> McManus, *Dublin, 1910-1940*, pp 182-96.

<sup>16</sup> Daly, *Buffer State*, p. 208.

<sup>17</sup> O'Sullivan, 'Local authority housing in Cork County Borough', Chapter 4.

<sup>18</sup> Assuming a town valuation of £8000 (typical of towns such as Longford, Navan or Ennis), striking a special housing rate of 2s. would generate £800. This would allow the council raise £2,400 in loans (£800x 3) and obtaining a state subsidy of £6,400 (£800 x 8). In total, then, the council would have £9,600 at its disposal which would build 14 to 18 houses. In reality, a 2s. in the pound housing rate was at the upper end of what most councils were willing to contemplate with most striking rates of 1s. or 1s. 6d., with a consequent diminution in the total funds available.

Suir.<sup>19</sup> By 1923 there were calls for a further £1 million to be made available, and in May the state's housing policy was subject to a prolonged debate in the Dáil referred to above, led by Labour TDs Richard Corish and William O'Brien. While all sides recognised that urban housing conditions in both Dublin and in the cities and towns of provincial Ireland had deteriorated over the preceding decade both Cosgrave and Blythe expressed disquiet at high labour costs in the building industry and effectively defined the £1 million scheme as a 'one-off' response to the housing problem.

Most municipal authorities responded to Cosgrave's memorandum in March 1922 announcing the terms of the scheme by discussing the possibility of raising a special housing rate and calculating how finance in total would be available. The contrast between what might be achieved under the scheme and the expansive proposals submitted to the LGB three years earlier is best illustrated in Athy. As described in Chapter 3, only thirty houses were built by Athy UDC prior to World War I, despite an acute shortage of accommodation and relatively high levels of overcrowding, standing at 35 percent of the population in 1901. In the spring of 1919 the council adopted 'a policy of retrenchment and endeavour[ed] to reduce the heavy charges of expenditure caused by the war', and at the same time had increased the rents of its existing houses 'to cover higher rates'.<sup>20</sup> A few months later, in October 1919, in response to the passing of the 1919 Housing Act and the availability of generous subsidies, it drew up ambitious plans for 200 houses.<sup>21</sup> However, when considering the provisions of the £1 million scheme the council reverted to its more characteristic stance and struck a housing rate of just 1 shilling in the pound, generating £240. With a bank loan of £760 and a state subsidy of £2,000, this provided the council with total funds of £3,000, sufficient, it calculated, to build six houses.

In Ballina, consideration of the scheme coincided with a damning report from the council's Medical Officer of Health, Dr Keane, who condemned

the frightful housing conditions under which the poorer classes in the town were compelled to live. In his opinion this was a most urgent social problem which the Council should as soon as possible, endeavour to solve. Hundreds of people in the town were living in houses which would make very poor stabling accommodation for animals.<sup>22</sup>

In the autumn of 1919 the Council had proposed the building of fifty houses 'as a first instalment' of a scheme of 250 houses under the 1919 Act.<sup>23</sup> The scheme was adopted by the council on the

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<sup>19</sup> *Irish Independent*, 29 April 1922.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 April and 2 June 1919.

<sup>21</sup> Athy UDC minutes, 28 October 1919.

<sup>22</sup> Ballina UDC minutes, 15 March 1922.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 November 1919.

important proviso that state subsidies should be sufficiently generous 'so that local authorities would not have to bear more than 1d in the £ on rates'.<sup>24</sup> It is of interest that the demise of the LGB was viewed favourably by one of Ballina's larger landlords, Capt. H.H. Jones, who owned several dozen small houses on the eastern bank of the Moy at Ardnaree. When issued with notices to provide sanitary accommodation in these houses under the Public Health Act by the council in early 1922, he indicated he would postpone the work as 'we are shortly coming under more sensible conditions than the arbitrary and wasteful LGB'.<sup>25</sup> The council struck a housing rate of 1s 6d in the pound and put forward proposals to build eight houses, later extended to ten.

The striking of a rate in Tuam was a novelty for its Town Commissioners, having refused urban district status for the preceding two decades because it entailed taking such a course. They declared themselves 'desirous of availing of the scheme' and struck a rate of 1s 6d in the pound, sufficient to attract funding for six houses. The decision to strike a rate did not meet with universal approval as the *Tuam Herald* reported that

A good deal of unfair and ill-informed criticism has been levelled at the Town Board for striking a rate for the erection of those houses, but the people who criticise forget that the rate was only struck in order to procure Tuam's fair share of the £1,000,000 free grant.<sup>26</sup>

The extent of the opposition to the rate is difficult to quantify, but at a Town Commissioners meeting in April 1924 the Town Clerk 'was directed to summon about twenty parties who had refused to pay up the Housing Rate at the next Petty Sessions Court'.<sup>27</sup> Despite the repeatedly expressed intention of councillors in towns across the country from the 1890s onwards to avoid subsidising public housing via rates, accounts published in the appendices to the Dublin Housing Inquiry of 1913 showed that 36 out of 44 provincial towns had reported a loss on their housing programmes.<sup>28</sup> However, these losses seldom amounted to more than three or four pence on the rates and were embedded in the annual accounts of municipal authorities. On the other hand, the Housing Rate was a much more transparent, albeit a once off, transfer of funds from ratepayers to those acquiring houses to rent or buy under the £1 million scheme.

The question as to who benefitted from the scheme was, in part, determined by relatively high building costs in the early 1920s, the influence of the garden city movement in promoting

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 6 January 1922.

<sup>26</sup> *Tuam Herald*, 6 October 1923.

<sup>27</sup> Tuam Town Commissioners minutes, 8 April 1924.

<sup>28</sup> *Report of the Departmental Committee into the Housing Conditions of the Working Classes in the City of Dublin*, 1914 [Cd. 7273], Appendix xxxvi. These figures are based on the returns from 44 of the 74 provincial towns in the area of the future Free State.

lower densities and larger houses, and the repeated urgings on the part of Department of Local Government to local authorities to sell the houses they built. These three factors were, to some extent, inter-related and reinforced by the new Free State government's ideological stance towards the housing question.

Daly suggests that subsequent to the £1 million scheme the Cumann na nGaedheal government effectively used the excuse of high building costs to postpone addressing the issue of working class housing.<sup>29</sup> Even as the scheme was in its initial stages, Dáil debates on the housing question through the second half of 1922 and into 1923 saw government spokesmen lament high building costs, particularly in Dublin, and identified high wages and restrictive labour practices as undermining progress. Cosgrave claimed that 'people who are in the capitalist class, from the repeated conversations I have had with them, are not satisfied that they are being fairly treated by labour'.<sup>30</sup> It is questionable, however, if high wages were the determining factor in limiting the impact of the £1 million scheme. Instead, it may be that lack of capacity in the building industry, resulting in low levels of competition between builders, together with a certain level of profit seeking on their part, contributed more to high tenders. Wartime conditions in 1914-18 had certainly driven up wages with a combination of labour shortages and significant increases in the cost of living, particularly food. In Britain wages were driven down as trade union solidarity collapsed in the spring of 1921 in the face of high unemployment and a determination on the part of employers to revert to pre-war levels. In Ireland, as described by O'Connor,

Employer expectations [of wage cuts] were frustrated in the south by the effect with which militancy could be deployed in the near anarchic conditions obtaining during the Anglo-Irish truce and the Civil War.<sup>31</sup>

The evidence from municipal authority records, though, is that as early as 1922 councils successfully cut wages for their own staff and argued that they were merely seeking to benchmark them against falling wages in local private enterprises. In Drogheda, for example, a proposal to cut all the Corporation staff's wages by 4s. per week was put forward in February 1922 and, despite the objections of local trade unions, was implemented in April.<sup>32</sup> At the national level the general strike 'against militarism' that month appears to have marked the high point of trade union influence.

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<sup>29</sup> Daly, *Buffer State*, p. 208.

<sup>30</sup> *Dáil Debates*, 4 May 1923.

<sup>31</sup> O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland*, p. 119.

<sup>32</sup> Drogheda Corporation minutes, 7 February and 4 April 1922.

Later in the year there were regular references in the Dáil to falling wages,<sup>33</sup> and by the autumn of 1923 the threat of widespread strikes had largely dissipated.<sup>34</sup>

One of the difficulties relating to price was that the government's own statement regarding the likely output from the scheme regularly referred to an all-in cost of £750 per house. At the same time the provisions of the scheme allowed for a maximum grant of £500 per house – i.e. corresponding to a £750 all-in cost. An examination of tenders submitted by builders in a number of towns suggests that the figure of £750 was regarded by them as something of a target rather than a maximum figure. In Athy, for example, local builder D & J Carberry, submitted an initial tender for the council's scheme of six houses which 'would bring the cost of providing the houses, allowing for land, drainage etc. to over £750 per house'.<sup>35</sup> It appears that Carberry's was the only tender received and, while some suggested that this may have been related to the a railway strike,<sup>36</sup> there was a general lack of competition in tendering for building contracts in provincial towns in 1922-23.<sup>37</sup> Only one tender was received for an eight house scheme in Enniscorthy,<sup>38</sup> two tenders were received for a sixteen house scheme in Drogheda,<sup>39</sup> and two for an eight house scheme in Ballina.<sup>40</sup> In some cases the Department refused to sanction the acceptance of tenders on the grounds of their being excessive and instructed the councils to re-advertise. This occurred in Tuam where the initial lowest tender for five houses, at £3,190, was rejected by the Department in May 1923 and, when re-advertised, a revised one of £2,895 approved a month later (albeit with cheaper solid concrete walls rather than block cement). What is particularly revealing is that one of the builders who submitted on both occasions reduced his tender from £3,857 to £2,971. A further indication that builders may have been engaged in profit-seeking arose in Athy where the contract to build eight houses was eventually awarded to D & J Carberry when the company reduced its tender from £577 to £460 per house.<sup>41</sup> This arose when the Department insisted that

the tender which the Council now propose to accept for their housing scheme is quite excessive having regard to the size of the house proposed and that the Council should therefore re-advertise immediately with a view to obtaining a more satisfactory quotation.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, the debate on rent controls on 20 October 1922 when Darrell Figgis stated that 'wages...have gone back a great distance'.

<sup>34</sup> O'Connor, *A Labour history of Ireland*, pp 121-26.

<sup>35</sup> Athy UDC minutes, 4 December 1922.

<sup>36</sup> *Leinster Express*, 25 November 1922.

<sup>37</sup> There were only two valid tenders for the Athy scheme when it was re-advertised in early 1923.

<sup>38</sup> *Irish Builder and Engineer*, 9 September 1922, p. 618.

<sup>39</sup> Drogheda Corporation minutes, 19 September 1922.

<sup>40</sup> Ballina UDC minutes, 4 April 1923.

<sup>41</sup> Athy UDC minutes, 5 April and 18 June 1923.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 May 1923.

The first report of the DLGPH published in 1925 and covering the years 1922-25 shows that the average cost of a £1 million scheme house was £673 in the 57 provincial towns that availed of its provisions.<sup>43</sup> The scheme saw the state pay subsidies of £233,000 to provide 567 houses in these towns, an average of £436 per house.<sup>44</sup> In an era of retrenchment, described by Cousins as ‘a concept dear to the hearts of key Cumann na nGaedheal leaders’, it is hardly surprising that after the general election of August 1923 the government set its face against further significant state subsidies for housing. Indeed prior to the election, in May 1923 Ernest Blythe, in claiming the solution to the housing question would demand £30 million in capital investment, was effectively suggesting an indefinite postponement of any concerted action.<sup>45</sup> His calculations were again based on an all-in cost of £750 per house, but within two years councils were awarding building contracts for less than £300 per house. Drogheda Corporation, for example, signed a contract in the spring of 1925 for 40 four-roomed concrete houses for £263 per house.<sup>46</sup> The councils in Athlone, Dungarvan and Wexford all accepted tenders for less than £300 per house over the following year. What characterised the schemes in these four towns is that the houses were smaller than those built under the £1 million scheme and appear to have had lower specifications. This marked a break with the more aspirational house designs derived from the garden city movement which influenced the Tudor Walters Report and the 1919 Housing Act. A memorandum from the DLGPH to coincide with the launch of the £1m in April 1922 advised local authorities that the

minimum accommodation that should be provided in a new house is a living room, scullery and two bedrooms; but in most of the houses three bedrooms should be provided. In at least 40 per cent of the houses it is desirable that parlours should be provided.<sup>47</sup>

In fact, as shown in Table 4.1, over 80 percent of the houses built by urban local authorities in the years 1923-25 had five rooms, consisting of three bedrooms, a kitchen and a parlour. The recommended minimum square footage for living rooms, parlours and bedrooms (see Appendix 6) faithfully followed those set out in a RIBA Housing competition held in 1917 and incorporated into Peter Cowan’s 1918 report on Dublin housing. A further factor in favouring five-roomed dwellings appears to have been the Catholic Church’s influence on government housing policy, or at least on Cosgrave’s thinking. During a debate on the 1924 Housing Act the government was urged to build more three-roomed houses. In response, Cosgrave claimed ‘the churches were insistent on at least

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<sup>43</sup> *Department of Local Government and Public Health First Report, 1922-25*, Appendix D.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Dail Debates*, 4 May 1923, Vol. 3, No.19.

<sup>46</sup> Minutes of the Housing Committee of Drogheda Corporation, 25 March 1925.

<sup>47</sup> Circular April 1922 – Main Points in standards to be adopted, (LCA, DBC-HGS-001-001-001).

four-roomed houses’,<sup>48</sup> and in a debate of the 1925 Act the following year he argued that ‘for a household run on decent Christian lines, four rooms are needed, and the case is made for another room as a meeting place’. He added ‘unless where there is only one sex in the family, so that they could occupy bedrooms separately, it would be inadvisable to have three-roomed houses’.<sup>49</sup>

In one sense the adoption of these standards as part of the £1 million scheme was a positive recognition of the need for higher standards. But on the other it reflected the fact that housing policy as enunciated by the DLPH would see these house sold by the local authorities who built them, and this had implications for the type of houses to be built. Those who were cash buyers or those could avail of tenant purchase schemes were more likely to seek out well appointed houses in attractive locations. It is evident that in some towns the councils sought out the best sites for these houses, as they were clearly superior to anything they had built in the pre-war years. When the DLGPH insisted that Navan UDC adopt a less expensive house plan than it had initially chosen for ten houses at Abbeylands, the *Meath Chronicle* posed the question

the proposed site being such a suitable one for decent dwellings does it not seem a pity that it is placed beyond the power of the Council to erect dwellings that would do everlasting credit to the Council?<sup>50</sup>

The Tralee scheme at Cloonbeg also benefitted by being located in an ideal site overlooking the town park, which had been recently acquired by the council.<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, in Athy the council, in order to cut costs, built eight houses without water-based sanitation, and subsequently had little option but to let them to weekly tenants.

**Table 4.1**

**Number of houses of varying sizes built under state aided schemes, 1923-25**

	3 room	4 room	5 room	Total
1923	18			18
1924	12	30	404	446
1925	8	199	748	955

*Source: First annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1922-25*

Ernest Blythe suggested to the Dáil in 1923 that

if any local authority can find or devise any scheme for selling houses built under this £1,000,000 scheme in such a way as to get cash or to get any

<sup>48</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 8 November 1924.

<sup>49</sup> *Dáil Debates*, 1 April 1925.

<sup>50</sup> *Meath Chronicle*, 7 July 1923.

<sup>51</sup> *The Kerryman*, 13 April 1929.



substantial proportion of the price in cash they will be at liberty to use that money so obtained for the building of further houses.<sup>52</sup>

In fact the Department, in its communications with local authorities, adopted a much more prescriptive stance and consistently urged councils to put newly completed houses up for sale at the earliest opportunity. It appears that in many cases this brought the Department into conflict with councils which favoured tenant purchase or the letting of the houses.

The issues involved are well illustrated in Ballina and Fermoy. In April 1924 ten houses were completed under the £1 million scheme at Ardnaree in Ballina. At its May meeting the Town Clerk reported that there had been 90 applicants for the houses and 'several of those were prepared to pay outright for cash'.<sup>53</sup> It soon emerged that the high number of applicants was less an indication of a surfeit of cash buyers than the simple demand for housing in the town. The council proceeded to allocate all ten houses on a tenant purchase scheme, involving the payment of a £15 cash deposit and the repayment of an annuity of £300 over a period of twenty five and a half years. This represented a very substantial state subsidy to the purchasers, as the all-in cost of the houses had been just under £600.<sup>54</sup> Two of the councillors were allocated houses and this, combined with the apparent popularity of the tenant purchase arrangement, led to the council initially resisting the Department's advice to sell the houses for cash. At one point some councillors claimed the pressure being applied to sell the houses 'was to encourage outsiders',<sup>55</sup> and it does appear that in towns where the houses were sold that some of the purchasers were not town residents. By the end of July the minister had taken a personal interest in developments in Ballina and the terms in which he communicated with the council indicate the priorities in government housing policy:

I am to state that he regrets to find at a time when every available force is being strained to the alteration of the housing and unemployment problem which are of such vital interest to the community, that a body of public representatives should refuse to take advantage of the opportunities which have presented themselves in connection with the disposal of this property. The sale of the ten houses for ready cash would realise between £4500 and £5000 with which the Council could embark immediately on a scheme for the provision of a number of small dwellings which in turn could be sold to provide funds for a further scheme.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 May 1923.

<sup>53</sup> Ballina UDC minutes, 6 May 1924.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Western People*, 8 November 1924.

<sup>56</sup> Ballina UDC minutes, 29 July 1924.

In a subsequent letter the Department indicated 'the Minister did not desire the Council to impose any special conditions or reservations in connection with the sale of these houses for cash'.<sup>57</sup> This effectively gave sanction to the council to dispose of the houses, irrespective of the status of the purchaser. The council deferred to the Minister's wishes and advertised the houses for sale. By September just two cash offers had been received, one of which was subsequently withdrawn. Ultimately one of the houses was sold for £400 to a single woman and the rest occupied by tenant purchasers who made payments of 11s. 3d. per week. No further houses were built by Ballina UDC until 1929 when the Local Loans Fund (LLF) first made loans for housing available to local authorities.

In Fermoy opposition to the sale of the ten houses built by the council was more vocal and highlighted the tensions between the Department and local councillors. When the houses were completed in September 1925 the scheme was inspected by a Mr Hickey from the Department who advised the council of 'the necessity of the sale of these houses in order that money may be created for a further scheme'.<sup>58</sup> An earlier communication from the Department recommended that the houses, which cost just over £700 each to build, should be sold for £450. Councillor Sheehan proposed the houses be let and stated 'he refused to acknowledge [the Department's] right to dictate to the Council what ought to be done with the cottages'. Other councillors pointed out the very substantial subsidy that private purchases would receive, one remarking that 'from a financial point of view he would say it was rotten. If a man got a house for half the price of its erection there was something loose'.<sup>59</sup> It seems likely that the councillors who expressed these views had been lobbied by prospective tenants as they indicated that they were aware of people in the town who would be willing to pay the eight shillings per week rent.

Councils such as Navan and Tuam that followed the prescription of the Department and sold the houses they built made little or no impact on the poor housing conditions in their towns with the funds raised. In Tuam nineteen houses were built and subsequently sold by the Town Commissions between 1924 and 1929, at which point a housing survey reported that 128 houses were required to house those in unfit accommodation.<sup>60</sup> The circumstances of those in a position to raise cash sums of £300 or £400 were very different from the residents of the crumbling hovels in the town's Sun Street and Tullinadaly Road. As one of the schemes came close to completion a local priest wrote to the Commissioners seeking a house for a widow and her family whose 'plight'

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 August 1924.

<sup>58</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 30 September 1925.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Department of Local Government and Public Health Annual Report, 1929-30*, Appendix xxvii.

was described. After some discussion the Commissioners decided to make a charitable collection for repairs to her house.<sup>61</sup> Shortly afterwards a letter from the DLGPH requested the commissioners to provide information regarding the previous housing accommodation of those who had purchased houses in the scheme. The commissioners replied that the houses were simply sold to the highest bidders.<sup>62</sup>

Tralee was one of the few towns where the sale of the £1 million scheme houses was used as seed capital for further house building as envisaged by the Department. The council built sixteen houses at The Green and in 1925 realised £8,000 when they were sold. It immediately drew up plans for a similar scheme of five roomed houses which it also planned to sell.<sup>63</sup> Labour representatives on the council proposed that smaller houses that could be let should be built. The proposal was defeated but 'the promise was made that when the 16 or more 2 storey houses would be sold a scheme of workers' houses would immediately be begun'.<sup>64</sup> In the event fourteen five-roomed houses were built and subsequently sold, but there was a gap of eight years before a scheme of 'workers' houses' was realised in 1933.

### **Evaluating the £1 million scheme**

Table 4.2 shows that over 60 percent of the £1 million scheme houses were built in Dublin city and its immediate environs. 57 of 74 provincial towns participated in the scheme, with the urban councils (as opposed to Town Commissioners) of Birr, Cavan, Listowel, Naas and Westport being the only exceptions. Despite the Department's insistence that houses built under the scheme should be disposed of, the same report shows that only 296 of 536 had been sold by 1925 and the remaining 240 were being let. This suggests that the housing market in provincial towns was quite different from that in Dublin, where virtually all the £1 million scheme houses were sold. In Cork city the corporation devised a tenant-purchase scheme requiring a £60 10s. deposit and weekly repayments of 10s. exclusive of rates and maintenance for 31 years. The scheme, however, collapsed and Cork corporation succeeded in selling only 23 of the 146 houses it built in 1923-24.<sup>65</sup> Despite the very substantial subsidies available to both cash buyers and tenant purchasers, neither of these groups were sufficiently numerous in some towns to generate demand. This is despite the

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<sup>61</sup> Tuam Town Commissioners minutes, 17 June 1929.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 December 1929.

<sup>63</sup> *The Kerryman*, 19 December 1925.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Cork Corporation's operation of the scheme is discussed in O'Sullivan, 'Local Authority Housing in Cork County Borough', pp 209-213. See also *Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health 1927-28*, Appendix xxiii.

fact that cash purchasers benefitted, on average, from a 40 per cent discount on the total cost of houses they acquired. Under the terms of the tenant-purchase scheme, buyers were obliged to pay off a mortgage equivalent to 52.5 per cent of the total cost over 25.5 years at an interest rate of five per cent.<sup>66</sup>

**Table 4.2**  
**Houses provided under the ‘£1 million scheme’**

Location	Houses
Dublin city	947
Dublin townships	356
Other cities	256
Provincial towns	536
Towns < 1500 population	5
Total	2090

*Source: Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1929-30, Appendix xxix*

Cosgrave’s own evaluation of the scheme as ‘a bad scheme - it is an expensive and an extravagant scheme that the State could not afford’<sup>67</sup> is revealing. Made in May 1923, it anticipates the policy of financial retrenchment adopted by the government in November when Ernest Blythe announced the infamous cuts to old age pensions along with reductions in teachers’ salaries.<sup>68</sup> But it also reflects an over-riding concern with fiscal probity. In March, Joseph Brennan, Comptroller and Auditor-General, and soon to be secretary of the Department of Finance, advised ministers that the current deficit was £2,750,000 and likely to rise by a further £1,750,000.<sup>69</sup> He urged that ‘every possible saving should be effected’.<sup>70</sup> In the interim, the general election campaign had featured predictable rhetoric regarding the housing question, with W.T. Cosgrave promising that ‘the Government had money that will build ten times as many houses as those destroyed’.<sup>71</sup> The government’s perception of its £1 million scheme as extravagant assumes a certain logic when, as pointed out by Cousins, the highly unpopular cut to pensions generated about £600,000 in

<sup>66</sup> These details are outlined in the Drogheda Corporation minutes of 24 July 1923.

<sup>67</sup> *Dail Debates*, 4 May 1923, Vol. 3. No. 10.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 November 1923, Vol. 5, No. 10.

<sup>69</sup> Fanning, *Department of Finance*, p. 105.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Fanning, p. 108.

<sup>71</sup> Excerpt from a speech made in Clonmel and reported in *Cork Examiner*, 23 August 1923. The highlight of most of Cosgrave’s speeches were attacks on anti-Treaty republicans for the destruction they wrought under the civil war and the continuing threat they posed.

savings.<sup>72</sup> On the other hand, most local councils came to view the scheme quite differently. While many were obviously anxious to avail of the subsidies it offered, the prospect of imposing a special rate, the growing realisation of the relatively small scale of what could be achieved, and the difficulties encountered in some towns in meeting the Department's urgings to sell the houses meant that local expectations were not met. Roche's assessment that the government 'turned away from the problem of the worst-housed and looked for quick returns from grants to the middle range of houseseekers'<sup>73</sup> captures the essence of its policy. However, for thirteen years, principally through the IAMA, councillors from provincial towns had been lobbying for more generous subsidies to address housing conditions that they were invited to document in 1919. The £1 million scheme, with its ostensibly generous subsidies, hinted at what might be possible but, with ten or a dozen houses built in most towns, it may have contributed to the hollowing out of political support for Cumann na nGaedheal as the decade progressed.

### **The 1924 and 1925 Housing Acts**

Following the 1923 general election the Cumann na nGaedheal government was unlikely to repeat what it perceived as the mistakes of the £1 million scheme. Instead, it borrowed from the most recent developments in housing policy in Britain, where the 1923 Housing Act provided subsidies of up to £6 per year per house for twenty years, whether built by local authorities, private individuals or speculative builders. The Department's own statement of the aims of the Act referred to 'the revival of the housing activities of private enterprise. The Housing problem generally had assumed such dimensions that it was clearly impossible for local authorities to cope with it.'<sup>74</sup> The Housing (Building Facilities) Act of 1924 provided for state subsidies of £60, £80 and £100 for three, four and five roomed houses respectively, and set aside a total of £250,000 for such subsidies.<sup>75</sup> It also included a provision whereby rates could be abated on a sliding scale over twenty years.

In introducing the 1924 Housing Act in the Dáil on 18 January 1924 Cosgrave set out its aims as 'alleviating unemployment in so far as that is possible, to provide houses for the working classes at prices which, it is hoped, they will be able to pay, and, generally, to give some help towards business'.<sup>76</sup> Regarding the second point, he made no pretence that the measures in the Act were designed to address those in the poorest conditions. When outlining the likely costs of

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<sup>72</sup> Cousins, *The Birth of Social Welfare*, pp 30-32.

<sup>73</sup> Roche, *Local government in Ireland*, p. 233.

<sup>74</sup> *Department of Local Government and Public Health First Report, 1922-25*, p. 81.

<sup>75</sup> The scale of subsidies was £50, £70 and £90 for houses where sewers and water mains were not available.

<sup>76</sup> *Dáil Debates*, 18 January 1924, Vol. 6, No. 6.

the houses being provided there was an assumption that the houses would be sold for between £300 and £450 and that

there are numbers of people comprising the term “working class” capable of paying these particular sums, who do not require such assistance to the same extent as some of their less fortunate brethren.<sup>77</sup>

While there was extensive debate in the Dáil on the role of local authorities in implementing the provisions of the Act, Cosgrave’s remark that ‘we are endeavouring to get private enterprise to give some assistance towards the solving of the [housing] problem’ more accurately reflected the trajectory of government policy. This was confirmed several weeks later when Cosgrave addressed Dublin’s Rotary Club on 25 February, attended by ‘a large number of representatives of the building trades’.<sup>78</sup> Setting out government housing policy in terms that his listeners were no doubt pleased to hear, he stated that

We have discovered during the last few years ... that neither the State nor the Municipality nor any of the State or semi-State organisations is in a position to deal in a satisfactory manner with this subject and we have come to the conclusion that if we are to achieve any real success in the matter of housing it must come from private enterprise.<sup>79</sup>

He rather unfairly castigated those town councils that had failed to avail of the £1 million scheme when the evidence suggests that many found that the scheme did little to address their housing problems. He went on to confer a moral seal of approval on the members of the Rotary Club when adding that

he did not know that there was a greater platform on which they could deal with the matter [of housing] than there in that club, whose ideals and ethics accorded in splendid unanimity with Christianity.<sup>80</sup>

The extent to which available state funding under the 1924 Act was ‘captured’ by private builders, particularly in rural areas, is well illustrated in Figure 4.1. This shows that over three quarters of the total of £273,459 in state grants was allocated to private building with 80 per cent of these houses being built in rural areas. In fact the figures are somewhat distorted by the continuing activity of Dublin Corporation in building tenant-purchase scheme houses on the northern edge of the city at Marino and Drumcondra. Apart from this, urban Ireland gained very little from the Act, with 46 of 74 provincial towns building just 402 houses, or less than 12 per cent of the national total. Only ten municipal authorities in provincial towns availed of the provisions of the Act and built 203 houses.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> *Irish Independent*, 26 February 1924.

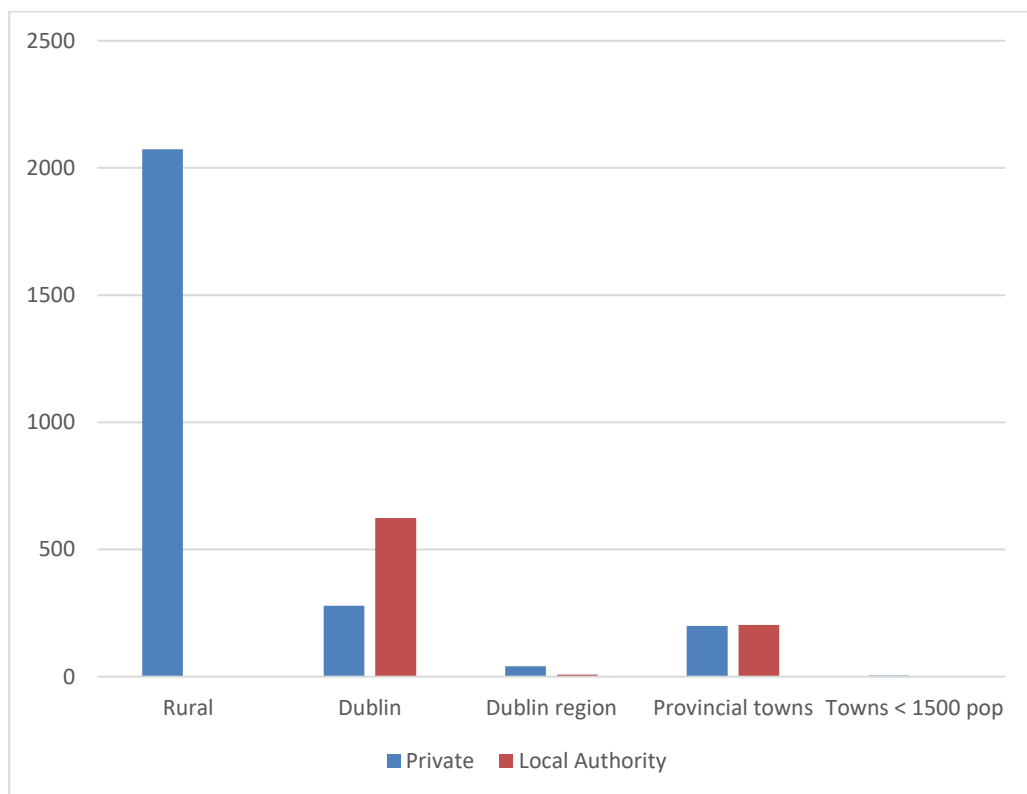
<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> *Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health 1927-28*, Appendix xxiii.

While public discourse on the housing problem focused on cities and towns, three-quarters of the £273,459 provided for new housing in the Act went to rural areas. Daly points out that the grants available to private individuals were particularly attractive for farmers who could build new houses during slack periods in the agricultural year.<sup>82</sup>

**Figure 4.1**  
**Houses built with state aid under the 1924 Housing Act**



Source: *Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health 1927-28*, Appendix xxii

In introducing the 1925 Housing Act, Cosgrave offered a fairly weak defence of the fact that the 1924 Act had done little to address housing in towns. He suggested that

some criticism may be levelled at the fact that such a small number of houses were built in urban areas, but the number given for the rural areas is scarcely a true index, as quite a number of these were built near towns and the towns would benefit by the fact that they were built in close proximity.<sup>83</sup>

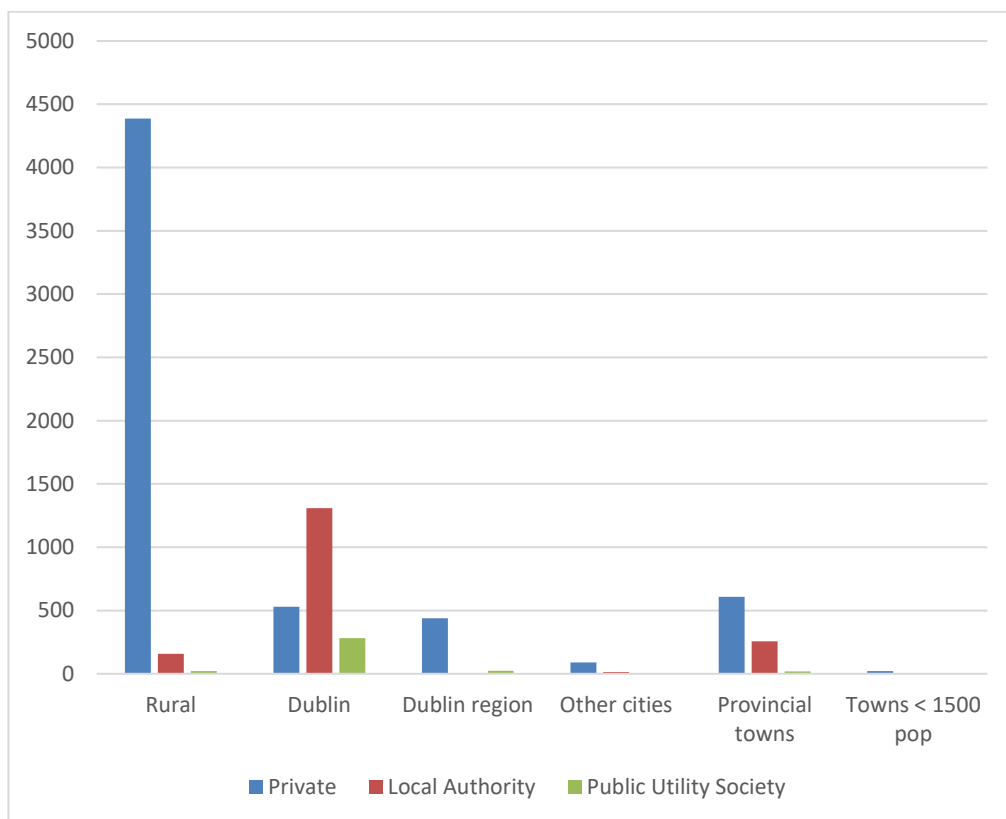
<sup>82</sup> Daly, *Buffer State*, p. 210.

<sup>83</sup> *Dail Debates*, 18 March 1925, Vol. 10, No. 14.

The provisions of the 1925 Act reduced the subsidies available to private builders to £45, £60 and £75 for 3-, 4- and 5-roomed houses respectively, while leaving the grants to local authorities unchanged. For the first time public utility societies could avail of grants and this had the effect of stimulating the establishment of such societies, particularly in Dublin.<sup>84</sup> Unsurprisingly, the overall impact of the Act was similar to its predecessor with the main beneficiaries being those building their own homes in rural areas (see Figure 4.2). Again, the lack of activity by councils in provincial towns was particularly marked, with only 257 houses built in thirteen towns up to the end of March 1928.

**Figure 4.2**

**Houses built with state aid under the 1925 Act and subsequent  
Housing Acts up to 31 March 1928**



*Source: Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health 1927-28, Appendix xxii*

Only Bray, Drogheda and Dundalk built more than twenty houses, and this seems to confirm the difficulty that councils in smaller towns had in persuading commercial banks to grant loans, an issue

<sup>84</sup> McManus, *Dublin 1910-1940*, pp 235-69.



regularly raised by TDs in the Dáil. Typical of the enquiries made by TDs was Richard Corish's questioning the Minister for Finance in April 1926 'if he is aware of the difficulties of local authorities in their efforts to secure loans for the purpose of building houses' and '[when] would [he] bring forward legislation which would enable the Government to advance loans to local authorities for long periods, so that houses could be let at an economic rent'.<sup>85</sup>

In the face of the evidence showing low levels of building activity in towns, government spokesmen, even as late as 1929, cited high wages and building costs as deterring investment. In 1925, however, under the provisions of the 1924 Housing Act, Drogheda Corporation had built 43 houses at £282 each, less than half the cost regularly quoted in Dáil debates by government ministers. The Corporation's decision to build four-roomed concrete houses appears to have originated with its housing committee, which also favoured a policy of renting rather than selling.<sup>86</sup> Its experience with the £1 million scheme had shown a limited demand for either cash or tenant purchase while, on the other hand, the vast scale of the town's housing problem hung over all the Corporation's deliberations. In considering the provisions of the 1925 Act, it wrote to the DLGPH casting doubt on the feasibility of building further houses in the absence of longer term loans being made available by the commercial banks. The Corporation's calculations showed that repayments on 15-year loans translated into economic rents of 7s. 6d., even for the cheapest houses. Sixty-year loans, which they pointed out were available under British rule, gave the Corporation the option of letting the same houses at 3s. 11d. per week.<sup>87</sup> The context, the letter explained, was that

there are in Drogheda 906 houses with a poor law valuation ranging from 2s. to £2 and a further 253 with valuations from £2 5s. 0d. to £2 15s. 0d.. Practically all of these houses must be considered as insanitary dwellings. The people who live in these houses pay rents from 1s. to 3s. per week, and from our local knowledge we are aware that the maximum rent they would be able to afford would be 5s. per week.<sup>88</sup>

Attempts to square this circle, in the absence of the type of finance required, exposed some sharp divisions amongst councillors on the Corporation. In the summer of 1926 it agreed to proceed with the building of 43 four-roomed concrete houses at £271 per house.<sup>89</sup> When the houses were completed the following year the town clerk calculated the economic rent at 8s. per week, which the councillors admitted was 'altogether beyond the means of the average working man'.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> *Dáil Debates*, 21 April, Vol. 15, No.2.

<sup>86</sup> Drogheda Corporation Housing Committee minutes, 2 December 1925.

<sup>87</sup> Correspondence regarding financing of housing in the 1920s – 1926, (LCA, DBC-HSG-001-030-001).

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Drogheda Corporation Housing Committee minutes, 20 July 1926.

<sup>90</sup> Drogheda Corporation minutes, 25 April 1927.

Recognising this reality, some councillors argued for a modest subsidy from the rates that would bring the rents down to 7s. 6d., whilst others proposed setting the rents at 4s. 11d. Although the latter proposal was passed, at a subsequent meeting of the Corporation the decision was overturned when the more fiscally conservative councillors mustered a majority. Despite the chronic shortage of decent housing in Drogheda, and the fact it had more industrial employment than most provincial towns, the demand for the houses built by the Corporation was not overwhelming. Seven houses completed in the summer of 1927 at Nun's Walk had only nine applicants, for example.<sup>91</sup> Having completed this scheme, the Corporation effectively suspended any further building due to the unavailability of long term loans. Despite owning multiple sites around the town and drawing up outline plans for three schemes of 58 houses, it concluded

We are unfortunately too well aware of the deplorable condition of housing on this town but until loans repayable for a period of at least 40 years can be obtained we cannot build houses to let at economic rents to meet the needs of the working classes.<sup>92</sup>

The campaign to open the Local Loans Fund, already funding roads and sanitary services, as a source of capital for housing was pursued through 1928 by both the DLGPH and opposition deputies in the Dáil, but resisted by the Department of Finance. The debate on the 1928 Housing Bill, which allocated £200,000 for grants and merely extended the closing date by which houses built by private individuals had to be completed, exposed both the government's lack of progress in address poor housing and its apparent lack of will to commit the state's resources in that direction. In response to sustained criticism from Fianna Fáil and Labour deputies, Cosgrave repeated the mantra regarding high building costs. In a more revealing remark, hinting at the government's ideological distain for housing subsidies, he rejected the call for 'better financing' by claiming it entailed getting 'more money from somebody else ... to enable a man to get a cheaper house'.<sup>93</sup> Debating the 1929 Housing Bill the Minister for DLGPH, General Mulcahy, resisted the call for a comprehensive plan to deal with housing via subsidies on the basis they would cause inflation in the building industry.<sup>94</sup> His contribution also reflected a recurring theme in the Cumann na nGaedheal government's perspective on local authorities, going back to Cosgrave's stated view that they may not be the best vehicle for delivering the fruits of the £1 million scheme. He cited waste and inefficiency on the part of Ennis UDC until a commissioner was appointed to administer the town, and he suggested that until such maladministration was eliminated 'it is not thought

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<sup>91</sup> Drogheda Corporation Housing Committee minutes, 8 August 1927.

<sup>92</sup> Drogheda Corporation minutes, 18 January 1929.

<sup>93</sup> *Dail Debates*, 24 October 1928, Vol. 26, No.7.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 March 1929, Vol. 28, No. 12

opportune or possible to open the Local Loans Fund to local authorities to meet their housing costs at present'.<sup>95</sup> On the other hand, he saw merit in passing the entire responsibility for housing to local authorities, on the important proviso, however, that it would exclude 'the expense falling on the State at all'.<sup>96</sup>

The 1929 Bill again allocated £200,000 for housing grants; now they were to be awarded on a flat basis of £60 for a local authority or public utility society house and £45 for a house built by a private individual. Local authorities were now obliged to grant remission of rates to individuals building a house where previously it had been at the discretion of the local council. They were also given discretion to strike a housing rate of not less than one shilling in the pound, and in these circumstances the grant payable would rise from £60 to £72. The prospect of this Act having any significant impact on provincial towns was remote as municipal authorities had effectively withdrawn from house building in the preceding two years. As described above, just 257 local authority houses were built in provincial towns in the twelve months up to 31 March 1928, and this fell to 131 in the following twelve months. The Act was the subject of sustained criticism in the Dáil, particularly by Fianna Fáil spokesmen, and the government's resistance to the call for a comprehensive housing programme appeared weak in the face of the evidence showing falling building costs and inactivity on the part of local authorities.

In retrospect the Act can be seen as something of a holding device, as the context changed significantly when, a matter of weeks later, the Department of Finance finally succumbed to sustained calls to permit the Local Loans Fund to issue loans to municipal authorities for housing.<sup>97</sup> Although Daly claims that the availability of loans from the LLF had 'little immediate effect',<sup>98</sup> Table 4.3 shows that in the three-year period from April 1929 the rate of public housing provision in provincial towns increased significantly, albeit from a very low base.

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Opposition politicians claimed that Cumann na nGaedheal spokesmen promised to open up the LLF for housing loans when campaigning in the August 1927 general election.

<sup>98</sup> Daly, *Buffer State*, p. 212.

**Table 4.3****Number of houses completed with state aid in provincial towns, 1929-31**

	Private persons	PUS	Local authority
1 April 1928 to 31-March 1929	142	36	131
1-April-1929 to 31-March-1932	384	29	1220 <sup>99</sup>

*Source: Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1928-29 and 1931-32*

Also in the summer of 1929, the DLGPH undertook a survey of housing needs by requesting municipal authorities to quantify the number of houses needs to meet unsatisfied demand, to replace substandard dwellings and to ‘meet anticipated deficient arising from industrial development’.<sup>100</sup> The precise intentions behind the Department’s motivation in conducting the survey are ambiguous. On the one hand, the minister, when speaking in the Dáil on the 1929 Act, appeared to query the scale of what was required by describing the estimated housing needs arising from the 1919 survey conducted by the LGB as ‘pretty generous’.<sup>101</sup>

On the other hand, the government was coming under increasing pressure from Fianna Fáil on the housing question as it repeatedly called for a ‘national solution’ to the housing problem. The framing of the housing problem as a national one requiring a long-term plan was a recurring theme of Fianna Fáil spokesmen in Dáil debates. At public meetings across the country the message that the government was failing to take the issue seriously was repeated, often in the context of addressing unemployment and developing local industry. Addressing a public meeting in Athy in 1929 Seán Lemass stated ‘I do not think the problem will be met by giving small housing grants to committees. We consider this big question should be considered as a national problem and dealt with in a national way.’<sup>102</sup> The political threat the party posed was quite evident when it won 57 seats in the August 1927 general election and firmly established itself in local government following the local elections of June 1928. Given Cumann na Gaedheal’s failure to develop policies in economic and social areas other than housing in the late 1920s and the fact the results of the housing survey elicited little response from the government until the Housing Act of late 1931, one

<sup>99</sup> A further 432 houses were completed in provincial towns in the twelve months up to 31 March 1933. These schemes would have commenced before the passing of the 1932 Housing Act in August of that year.

<sup>100</sup> *Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health 1929-30*, Appendix xxvii, pp 209-12.

<sup>101</sup> *Dail Debates*, 20 March 1929, Vol. 28, No.12

<sup>102</sup> *Kildare Observer*, 28 December 1929.

is tempted to conclude that the housing survey was not intended as the basis of a comprehensive housing programme.

At the local level communications from the DLGPH regarding the availability of loans from the LLF and the instruction to carry out a housing needs survey were discussed within months of each other at council meetings and had the effect of stimulating a renewed focus on the housing question. Notice of both developments was discussed, for example, at a Ballina UDC meeting on 6 August 1929 and it was agreed to seek a loan from the LLF for a ten-house scheme already in train.<sup>103</sup> The Town Surveyor reported back to the council on 11 October in terms which can have left the councillors in no doubt regarding conditions in the town

To say it was an unpleasant and heart moving job would be speaking very mildly. One is moved to indignation at the thought of how poor people having to pay from 1s. 6d. to 5s. per week for hovels only fit for housing cattle ... I would like to pay a tribute of praise at the feet of my unfortunate townspeople, in consideration of the patient, brave and uncomplaining manner in which they bear their sufferings, hoping they may speedily be relieved.<sup>104</sup>

The report identified 300 of the town's 995 houses as unfit for human habitation with some of these as small as 1,500 cubic feet. It pointed out that the houses currently being built by the council were 7,500 cubic feet in size. Ballina UDC had an overwhelming Fianna Fáil and Labour majority and its most prominent politician was P.J. Rutledge, chairman of the council and future minister in the post-1932 Fianna Fáil administration. When considering the survey it concluded that 'the government should tackle the housing in a big way and as a national thing', reflecting Fianna Fáil's rhetoric at the national level.<sup>105</sup> The scale of demand for housing in the town was further underlined when its ten-house scheme was completed in June 1930 and 'there were upwards of 130 applicants, all of them deserving'.<sup>106</sup> In April 1930 the council decided in principle to build 70 houses. As was often the case, the interplay of different interests at the local level resulted in this aspiration being side-lined and, to some extent, supports the rather jaundiced view held by government ministers of how local authorities operated. Through the second half of 1930, rather than push ahead with its housing plans, the council was pre-occupied with managing the contracts for a major waterworks scheme for the town, valued at over £12,000, with clear suggestions that local nepotism was at play.<sup>107</sup> When the scheme went to tender in August 1930 a Belfast company

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<sup>103</sup> Ballina UDC minutes, 6 August 1929.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 11 October 1929.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 20 May 1930.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 22 July 1930.

submitted the lowest bid but the work was awarded to a local contractor, T.J. Reid, who had somewhat mysteriously reduced his tender by £1,000 on the final day for submissions.<sup>108</sup> New tenders were invited and, even then, it took the fortunate uncovering of errors in the tender of a Leeds company, which was now the lowest bidder, before the work could ultimately be awarded to Reid.<sup>109</sup>

Strong suspicion was laid at the door of the Ballina Ratepayers Association for causing delay and ultimately the scaling back of the 70-house scheme. In March 1931 the council decided to acquire two sites, at Pound Street and Ardnaree, by Compulsory Purchase Order. When permission was sought from the Department the council, much to the annoyance of the majority of councillors, was advised to proceed with a small scheme of ten houses. This was despite the fact that 1929 survey returns had shown a requirement for 300 houses and the fact the council had £630 in its housing fund and its existing houses generated a surplus. Suspicion immediately fell on the Ratepayers Association which, it was alleged, opposed the 70-house scheme and had recently sent a delegation to the DLGPH.<sup>110</sup> The incident highlights the influence of some of the entrenched interests who believed increased spending on public housing by town councils challenged their local hegemony. When the association was formed in the summer of 1928 with a view to running candidates in the forthcoming local elections (in which four of their number were successful), its chairman proclaimed ‘the people who paid the piper should be the people who played the tune – it was really the large ratepayers who should play the tune’.<sup>111</sup> A 35-house scheme was approved towards the end of 1931, and it eventually became part of the very extensive housing programme undertaken by the council under the 1932 Housing Act.

When Athy UDC first considered the question of obtaining a housing loan from the LLF in August 1929, it resolved that 200 houses were required, precisely the same number it had reported as being required in 1919 in response to the LGB’s survey.<sup>112</sup> William Strahan, Housing Inspector from the DLGPH, visited the town in January 1930 and found 316 houses unfit for human habitation. By May 1930 it had settled on a programme of 59 houses across three different sites and invited tenders. All four contracts were won by Carberry, the prominent local builder, who submitted the only bids on three of the tenders. The council decided to raise a one-shilling housing rate, as one of the provisions of the 1929 Act was that local authorities that agreed to take this step

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 August 1930.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 October 1930.

<sup>110</sup> *Ballina Herald*, 25 July 1931.

<sup>111</sup> *Ballina Herald*, 9 June 1928.

<sup>112</sup> Athy UDC minutes, 21 August 1929.

could avail of an increased grant of £72 per house rather than the flat £60. In other respects, however, the council proved itself quite fiscally conservative, with significant implications for its early 1930s housing programme. In 1928 it was incurring a modest loss of £70 per year on the thirty houses that it let. In order to preclude any further losses being sustained by the ratepayers it adopted a motion that ‘the housing scheme be self-supporting’. This was consistent with DLGPH policy but was a relatively rare instance in the late 1920s of a council formally adopting this position. In order to cut costs the council considered building some three-roomed houses, but were advised by the Department that this would not be sanctioned.<sup>113</sup> Other councils were similarly inclined to build smaller houses but were generally discouraged from doing so by the DLGPH. This trend towards the four-roomed house is reflected in Table 4.4 and suggests that there were influences at work in the Department other than those seeking to drive down building costs. A memo from DLGPH to Finance in 1928 had argued that

It may almost be necessary to come down so low as to admit that it will be preferable to have the poorer classes of the community housed in dwellings of the ‘shanty’ types than not housed at all.<sup>114</sup>

It may be that by 1929, with the LLF available for housing loans, that the DLGPH no longer needed to advertise to Finance its determination to control costs and could concentrate instead on encouraging councils to build appropriately sized houses.

**Table 4.4**

**Houses of varying numbers of rooms built by local authorities, 1929-32<sup>115</sup>**

Year	Rooms				Total
	2	3	4	5	
1929		156	359	181	696
1930	24	75	831	135	1065
1931		35	716	8	759
1932	75	52	1518	87	1732

*Source: Annual reports of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1929-32*

While the availability of loans from the LLF certainly encouraged local authorities in towns to build – councils in 22 provincial towns completing housing schemes in the twelve months ending 31 March 1932<sup>116</sup> – the cost of the loans and the relatively small state subsidies meant that the rents

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 19 May 1930.

<sup>114</sup> Memorandum on future housing policy (NAI, F136/21/26).

<sup>115</sup> This data relates to all local authorities, both urban and rural. The data is not available at the individual town level.

<sup>116</sup> *Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health 1927-28, 1931-32*, p. 108.

of these houses remained beyond the means of those enduring the poorest housing conditions. In Athy, despite the council resolving that 'every possible economy be used in the building of the houses, steel windows and not wooden windows be put in all the houses in Jail Field site; the question of other economies to be considered',<sup>117</sup> rents were still set at 6s. 6d. (Type No.1) and 6s. 9d. (Type C.7) plus rates per week.<sup>118</sup> This appeared to deter prospective tenants, as only 23 applied for the first 20 houses that became available in the newly named St Patrick's Avenue in April 1931. Four were members of An Garda Síochana and six were from outside Athy town boundaries.<sup>119</sup> When the remaining 16 houses in the scheme were completed in June there were 28 applicants, and of those that were awarded tenancies 12 were non-Athy residents, including four with Dublin addresses and others from Cobh, Enniskillen, Clonmel and Birr.<sup>120</sup> Although the rationale behind the appointment of these tenants is not revealed in the council records, one suspects that the councillors were minded to offer houses to those who were financially solvent, whatever their address. The council minutes obviously piqued the interest of officials in the Department who enquired as to the employment status and current housing conditions of those offered tenancies.<sup>121</sup> On receiving this information the Department replied

in reference to tenants of houses on St Patrick's Avenue, and stating that the Council should endeavour to let the houses in the best interests of the public health of the district, as they do not seem to have let to families living in insanitary districts.<sup>122</sup>

Undeterred, the council subsequently considered offering tenancies to Mrs Lee (Summerhill, Dublin) and Mrs Ward (Athy), having procured references 'as to [their] character and respectability'.<sup>123</sup>

The opening up of the LLF for loans for public housing marked the last state initiative that had a practical effect in provincial towns before the change of government in 1932. However, there were a number of political developments and shifts in housing policy in the years 1929-31 that pre-figured the housing programme of the Fianna Fáil government.

As referred to above, the passage of the 1929 Housing Act through the Oireachteas provided an opportunity for Fianna Fáil to promote the notion that the scale of the housing problem required 'a national solution', although the contributions of party spokesmen to the debate did

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<sup>117</sup> Athy UDC minutes, 7 July 1930.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 October 1931.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 April 1931.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 June 1931.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 June 1931.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 July 1931.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 August 1931.



little to suggest it had devised a coherent housing policy. Seán Lemass, perhaps, came closest to capturing the essence of the party's approach when stating

the problem of erecting the number of houses required should be undertaken by a Housing Board, financed and controlled by the State, with power either to engage directly in the task of building houses or to operate through local government bodies, or even through private individuals as their agents. We think that Board should be empowered to acquire compulsorily such buildings, land, plant, mines or quarries as they think necessary for the efficient carrying out of their work.<sup>124</sup>

Dunphy locates the party's thinking on housing at this time firmly within the context of its industrial policy, with an emphasis on support for native industry behind tariff walls as a means of addressing unemployment.<sup>125</sup> The report of the Committee on the Relief of Unemployment published in 1928 provided useful support for the Fianna Fáil position by advocating that the state invest £15 million over ten years in a housing programme.<sup>126</sup> In the autumn of 1929 the housing volume (number 4) of the 1926 census was published and received wide coverage in both the national and provincial press. Its findings were quickly seized upon by Fianna Fáil. At its Ard Fheis in October, Seán T. O'Kelly quoted extensively from the census returns and asserted that they proved that the party's description of the housing question as a national crisis was no 'exaggeration' and that they had not used 'the sad condition of the poor for purely party political reasons'. Instead 'the figures given in the official report on housing proved that ... they were more than moderate in their statements on the question'.<sup>127</sup>

The preamble to the volume on housing remarks that 'considerable improvement was effected in rural housing after 1911'<sup>128</sup> and goes on to state that 'in the compilation of the 1926 Census attention was concentrated on the towns'.<sup>129</sup> At the national level it showed that towns and cities did experience more crowded conditions than rural areas, with 31.3 percent living more than two to a room in the former and 25.5 percent in the latter. Given the comparisons drawn in Chapter 2 between levels of overcrowding in Ireland (other than the six northern counties that were to constitute Northern Ireland) and County Durham, the numbers living in such conditions in Durham in 1931 fell to just over 20 percent, from 29.5 percent in 1921.<sup>130</sup> Reflecting this emphasis, the volume provides valuable statistical profiles of housing in all towns with populations of over 1,500.

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<sup>124</sup> *Dáil Debates*, 20 March 1929, Vol. 28, No. 9.

<sup>125</sup> Dunphy, *The Making of Fianna Fáil Power in Ireland*, pp 92-93.

<sup>126</sup> *Committee on the Relief of Unemployment; final report* (Dublin, 1928).

<sup>127</sup> *Irish Independent*, 19 October 1929.

<sup>128</sup> *Saorstát Éireann, census of population 1926*, Volume IV, p. vii.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii

<sup>130</sup> *Census of England and Wales 1931, County of Durham* (London, 1932), p. xvi.

However, the twin proxies for housing quality used were persons per room and size of dwelling which obviously only capture some of the dimensions of how people were housed. Notwithstanding this, the picture which emerges confirms that the patterns of small dwellings and overcrowding evident from the 1901 and 1911 census persisted, with the notable exception of rural areas where the Labourers Acts had been actively implemented. In most counties of the Free State, other than along the western seaboard (where few labourers' cottages had been built under the Acts), levels of overcrowding were higher in towns than in rural areas.<sup>131</sup> Across the 74 provincial towns, 9,385 households lived in overcrowded conditions, two thirds of these in one or two-roomed dwellings (see Table 4.5). Unsurprisingly, there is a high correlation ( $r= 0.84$ ) between levels of overcrowding and the proportion of households living in one or two rooms. In towns such as Athy (42.4 percent), Tullamore (34.1 percent) and Edenderry (33.4 percent), more than a third of the population lived in one or two rooms compared to a fifth across the state as a whole.

**Table 4.5**  
**Extent of overcrowding in provincial towns, 1926**

Households			Persons		
in 1 room	1,761	18.8%	in 1 room	7,568	11.8%
in 2 rooms	4,399	46.9%	in 2 rooms	28,486	44.4%
in 3 rooms	2,108	22.5%	in 3 rooms	17,223	26.8%
in 4 rooms	1,117	11.9%	in 4 rooms	10,937	17.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>9,385</b>			<b>64,214</b>	

*Source: Saorstat Éireann, census of population 1926, Volume IV, Table 16*

As shown in Table 4.6 below, the patterns of overcrowding in the fifteen case-study towns in 1926 largely mirror those in 1901, with Leinster towns Edenderry, Tullamore, Drogheda and Athy still having over 30 per cent of their populations living more than two to a room. In 1926 Edenderry remained the country's most 'overcrowded' town, as it had been in 1901. For its size, and by Irish standards, it was quite an industrialised town, dominated by Aylesbury's timber mill which employed several hundred men. The town's growth in population between 1901 and 1926 probably reflected an upturn in the fortunes of the mill. Alongside this, the town was home to two car manufacturing plants, one of which employed forty men.<sup>132</sup> According to the 1926 census,

<sup>131</sup> *Saorstat Éireann, census of population 1926, Volume IV, Table 1.*

<sup>132</sup> Edenderry Historical Society, 'When Edenderry Was Ireland's 'Detroit'', <http://edenderryhistory.blogspot.ie/2013/07/when-edenderry-was-irelands-detroit.html> [accessed 26 January 2016].

almost a third of the town's adult male population were employed in wood, furniture and metal industries.<sup>133</sup> The mills attracted a semi-migrant workforce, many of whom lived in poor conditions.

In 1925 local Labour TD, William Davin, asked the minister for LGPH

if he has received complaints regarding the shortage of suitable housing accommodation in the town of Edenderry, Offaly, and the refusal of the Town Commissioners, by a very small majority, to proceed with a new housing scheme as demanded in a memorial signed by the majority of the residents; whether he has been informed that the lack of suitable accommodation is preventing Messrs. Alesbury Bros. from employing a larger number of workers in their factory...

He went on to state that 'there were human beings living in stables in this town, and that the stables were owned by members of the Town Commission'.<sup>134</sup> Based on this data, levels of overcrowding in Tuam and Ballina increased between 1901 and 1926 and it is noteworthy that relatively few houses were built by the local authorities in these towns. On the other hand, Navan stands out as experiencing a significant drop in levels of overcrowding, its council having one of the highest rates of local authority houses built in the country at 33 per 1000 population.

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<sup>133</sup> *Saorstát Éireann, census of population 1926*, Vol. 2, Table 9.

<sup>134</sup> *Dail Debates*, 18 November 1925, Vol. 13, No. 6.

**Table 4.6****Levels of overcrowding, population change rates of local authority house building, 1901-26**

Town	1901 >2 per room	1926 > 2 per room	Houses built by municipal authorities to 1926	1901 pop <sup>135</sup>	1926 pop	% change in pop	Houses Built/1000 pop
Edenderry	46.7%	38.0%	0	1611	2092	29.9%	0
Tullamore	35.8%	32.8%	111	4639	4830	4.1%	23
Drogheda	38.0%	32.7%	250	12760	12716	-0.3%	20
Athy	35.9%	30.1%	30	3599	3460	-3.9%	9
Kilrush	33.4%	30.0%	6	4179	3345	-20.0%	2
Tuam	24.4%	29.9%	54	2896	3293	13.7%	16
Listowel	31.8%	29.9%	0	3605	2917	-19.1%	0
Tralee	32.5%	29.7%	118	9867	10533	6.7%	11
Ballina	24.3%	27.7%	54	4505	4873	8.2%	11
Fermoy	24.3%	23.8%	122	6126	4510	-26.4%	27
Navan	36.4%	21.1%	119	3839	3652	-4.9%	33
Arklow	32.8%	20.8%	120	4944	4535	-8.3%	26
Enniscorthy	22.0%	19.3%	98	5458	5543	1.6%	18
Longford	17.7%	18.4%	124	3747	3685	-1.7%	34
Clones	6.5%	10.5%	7	2068	2365	14.4%	3

*Source: 1901 Census House and Building Return forms, Census of Population 1926, Volume IV, Housing, Table 16; Annual report of DLGPH 1926-27, Census of Ireland 1901; Saorstát Éireann, census of population 1926, Vol. I*

What the census does not capture is the decrepit state of many dwellings that may not have been overcrowded. We can obtain some sense of this by comparing the number of households living in overcrowded conditions in 1926 with the number of houses deemed unfit for human habitation and approved for demolition in the 1930s, shown in Table 4.7. The data for demolitions was the product of often protracted discussions between local authorities, medical officers of health and other officials and the DLGPH, and so are not an objective measure of housing quality. Notwithstanding this, the data shows that in towns such as Arklow, Athy, Ballina, Enniscorthy and Tralee the number of families living in dwellings ordered to be demolished was between 50 and 100 percent higher than those living in overcrowded conditions.<sup>136</sup> This confirms that the scale of

<sup>135</sup> The population of Fermoy and, to a lesser extent, Longford in 1901 is inflated by the presence of army barracks. About half of Longford's public housing was built before 1901 so the impact of its housing programme between 1901 and 1926 is more modest than in Navan.

<sup>136</sup> Data on the number of houses ordered to be demolished was published in the appendices to the annual reports of the DLGPH through the 1930s and into the 1940s.

sub-standard housing, as determined by councils in the 1930s, is not reflected in a simple reading of the numbers recorded as living in overcrowded conditions in the published census.

**Table 4.7**

**Overcrowded households (1926) and households in dwellings ordered to be demolished (1932-45)**

Town	Overcrowded households 1926	Households in dwellings ordered to be demolished 1932-45
Arklow	144	262
Athy	123	224
Ballina	180	344
Clones	29	99
Drogheda	544	380
Edenderry	109	40
Enniscorthy	121	244
Fermoy	137	87
Kilrush	138	123
Listowel	138	74
Longford	78	105
Navan	91	83
Tralee	405	683
Tuam	108	107
Tullamore	220	212
<b>Total</b>	<b>2565</b>	<b>3067</b>

*Source: Saorstát Éireann, census of population 1926, Volume IV, Housing, Table 16; Annual report of DLGPH 1944-45, Appendix xxix*

The results of the 1929 housing needs survey were published in the annual report of the DLGPH in 1930 but do not appear to have informed public discourse on the housing question in the same way as the census report published a year earlier. Instead, the actual carrying out of the survey and the results compiled by Sanitary Officers and Medical Officers of Health, as described above in Ballina, had the effect of educating councillors regarding conditions in their own towns. Council minutes suggest that many councillors has little direct experience of housing conditions in the poorer areas of their towns. An editorial piece in the *Limerick Leader* in 1931 argued that

outside the priests and the workers of the St Vincent de Paul Society not even one in a hundred, we venture to think, has the faintest idea of the horrible evils and dangers inherent in the slums .... Few, indeed, have anything like a well-informed knowledge for what their existence means, not only for those who are unfortunate enough to have to dwell in them but for the city in general.<sup>137</sup>

<sup>137</sup> *Limerick Leader*, 5 December 1931.

The 1929 survey required councils to quantify their towns' housing needs under five headings, as shown in Table 4.8. The overall figures indicate that councils believed about 15,000 were required in provincial towns. According to the returns about 10,000 sub-standard houses (including those in 'unhealthy areas') needed to be replaced, with the balance to meet the requirements of those in overcrowded conditions. However, the data tells us almost as much about the level of diligence employed by councils in conducting the survey as it does about local housing conditions, as councils obviously categorised housing needs in different ways. In Enniscorthy, for example, only 57 houses were returned as 'unhealthy' or 'unfit', but 244 were ordered to be demolished in the 1930s. Four reasonably substantial towns – Arklow, Clones, Portlaoise and Kells – made no returns while the returns for several others suggest that fairly perfunctory process was gone through in arriving at their estimates of housing need. For example, Carlow UDC's return indicating a requirement for 704 new houses seems excessive given that the 1926 census only recorded 1,249 households. Tralee UDC's estimate of 1,000 houses being required, apart from being a convenient round number, appears high given that the town was home to just under 2,000 households in 1926. It also puts into context the modest scale of its housing programme – 30 houses – between 1922 and 1929. Other councils, such as Navan, appear to have conducted a more scrupulous survey and identified 75 houses as unhealthy or unfit; during the town's 1930s building programme 63 houses were actually demolished.

**Table 4.8**

**Aggregate returns of housing needs survey of 1929 (65 of 74 provincial towns)**

Houses required to	Houses	No. of towns
meet unsatisfied demand	4768	54
rehouse persons displaced by clearance of unhealthy areas	3734	36
replace unfit houses	2681	40
replace obstructive or other buildings	441	9
replace houses below a reasonable standard	2733	44
meet anticipated deficiencies arising from industrial development	422	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>14779</b>	

*Source: Annual report of Department of Local Government and Public Health 1929-1930, Appendix xxvii*

Through the latter half of 1930 and into 1931 'the slum problem' attained a higher profile in public and political discourse and forced government spokesmen onto the defensive. The restoration of Dublin Corporation in the autumn of 1930 re-established a forum that brought the housing question to the attention of the national press, and its Housing Committee was soon identifying clearance areas for redevelopment.<sup>138</sup> Coverage of the housing question in the press at this time suggests that Fianna Fáil's characterisation over several years of housing as 'a national problem' was in tune with public sentiment. In Dublin, in particular, the slums were increasingly regarded as 'a national shame', and some saw them as a blot on the landscape as they looked forward to the Eucharistic Congress in 1932.<sup>139</sup>

The housing question, in Dublin at least, appears to have had its most public airing at a series of meetings held in the Mansion House, culminating on 14 July 1931 in what the *Irish Independent* called 'a mass meeting of the citizens in the Mansion House' declaring 'a war on the slums'.<sup>140</sup> Held under the auspices of the Civics Institute of Ireland, the meeting ultimately broke up in disorder when a contribution by Jim Larkin 'encountered considerable interruption', and was followed by a Mr Murray calling for a rent strike in all slum properties. Earlier a motion proposed by Fr T.F. Ryan, S.J., was passed calling for the housing problem to be dealt with as 'a great national problem, to fix a definite plan to wipe out the entire slums and [replace] them by decent houses let at a rent that the people can pay'.<sup>141</sup>

In viewing the government response in the form of the 1931 Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, it seems reasonable to assume that it was influenced by the Greenwood Act passed in Britain in 1930. The initial draft of the legislation, as pointed out by Daly, mirrored some of its provisions and the Department of Finance were disposed to copy the British 'who are wise guys, and probably thought the whole thing out carefully'.<sup>142</sup> The key feature of the Greenwood Act, and of the 1931 Housing Act, is that it decisively shifted the emphasis of state support to slum clearance. In 1924 the first Labour government had introduced the Wheatley Act which offered a flat £9 per house per year grant for 40 years to local authorities and obliged them to make a specific contribution through the rates.<sup>143</sup> As its provisions were not specifically directed towards ameliorating 'slum conditions', the Act supported 'general needs building' in much the same way as the £1 million scheme and the subsequent Housing Acts in the Free State through the 1920s. In

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<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 July 1931.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 July 1931.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 July 1931.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> Quoted in Daly, *Buffer State*, p. 217.

<sup>143</sup> Housing (Financial Provisions) Act 1924 (14 & 15 Geo. 5 c. 35).

Britain the impact of the Wheatley Act was of a completely different order to that of the Irish Housing Acts and was responsible for the provision of over half a million council houses. Nevertheless, as in the Free State, those housed were the better off semi-skilled workers in fairly safe jobs.<sup>144</sup>

The Greenwood Act provided subsidies, paid on an annual basis like the Wheatley subsidies, based on the numbers being moved from insanitary dwellings and rehoused.<sup>145</sup> The 1931 Act included a similar provision in that a subsidy would be paid each year for each house, rather than the up-front payment that was a feature of previous legislation. This had the advantage of spreading the cost to the Exchequer over an extended period. The loan charges for houses built to accommodate those moved from clearance areas and condemned dwellings were to be subsidised by 30 per cent for the first fifteen years and by 20 per cent for the subsequent fifteen years. Loan charges for other houses built by municipal authorities were to attract subsidies of 20 per cent for the first thirteen years and 15 per cent for the subsequent five years. Houses built under the Act were to benefit from a two-thirds remission of rates for the first seven years.<sup>146</sup>

A significant feature of the Act was the powers vested in municipal authorities to define and acquire 'Clearance Areas' under Compulsory Purchase Orders. Owners of property in such areas would receive the site value only and were liable for the costs associated with the demolition and clearance of condemned buildings, mirroring similar clauses in the Greenwood Act.<sup>147</sup> As we shall see in the next chapter, this provision, replicated in the 1932 Act, represented a financial threat to the position of a particular stratum of landlords in provincial towns. Pre-figuring the disputes that this provision would generate, Sir John Keane<sup>148</sup> in the Seanad claimed that they were unfair to property owners as 'there might ... be dwellings which none of us, perhaps, might like to live in, but which at the same time are not quite as bad as they might be'.<sup>149</sup> He expressed concern at what he regarded as the arbitrary power vested in medical officer of health in these circumstances as 'some of them come hot-foot from their schools of hygiene with peculiar ideas as to what is insanitary. To them everything is insanitary that smells.'<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Bowley, *Housing and the State*, p. 129.

<sup>145</sup> Seán Lemass expressed support for this form of subsidy in the debate on the 1931 Housing Act although it did not feature in Fianna Fail's 1932 Act – see *Dáil Debates*, 27 November 1931, Vol. 40, No. 18.

<sup>146</sup> Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 1931, Part VIII, section 64.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, Part II, sections 5 and 6.

<sup>148</sup> Sir John Keane was an Independent senator appointed by the President of the provisional government in 1922.

<sup>149</sup> *Seanad Éireann Debates*, 2 December 1931, Vol. 14, No. 40.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*



The debate on the Act involved discussion of dozens of amendments, many seeking to provide for grants for farmers building or reconstructing houses in rural areas. The government's refusal to commit additional funding can be viewed in the context of its introduction of a supplementary budget on 30 October, with an increase of 6d. in the pound in income tax and petrol by 4d. a gallon. This was designed to plug an emerging gap in the state's finances as a poor harvest had depressed trade.<sup>151</sup> It did concede, however, on the question of grants to private builders; having initially decided to withdraw the £40 subsidy available under the 1929 Act, it now reduced it to £20. Other changes in the Act from its original draft reflected successful lobbying on the part of the building industry, with an increase in the size of houses qualifying for grants and remission of rates. The Dublin and District House Builders Association proudly advertised its success in influencing government policy when listing these changes in a letter to the *Irish Press* in December.<sup>152</sup>

As the Act passed through the Dáil and the Seanad, much of the debate centred on the likely rents that councils would be obliged to charge given the level of subsidy available. In the event the views put forward regarding the adequacy of the level of subsidy were not tested, as the Act was one of the last pieces of legislation to be passed by the 6<sup>th</sup> Dáil on 17 December 1931 and its provisions were rendered redundant by the change in government two months later. In Drogheda, where several housing schemes were in train in early 1932, a copy of the Act only became available in April, at which point the town clerk advised a postponement in setting rents given the expected enhanced subsidies promised by the new Fianna Fáil-led government.<sup>153</sup> Similar decisions were made in other towns as councils anticipated increased largesse on the part of central government. Cumann na Gaedheal's promotion of the 1931 Act in the face of what it viewed as a crisis in the public finances suggests a stronger line of continuity between its housing policy, at least as articulated in 1931, and what followed in 1932. However, at many levels a new era for public housing dawned as Fianna Fáil, with Labour Party support, assumed power in early March. Soon, according to the secretary of the DLGPH, a 'fiery cross' was to be carried by the new minister across the country encouraging councils to build.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Fanning, *The Irish Department of Finance*, pp 206-14.

<sup>152</sup> *Irish Press*, 3 December 1931.

<sup>153</sup> Drogheda Corporation minutes, 5 April 1932.

<sup>154</sup> Rates of interest charged by Local Loans Fund (NAI, F60/10/33).

## An assessment

In assessing Cumann na nGaedheal's housing policy, Daly argues that the absence of anything approaching a national plan was due to a combination of ideology and personnel issues.<sup>155</sup> She points out that many of the senior staff who had been employed in the Ministry of Transport prior to 1922 transferred *en bloc* to the DLGPH while those involved in housing policy in the LGB were dispersed across a range of civil service departments. The result was that much of the department's energy was given over to promoting investment in roads. Cumann na nGaedheal's stated high regard for home ownership was reflected in the manner in which the DLGPH pressurised local councils to sell houses they built under the £1 million scheme and subsequent housing acts in the 1920s.

In introducing the 1929 Housing Bill, General Mulcahy admitted that state subsidised housing during the 1920s had done little to address the housing of the poor, but he claimed that elevated building costs had made this goal impractical. In an attempt to justify the trajectory of housing policy since 1922, which those trapped in insanitary housing were unlikely to appreciate, he suggested that

By directing the policy to the provision of houses for the better-paid working classes and the middle classes generally and at the same time inducing capital to the building industry for the purpose of putting it on its feet again after the post-war stagnation we prepared the ground for the present policy.<sup>156</sup>

During the second reading of the bill he articulated a further dimension of the government's policy

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The financial aspect of the problem is so great that, apart from other reasons, the State cannot bear on its shoulders the burden of solving this particular problem, particularly where there does exist or is supposed to exist, as far as the Central Government is concerned, machinery in the local authorities which could be more adapted for the purpose.<sup>157</sup>

This suggestion that the responsibility for the provision of public housing be devolved to local authorities was not one that was made seriously. If Mulcahy believed that the state could not afford to address the problem of poor housing then it was disingenuous to claim that local authorities could do so. His views expressed a reluctance to consider the housing problem as one amenable to state action. When Thomas Johnston quoted statistics from the 1926 census report

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<sup>155</sup> Daly, *Buffer State*, p. 148-49.

<sup>156</sup> *Dáil Debates*, 2 December 1931, Vol. 14, No. 40.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 March 1929, Vol. 28, No. 12.

on housing regarding levels of overcrowding in Dublin Mulcahy's response was a symbolic washing of the hands as he queried

What reason should the Government stand for any restriction of rent, for any subsidies for the building of houses or for any Government interference in the organisation of the building trade? ... He knew that many families were living in appalling conditions, although earning £3, £4 and £5 a week, and he knew that many of them had no desire to shift from their slums.<sup>158</sup>

This stands in contrast to the political priority attached to it by the IPP two decades earlier. It was even a retreat from that articulated by Earnest Blythe in 1923 who, in calculating that £30 million would be required to address the housing problem, conceded that 'it will be a saving in health; it will be a saving in man power; it will be a saving in police, if it goes to that. It will even be a means for promoting industry, because better work can be done by people who are well housed.'<sup>159</sup> Of course in political terms the policy implied by Mulcahy's utterances was not sustainable and the 1931 Housing Act was in large part a response to the heightened public profile of the housing question and Fianna Fáil's demands for a state-led response. Through the 1920s Cumann na nGaedheal's options regarding public expenditure and investment in infrastructure such as water, sewerage and housing were certainly constrained by the need to repair the damage wrought by the War of Independence and the Civil War and to control public debt.<sup>160</sup> But its ideological commitment to low taxes and low public spending meant that state housing policy was unambitious and was not directed towards addressing the issue of poor housing. The text of T.W. Cosgrave's 1922 memorandum quoted at the opening of this chapter proved prophetic and housing policy as it evolved through the 1920s further undermines simplistic notions of a benevolent state responding to housing need.

There is a hint in Mulcahy's remarks quoted above regarding the alleged unwillingness of slum dwelling families earning decent wages to move to superior accommodation of class attitudes that may have contributed to Cumann na nGaedheal's lack of enthusiasm for tackling poor housing conditions. Knirck describes the manner in which the party's TDs occasionally responded to hecklers at public meetings as 'suffused with class prejudices and assumptions'.<sup>161</sup> He quotes Patrick Hogan, Minister for Land and Agriculture, as responding to an interrupter by stating 'he did not come here to look for the votes of wastrels but for the votes of men who worked'.<sup>162</sup> On another

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<sup>158</sup> *Irish Independent*, 4 July 1930.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 May 1923, Vol. 4, No. 10.

<sup>160</sup> Daly, *Buffer State*, pp 142-45.

<sup>161</sup> Jason Krinck, *Afterimage of the Revolution: Cumann na nGaedheal and Irish Politics* (Wisconsin, 2014), p, 245.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

occasion Hogan responded to a heckler saying the party only wanted votes from ‘the decent people anxious to make a decent livelihood’.<sup>163</sup> ‘Knirck sets these attitudes in the context of the growing electoral threat of Fianna Fáil in the late 1920s and Cumann na nGaedheal’s increasing suspicion of an electorate ‘that it perceived as hostile and ungrateful’.<sup>164</sup> But they also echo sentiments expressed at local level by Fine Gael councillors in the 1930s when opposing ‘slum clearance’ in favour of ‘better class’ housing.<sup>165</sup> Subsidy for working class housing was on occasion described as a form of philanthropy while grants for private housing promoted a property-owning democracy.<sup>166</sup> All of this suggests a social distance between the party and those most likely to benefit from state expenditure on public housing. Notwithstanding this, Cumann na nGaedheal’s 1931 Housing Act was the first to target local authority housing at those in greatest need. It would fall to Fianna Fáil to take ownership of the policy and shape the provision of public housing in the following decade.

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., p. 244.

<sup>165</sup> Instances are discussed below in Chapter 5 relating to Monaghan and Midleton.

<sup>166</sup> The Fine Gael dominated Monaghan UDC, when discussing the issue of subsidising the rents of newly built council houses in 1934, insisted that it was not ‘a philanthropic body’ (*Anglo-Celt*, 24 November 1934).

## Chapter 5

### The Fianna Fáil housing programme in Irish towns

*As far as this government is concerned, nothing will be left undone to see that money is made available to fulfil the duty and the Christian obligation of providing decent accommodation for all those still living in insanitary conditions.<sup>1</sup>*

The 1931 Housing Act marked a clear reorientation of housing policy towards addressing the problem of insanitary dwellings and away from support for new private housing. Initially, officials in both Finance and the DLGPH urged that all support for private building be withdrawn but political imperatives ensured that under the legislation a reduced grant of £20 continued to be available, and the upper limit for house values that could be funded by Small Dwellings Acquisition Acts mortgages was raised to £1,000.<sup>2</sup> As discussed in the preceding chapter, ‘addressing the housing problem’ formed part of Fianna Fáil’s post-1927 political programme and certainly acted as a lever in shifting Cumann na nGaedheal housing policy. The 1932 general election campaign was a short, sharp affair lasting a little over two weeks, and housing did not feature that prominently.<sup>3</sup> The Labour Party manifesto echoed the call for a ‘national scheme of housing’ which had been a regular feature of Fianna Fáil rhetoric in the preceding years, and it pointed out that over 110,000 houses had been built in Scotland in 1922-30 while only 23,000 were built in the Free State.<sup>4</sup> Regarding the Fianna Fáil campaign, housing featured as part of its programme of public investment designed to promote employment, its position accurately reflected in the election leaflet reproduced in Appendix 8. Advocating a state-wide housing programme had obvious electoral advantages and, by linking it with the use of Irish material and local industries, the appeal could be extended to key interests beyond those being rehoused. The outgoing government found itself on the defensive both in Dublin,<sup>5</sup> where little

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<sup>1</sup> Seán T. O’Kelly speaking in Drogheda in August 1939, *Irish Press*, 22 August 1939.

<sup>2</sup> The first Small Dwellings Acquisitions Act was enacted in 1899 and made provision for the granting of loans by local authorities to tenants of modest dwellings who wished to buy out the interest in their homes from private landlords. See Small Dwellings Acquisitions Act 1899 (62 & 63 Vict. c. 44).

<sup>3</sup> Frank Barry and Mary Daly, ‘Irish perceptions of the great depression’, IIS Discussion Paper No. 349, Jan 2011, p.10, <https://www.tcd.ie/iis/documents/discussion/pdfs/iisdsp349.pdf> (accessed 4 March 2016); Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985*, pp 168-72.

<sup>4</sup> *Meath Chronicle*, 13 February 1932.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Seán Lemass’s speech on the launch of his campaign in the South City constituency as reported in the *Irish Independent* of 23 January 1932 where he claimed there was no city in Europe of similar size in which the housing conditions were worse.

progress had been made in the preceding ten years to address the problem of the insanitary and overcrowded tenements, and in rural areas where the Labourers Acts had been overlooked in favour of grants to those building private dwellings.<sup>6</sup> Nor was there much political traction in pointing to the potential of the recently passed 1931 Housing Act.

While much of the political discourse around housing in the years leading up to 1932 focused on conditions in Dublin and other cities, rural TDs proved themselves vocal advocates for increased subsidies for farmers and labourers. Debate on the 1931 Act saw Fianna Fáil TDs and senators condemn its neglect of rural housing, with one asserting that ‘the claims of the rural areas are far greater than the claims of the cities and towns’ and that the Act ‘wipes out all the assistance and encouragement that was given in the past in rural areas’.<sup>7</sup> Wildly inaccurate versions of statistics from the 1926 census volume on housing were quoted, including a claim by Fianna Fáil senator Seán MacEllin that over a million rural dwellers were living in one-roomed houses. Tom Johnson helpfully pointed out that the actual figure was less than 50,000.<sup>8</sup> When the new minister for Local Government and Public Health, Seán T. O’Kelly, made a much anticipated statement on planned housing legislation to the Dáil on 25 May 1932, it was clear that subsidies and grants would be liberally dispersed and that political calculations would ensure a less exclusive prioritisation of urban ‘slum clearance’ than was evident in the 1931 Act. The Government, he stated, were satisfied that

increased State subsidies are necessary to enable the provision of all the houses needed and that increased grants are required to encourage private persons and public utility societies to join with local authorities in the provision of the houses.<sup>9</sup>

He went on to outline a schedule of increased grants to be made available to private persons building in towns (£60), farmers with valuations less than £15 (£70), farmers with valuations of between £15 and £25 (£60) and other in rural areas (£45). In order to encourage the formation of public utility societies he announced grants of £80 for farmers with less than £15 valuation and £70 for those below £25 valuation. Despite being pressed by some opposition TDs as to the new level of subsidy that would be available to municipal authorities, this information was not made public until the bill was circulated at the end of June. This may have reflected the need to calibrate the level of subsidy carefully, as the provisions of the legislation meant that those living in condemned dwellings would be obliged to vacate them and move to newly built council

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<sup>6</sup> In Clare, the *Irish Independent* of 27 January 1932 reported Labour TD, Patrick Hogan, as stating ‘there were thousands of one-roomed houses where the sexes were herded together’.

<sup>7</sup> *Seanad Éireann Debates*, 2 December 1931, Vol. 14, No.40.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Dail Debates*, 25 May 1932, Vol. 41, No. 18.

houses where the level of rents would be critical. In December 1931 contributions by Labour TD, Richard Corish, a long-standing mayor of Wexford, during the debate on the level of subsidies proposed under the 1931 Act, appeared to show they would result in rents of between 5s. 9d. and 8s. per week for those displaced from Clearance Areas, even where the new houses cost a modest £250.<sup>10</sup> When announced, the 1932 Act increased the subsidy proposed in the 1931 Act from 40 per cent to 66.6 per cent for 'slum clearance' housing, and from 15 per cent to 33.3 per cent for other housing built by municipal authorities. And while urban housing conditions featured prominently in Seán T O'Kelly's speech, when the bill had its second reading in the Dáil the range of subsidies and grants available to rural labourers and farmers, to public utility societies and to those purchasing properties under the Small Dwellings Acquisitions Act indicated the scope of the legislation and succeeded in stifling any criticism from the opposition benches. The opposition response mostly consisted of questions dealing with points of detail and enquiries regarding how soon the grants and subsidies might be paid.<sup>11</sup> The *Irish Builder*, commenting on the Act's generous provisions, remarked that

One can only attribute to political excitements and to public absorption in the affairs of the Eucharist Congress, the apparent indifference shown to the recent announcement by the Minister of Local Government of ... [its] far-reaching extensions.<sup>12</sup>

It went on to describe the very generous provisions in the Act relating to the Small Dwellings Acquisitions Act (whereby private individuals could draw down 90 percent mortgages from the LLF and avail of a £60 grant) as 'bold almost to the point of rashness'.<sup>13</sup>

In taking the second reading of the Bill, O'Kelly spoke in terms which had not been heard previously from a government minister, when he described the housing conditions 'of our poorer classes' as 'a stain on our national honour'<sup>14</sup> and the language he used certainly conveyed a sense of urgency. By the spring of 1933 the DLGPH's annual report could claim that 81 municipal authorities had housing schemes either in progress or in preparation under the new Act.<sup>15</sup> Before exploring the Act's impact in provincial towns, it may be useful to reflect on the wider political and economic context that framed a quite dramatic upturn in public housing provision under the new government. Fianna Fáil came to power in March 1932 under the most inauspicious of financial circumstances. The British government's decision in September 1931

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 November 1931, Vol. 40, No.18.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 July 1932, Vol. 43, No. 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Irish Builder*, 2 July 1932, p. 600.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Dáil debates*, 8 July 1932, Vol.43, No.4

<sup>15</sup> *Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health 1931-32*, p.107

to remove sterling from the gold standard created considerable uncertainty and falling tax revenues and a growing deficit led the Department of Finance to urge 'drastic economies on public expenditure' on the out-going Cumann na nGaedheal government.<sup>16</sup> Fanning's work shows that the understandable apprehension of senior officials in Finance at the prospect of their new political masters imposing wholesale demotions and dismissals was unfounded. At the same time, though, the central role of the Department in shaping government policy was undermined.

Under the previous administration Finance regularly obstructed the implementation of cabinet decisions by various delaying tactics. But this was short-circuited by a procedure adopted by the new cabinet insisting that responses from Finance to policy initiatives must be forthcoming within two weeks.<sup>17</sup> As the government drew up its first budget in March, Finance indicated that a draft including additional expenditure and taxation would leave a deficit of £1.5 million, a prospect that would not have been contemplated by the Cumann na nGaedheal administration. Fianna Fáil, apart from its own housing policy, was dependent on Labour Party support to have the budget passed and that party's demands included a commitment to a major housing programme. In any case, the party was committed to increased social spending, taking the form of an additional £250,000 allocated to old age pensions in its first budget. So, while the Minister for Finance, Seán McEntee, was a fiscal conservative,<sup>18</sup> his budget speech on 11 May nevertheless included a commitment to make available £5 million from the LLF for housing which would cost the exchequer £150,000 in interest and sinking fund charges in the following year. Dunphy argues that had Fianna Fáil ministers confronted the economic orthodoxy of the civil service, a more interventionist state could have '[altered] the power structures of Irish society' and have delivered more progressive economic and social outcomes.<sup>19</sup> However, this perspective tends to ascribe a potential radicalism to the party which it did not possess. The party comfortably accommodated McEntee's views on the singular contribution of private enterprise and individual thrift to the country's progress. Lee characterises this stance as displaying an 'encyclopaedic innocence of Irish economic history'.<sup>20</sup> So, while Lemass at one point may have argued for a state bank and a break with sterling, any real challenge to the powerful position of the commercial banks soon dissipated. Nevertheless, as described by Barry

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<sup>16</sup> Fanning, *Department of Finance*, pp 206-14.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>18</sup> His speech included the assertion that 'no authority on public finance would attempt to justify borrowing to provide for services like public works and buildings, grants to universities and forestry'. *Dáil Debates*, 11 May 1932, Vol. 41, No.11.

<sup>19</sup> Dunphy, *The Making of Fianna Fáil Power*, Chapter 4.

<sup>20</sup> Lee, *Ireland 1922-85*, p. 200.



and Daly, Fianna Fáil's first budget in May 1932 'marked a major break with the parsimony of the past', with government spending rising from 24 per cent of GDP in 1931-32 to over 30 per cent the following year.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to the Cumann na nGaedheal governments, however, Fianna Fáil was quite willing to raise taxes and, despite increased public spending through the 1930s, fiscal deficits averaged only 3 percent.<sup>22</sup>

### **The housing programme and the Department of Finance**

At a political level it is apparent that the party's room for manoeuvre in terms of social spending was not constrained by ideology in the way that had proved electorally disastrous for Cumann na nGaedheal. A popular housing programme may have required Seán T O'Kelly, the Minister in charge, to slip the reins of the Department of Finance, but one can understand how the prospect of the political dividend easily outweighed that of confronting senior civil servants, used to getting their own way with Cumann na nGaedheal ministers. Given the current inaccessibility of relevant DLGPH files relating to this period, perhaps the most revealing documentation illustrating the tensions between Finance's consistent efforts to control public spending and O'Kelly's determination to meet the demand for housing grants and subsidies can be found in files dealing with the LLF. When loans from the LLF were initially made available for housing in 1929, the rate of interest charged to local authorities was set at 5.75 per cent and this remained unchanged through to 1934. However, international interest rates fell from 1932 onwards and the Irish government succeeded in floating the Fourth National Loan (amounting to £6 million) at 3.5 percent in late 1933. A Department of Finance memo of 21 February 1934 conceded that it could

no longer withstand the pressure ... for reduced rates of interest in advances from the Local Loans Fund, but it is clear that we cannot accede to anything like the extravagant claims made by Deputies or by Local Authorities individuals or through such organisations as County Councils.<sup>23</sup>

In a comment clearly reflecting Finance's desire to suppress the drawdown of loans from the LLF, it suggested 'the lower the interest rate, the greater the inducement to Local Authorities and others to seek accommodation from the Fund'.<sup>24</sup> Between 1932 and 1933 loans advanced

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<sup>21</sup> Frank Barry and Mary Daly, 'Irish perceptions of the great depression', IIS Discussion Paper No. 349, Jan 2011 [available at <https://www.tcd.ie/iis/documents/discussion/pdfs/iisd349.pdf>] accessed 4 March 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Ó Gráda, *Ireland: A New Economic History*, pp 420-21.

<sup>23</sup> Rates of interest charged by Local Loans Fund (NAI, F 60/10/33).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

for housing from the LLF had increased from £440,000 to £785,000,<sup>25</sup> a development which Finance regarded as 'reckless', describing it as a 'piling up of indebtedness at a time when rate collections are in such an unsatisfactory condition and the economic outlook for the agricultural and other sections of the community is so uncertain'.<sup>26</sup> At a meeting between senior officials in Finance and DLGPH on 1 March 1933, Assistant Secretary from Finance, Arthur Codling, described housing subsidies as 'a crucial part of the problem' in encouraging high levels of local authority indebtedness. The Secretary in DLGPH, E.P. McCarron, remarked with apparent concern that his minister O'Kelly was 'carrying a "fiery cross" through the country and had regularly emphasised that money should be found to solve the housing problem'.<sup>27</sup> Codling argued that if the rate of interest on LLF loans was to be reduced, then the question of housing subsidies should be revisited. The issue of reducing the interest rate on LLF loans featured at the annual conference of the IAMI in September 1934. Several speakers condemned the delay in cutting the rate, questioned why municipal authorities in England could borrow at 2.5 percent and demanded that the new rate should be no more than 4 percent. The high rate, it was pointed out, was a cost to ratepayers as they were obliged to subsidize rents which would otherwise be unaffordable for those being displaced from condemned houses under the 1931 and 1932 Housing Acts.<sup>28</sup> Eventually Finance introduced the rate cut on 1 October 1934, but limited the scale of the cut from 5.75 per cent to 4.75 per cent. Despite the best efforts of senior officials in Finance the level of subsidies (two-thirds of loan charges for dwellings accommodating those moving from condemned houses and one-third for other dwellings) remained untouched. This was despite the fact that Arthur Codling claimed that the rates of subsidy included in the 1932 had not been sanctioned by Finance in the first place.<sup>29</sup> McElligott, ever anxious to educate local authorities on the perils of increased spending, suggested that a reduction in the subsidy 'would make the problem of housing costs more intelligible'.<sup>30</sup> McCarron, however, emphasised the formidable challenge that he faced when he explained 'it would be useless to ask the Minister for Local Government to agree to a reduction in the subsidy ... His speeches in the Dáil and in the country were to the effect that the provision of housing must proceed at all costs'.<sup>31</sup> In fact O'Kelly went so far in his public speeches to hint at the opposition he was encountering from Finance in his valiant attempts to address the housing

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<sup>25</sup> These figures are taken from the annual reports of DLGPH for the years 1932-33 (p. 106) and 1933-34 (p. 124) and refer to the financial years 1 April 1932 to 31 March 1933 and 1 April 1933 to 31 March 1934.

<sup>26</sup> Rates of interest charged by Local Loans Fund (NAI, F 60/10/33).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 12 September 1934.

<sup>29</sup> Rates of interest charged by Local Loans Fund (NAI, F 60/10/33).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

problem. At the opening of one of the largest schemes completed in that provincial town in the 1930s – the 234-house Wolfe Tone Square in Bray – he emphasised the support he was receiving from Eamon De Valera who, he said, as soon as they assumed office told him that ‘the sooner he provided them with a new Housing Bill the better he (the President) would be pleased’.<sup>32</sup> His speech continued with a pointed barb – ‘although his Department had been criticised by Finance Department with a view to ensure they would get value for money, the Government never had refused to give the money’.<sup>33</sup>

Finance’s failure to extinguish O’Kelly’s ‘fiery cross’ is reflected in the fact that the scale of housing subsidies continued to increase, from £301,000 in 1933-34 to £801,000 in 1937-38.<sup>34</sup> The surge in council house building in provincial towns from 1933 onwards certainly marked a victory of sorts for O’Kelly’s department over Finance. While McCarron may have expressed some reservations about his minister’s enthusiasm for promoting the housing programme, and seldom challenged the positions put forward by McElligott and other Finance officials at inter-departmental meetings, he, nevertheless, denied that there was ‘much recklessness among Local Authorities in the matter of increasing their debts except where they were dominated by labour interests’.<sup>35</sup> McElligott, on the other hand, used every opportunity to express his opposition to increased spending. When the prospect of radical reform of local authorities was mooted he suggested that this called for additional caution because ‘in the fear that they might be abolished [they] might try to popularise themselves by extravagant borrowing’.<sup>36</sup>

### **The Housing Board**

Tensions between Finance and DLGPH form a backdrop to the housing programme in provincial towns right through the 1930s. A third institutional player was the Housing Board, established by Minister O’Kelly in October 1932. The Board has received very little attention in the literature, despite the fact that O’Kelly regularly proclaimed its key role in the delivery of the housing programme. The creation of such a body had been regularly touted by Fianna Fáil spokesmen in the Dáil when in opposition, and at that point it was envisaged that it would have extensive powers to compulsorily acquire building land, quarries and mines. During the summer of 1932 O’Kelly presented proposals on roughly these lines to the Executive Council with additional

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<sup>32</sup> *Irish Press*, 23 January 1936.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Daly, *Buffer State*, p. 221.

<sup>35</sup> Rates of interest charged by Local Loans Fund (NAI, F 60/10/33).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

powers to engage in the manufacture, purchase and sale of building materials.<sup>37</sup> DLGPH files accessed by Daly in the 1990s suggested that there was opposition within the Department to the wide powers being proposed for the Board; when it was eventually established in November its remit was limited to one of advising and assisting the Minister.<sup>38</sup> The Board consisted of just three individuals: chairman, Michael Colivet, a former Sinn Féin TD, Michael Buckley, retired Dublin city engineer and borough surveyor (and brother of the Governor General, Donal O’Buchalla) and Labour senator, Tom Johnson. The operations of the Board were low-key and almost certainly less central to the 1930s housing programme than suggested by M.P. Colivet reflecting on its history in 1954.<sup>39</sup> Outlining the tasks that the Board had been assigned by the Minister, he included a brief to encourage local authorities to ‘overcome any inactivity ... to undertake necessary housing schemes’, to inquire into the supply and cost of materials and labour, and to accelerate the formation of Public Utility Societies in towns.<sup>40</sup> At every opportunity in the Dáil O’Kelly praised the work of the Board when its apparent lack of profile was questioned by the opposition. In 1935 he was obliged to concede that the Board ‘had not been much in the limelight’ but that its members ‘were active in encouraging areas that were slack and local authorities they were not as enthusiastic as they might be’.<sup>41</sup> In 1936 he went so far as to state that ‘the progress due in town and country was due largely to the members of the Housing Board’.<sup>42</sup>

There is some evidence that members of the Board acted as ‘outriders’ for the Minister in identifying recalcitrant local authorities, but it is doubtful if their persuasive powers were particularly effective. In September 1933 Johnson attended a meeting of Arklow UDC in an attempt to encourage councillors to undertake a housing programme. Their decision, however, was to ‘adjourn indefinitely consideration of the Government’s housing scheme’.<sup>43</sup> Undeterred, he returned the following January to address a public meeting in the town where he pointed out that the town’s UDC was the only one in the country that had failed to take any initiative under the 1932 Housing Act.<sup>44</sup> Arklow UDC eventually invited tenders for the construction of 60 houses in October 1934. But this development appears to have had much less to do with the intervention of the Housing Board than the change in the political composition of the council

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<sup>37</sup> Daly, *Buffer State*, p. 233.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 233-4.

<sup>39</sup> M.P. Colivet, ‘The Housing Board, 1932-1944’ in *Administration*, 2, no. 3 (1954), pp 83-86.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84

<sup>41</sup> *Irish Independent*, 12 April 1935.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 April 1936.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 September 1933.

<sup>44</sup> *Irish Press*, 15 January 1934.

precipitated by the local elections in June. Campaigning in the town for Fianna Fáil just before polling day, Seán McEntee, Minister for Finance, castigated the outgoing council, which had a solid Cumann na nGaedheal/Ratepayers Party majority, stating 'not a penny had been spent to ameliorate housing conditions in Arklow which ... were worse than any other town of its size in Ireland'.<sup>45</sup> More controversially, he claimed the failure to build was because 'the only thing their opponents were concerned with was to make the conditions of the common people ... intolerable so that they would rise against the Government'.<sup>46</sup> McEntee's remarks echoed those of O'Kelly in the Dáil some weeks earlier when he had claimed that 'the Government were not getting the support from many Local Authorities that they should get ..., and that obstacles were being put in their way for political purposes'.<sup>47</sup> Fianna Fáil's commitment to council housing in Arklow, combined with the imminent construction of the new Arklow Pottery plant and the employment that it promised, garnered sufficient support for the party to win nine of the fifteen seats on the council. McEntee's claim that councils with Cumann na nGaedheal/Ratepayer Party majorities in 1933-34 actively frustrated O'Kelly in his housing drive is difficult to prove at the county-wide level given the upturn in council house building from 1933 onwards. By 31 March 1934, 65 municipal authorities in 74 provincial towns had either completed or were in the course of constructing council housing. Six of the other nine were small towns with Town Commissioners, and Arklow, Nenagh and New Ross were the only UDCs that had failed to commence building.

In seeking to persuade municipal councils to start building, the Housing Board may have often done little more than provoke irritation at the perceived interference of Dublin in local affairs. In the summer of 1933 Colivet visited Cavan and reported back to O'Kelly on sites chosen for housing by the council and on the sanitary condition of its existing housing stock. Much to the annoyance of the councillors, on Colivet's advice O'Kelly refused to sanction the purchase of one of the sites the council had chosen and urged it to provide adequate water and sewerage to houses it already owned. Referring to Colivet, one councillor remarked 'I don't know what qualifications he has or what he knows about engineering'.<sup>48</sup> Another insisted that 'it was the Council should have the final say in selecting sites and not for "those gods" in Dublin to dictate to them'.<sup>49</sup> When Colivet reported on delays in progressing with a housing scheme in Ballybay, Co. Monaghan in 1933, he apportioned part of the blame on the Town Clerk who he described

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 June 1934.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Irish Press*, 23 May 1924.

<sup>48</sup> *Anglo-Celt*, 12 August 1933.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

as ‘an old man and lacking a grip in matters’. This did not find favour with the councillors, and on learning that Colivet had a salary of £1,000 a year, elicited a comment from one councillor that ‘he is not worth a thousand pence’.<sup>50</sup> Johnson was a regular visitor to provincial towns, inspecting sites and completed housing schemes, but it is not clear that he contributed anything beyond that of an inspector from the Department.<sup>51</sup> In some cases local groups used the Housing Board as a vehicle for attempting to place pressure on their local authority to expedite housing schemes. In Fermoy, for example, in the summer of 1933 the Trades Council wrote to the Housing Board complaining that the UDC was slow in availing of the provisions of the 1932 Housing Act.<sup>52</sup> On balance it seems such lobbying of the Board reflected a mistaken perception regarding its actual influence. The salaries of the Housing Board members - £1,000 for the chairman and £500 per year for O’Buachalla and Johnson – proved an irresistible target for Cumann na nGaedheal spokesmen when O’Kelly presented his annual departmental estimates to the Dáil. During the estimates debate in 1936, Michael Brennan claimed that the Board was ‘not only a sinecure, but an expensive joke’,<sup>53</sup> while the following year, James Dillon, asked ‘what had become of the Government Housing Board. He had seen absolutely no trace of the activities of that body’.<sup>54</sup>

The suspicion that the Board was something of a pet project of O’Kelly’s and that it offered no real challenge to the autonomy of his Department is largely confirmed by a series of events surrounding the effective dismissal of Michael Buckley from the Board in 1934. His dismissal and an ensuing public inquiry that was held in Castlebar in 1935 saw the profile of the Housing Board reach its highest level at any point of its existence, but not in a manner that enhanced its reputation. In August 1933 Buckley attended a meeting of Castlebar UDC and encouraged it to undertake a programme to meet the housing needs identified in the 1929 housing survey, amounting to 220 dwellings. Not all councillors were in agreement with such an extensive scheme, with one remarking that ‘they had to consider the ratepayers and could not possibly indulge in that scheme’.<sup>55</sup> However, the real dispute arose over the issue of the proposed site which was chosen for the 80 house scheme and which the council decided to proceed with. Seven potential sites were identified by the council but, apart from one, the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, reports of his visit to Tipperary in January 1934 (*Cork Examiner*, 25 January 1934), Mallow in August 1935 (*Southern Star*, 24 August 1935) and Mullingar in 1936 (*Meath Chronicle*, 1 August 1936).

<sup>52</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 17 July 1933.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 22 April 1936.

<sup>54</sup> *Ballina Herald*, 17 April 1937.

<sup>55</sup> *Connaught Telegraph*, 5 August 1933.

owners were unwilling to sell. The council could have pursued the option of acquiring a site by compulsory purchase but were encouraged to buy the one available site, owned by the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy nuns, by officials from the DLGPH. This may reflect O'Kelly's insistence that councils push ahead with their housing programmes and obtaining a Compulsory Purchase Order or sourcing another site in Castlebar would undoubtedly have caused substantial delay. Buckley regarded the nuns' site as unsuitable as it was liable to flooding and was apparently waterlogged when he first inspected it.<sup>56</sup> He entered into a dispute with DLGPH officials and, ultimately, with the minister who requested his resignation in March 1934. In 1935 the Department was obliged to hold a public inquiry when 25 of the 80 houses built on the site it had selected showed signs of subsidence. As a witness at the inquiry, Buckley availed of the opportunity to defend his position and embarrass the Department. Apart from the engineering issues associated with the site, he revealed that the Board, despite lengthy communications between the chairman, Colivet, and the secretary of the Department, E.P McCarron, 'the duties of the Board were never clearly or satisfactorily defined'.<sup>57</sup> One can speculate that McCarron would have viewed this lack of definition with equanimity as it preserved his Department's primary role in directing a key government policy. Daly, who had access to the small volume of surviving Housing Board records, confirms that relations between the Board and McCarron were often strained and that proposals made by Colivet regarding the reorganisation of engineering services within the Department were simply ignored.<sup>58</sup> The inquiry also witnessed a sharp and revealing exchange between Buckley and P.J. Raferty, a DLGPH engineer. Buckley asked why some other sites along the main road had not been acquired and Raferty replied that these sites 'had private houses with fine lawns and he thought there would be objections to workers' houses being built in these locations'. When Buckley asked 'you mean these would be too good for the workers?', Raferty responded 'yes'.<sup>59</sup> The Castlebar inquiry was conducted by T.C. Courtney, Chief Advising Engineer to DLGPH, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, he found that the evidence presented vindicated his Department's actions in relation to the selection of the site. In fact, when 25 houses were subsequently condemned due to failures in their foundations, Castlebar UDC was obliged to bear the full cost of their demolition.<sup>60</sup> The sacking of Michael Buckley and the Castlebar inquiry proved to be the most high profile chapter in the Housing Board's twelve-year history.

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 31 August 1935.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Daly, *Buffer State*, p.237

<sup>59</sup> *Irish Independent*, 17 August 1935

<sup>60</sup> *Western People*, 22 May 1937

### **Early responses to the 1932 Housing Act**

When E.P. McCarron described Seán T O'Kelly as carrying a 'fiery cross' through the country as he promoted Fianna Fáil's housing programme, he was no doubt remarking on the political zeal with which housing policy was being pursued. And, despite the Department of Finance's best efforts, it is clear that political calculations were crucial in influencing how policy was implemented and how state funding was dispersed. Despite the political rhetoric in the years leading up to the 1932 general election about clearing the urban 'slums', by 1945 over half the new houses built with government subsidy or grant in the preceding twelve years were in rural areas. This reflected a high volume of grants paid under the Labourers Act and the continued popularity of grants to private individuals, particularly farmers. Table 5.1 shows that of the total state expenditure in the form of grants of £8.5m, just £2.5m was paid to municipal authorities. The remaining £6m was paid under the Labourers Acts (£1.5m) and to private persons and public utility societies.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> This data is published in the *Annual Report for the Department of Local Government and Public Health for 1944-45* in Appendix xxxi. As payments to local authorities and rural sanitary authorities who operated the Labourers Acts were in the form of subsidies related to annual loan repayments they were cumulative whereas grants to private individuals and public utility societies were one-off payments.



**Table 5.1**  
**State payments to local authorities, rural sanitary authorities,**  
**private persons and PUS for new and reconstructed houses, 1932-45**

	Municipal Authorities	Labourers Acts	Private Persons and PUS
1932-33			73,031
1933-34	13,250		286,788
1934-35	33,272	2,462	378,742
1935-36	96,674	68,038	445,080
1936-37	139,864	62,956	451,791
1937-38	178,826	99,798	461,520
1938-39	217,784	132,448	461,201
1939-40	209,395	159,458	323,102
1940-41	274,208	186,525	214,003
1941-42	314,260	197,843	103,745
1942-43	343,986	199,902	70,032
1943-44	361,769	206,586	35,103
1944-45	384,764	200,277	27,672
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,568,052</b>	<b>1,516,293</b>	<b>4,409,278</b>

*Source: Report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health 1944-45,*  
Appendix xxxi

In terms of new houses built, the target set for urban local authorities in 1932 was 43,600, with 10,000 cottages to be built in rural areas under the Labourers Act.<sup>62</sup> The actual outcome was just over 31,000 houses built by municipal authorities and just over 20,000 under the Labourers Act. A full assessment of the divergence between targets and outcomes will be undertaken at a later point but Figure 5.1 shows that the pattern of housing provision in provincial towns in terms of the breakdown between public and private was quite different in provincial towns compared to Dublin and, especially, compared to rural areas. Of the almost 15,000 houses built with state assistance in provincial towns, 12,500, or 85 per cent, were built by local authorities. This compared to just 67 per cent in Dublin and 47 per cent in rural areas.<sup>63</sup> Further evidence of

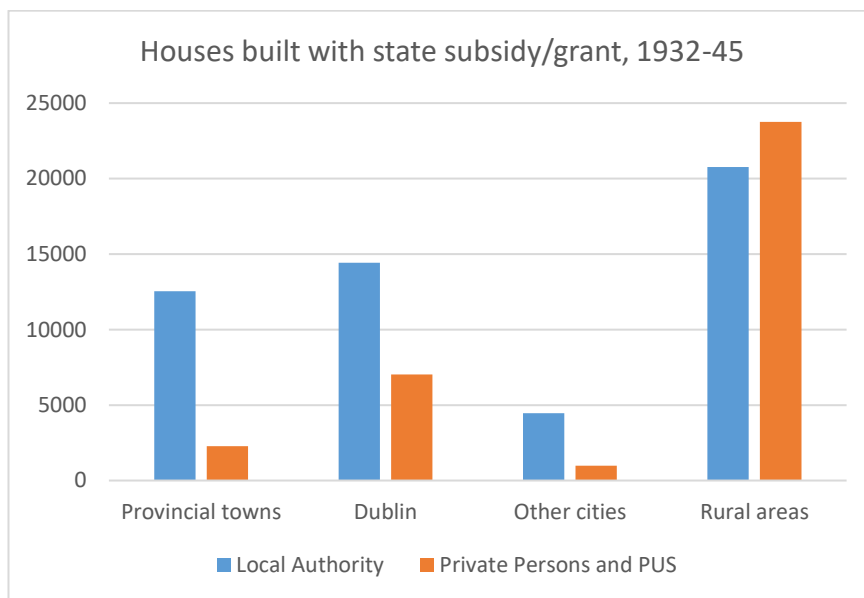
<sup>62</sup> State aid for housing, urban and rural (NAI, Fin S32/1/39).

<sup>63</sup> This data is from *Housing: a review of past operations and future requirements* published by DLGPH in 1947. 'Other cities' consist of Cork, Limerick and Waterford.

the relative impact of public versus private house building in provincial towns in the 1930s is indicated in Figure 5.2 which shows output in both sectors for Drogheda with 88 per cent of houses being built by the corporation. Although not evident from Table 5.1, public utilities society were almost completely absent from provincial towns and built only 77 houses in total up to 1945, 26 of these in Dundalk.<sup>64</sup> This is in contrast to Dublin (2,201 houses) and rural Ireland (13,786 houses). The mix, then, of housing built with state support after 1932 was quite different in provincial towns than in either Dublin or in rural Ireland.

**Figure 5.1**

**Breakdown of new houses between private and public sector, 1932-45**

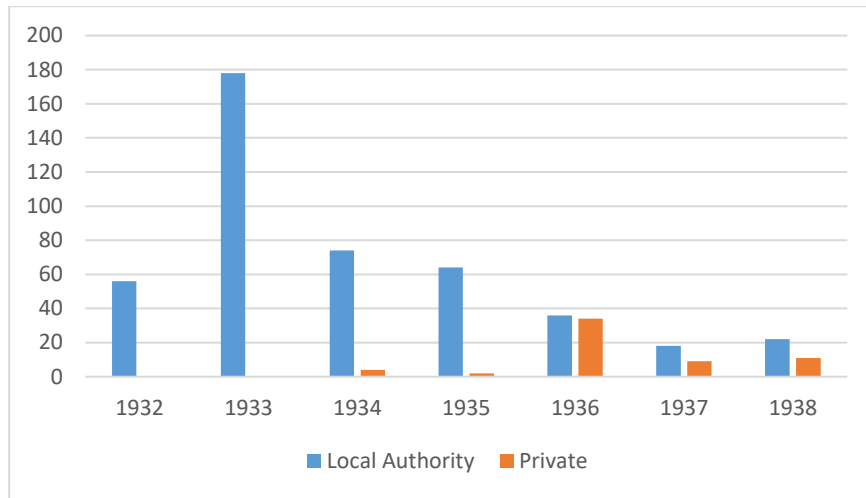


*Source: Housing: a review of past operations and future requirements (Dublin, 1947)*

<sup>64</sup> *Annual Report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1944-45, Appendix xxxii.*

**Figure 5.2**

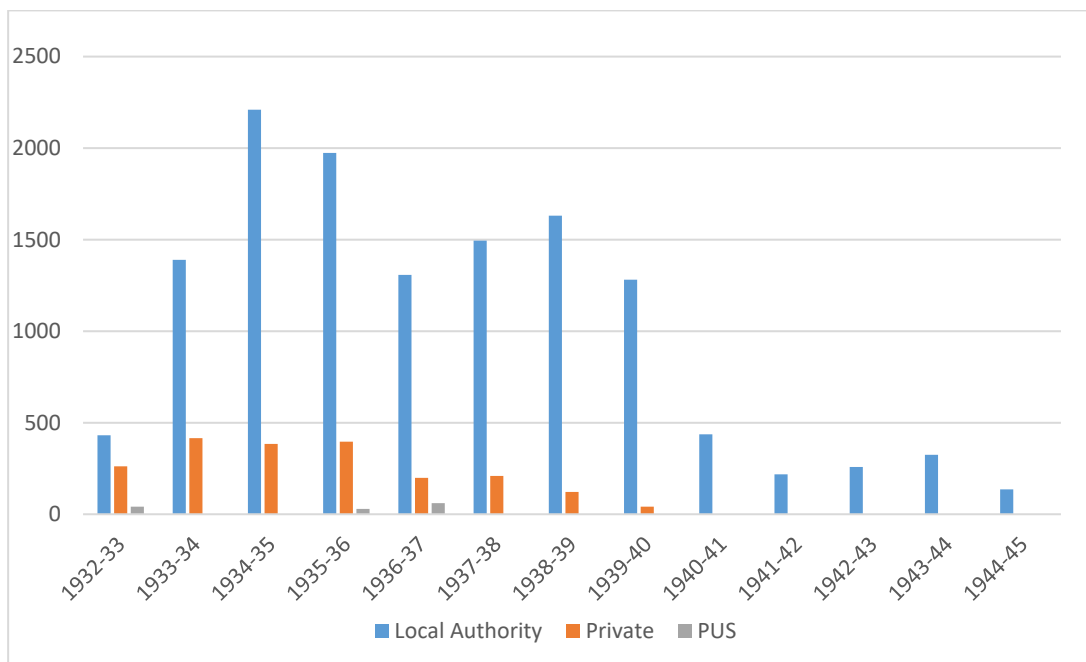
**Breakdown of new houses between private and public sector built in Drogheda, 1932-38**



Source: Frank Gibney, *Drogheda Survey 1940 (Drogheda, 2000)*<sup>65</sup>

**Figure 5.3**

**Houses built with state subsidy or grant in provincial towns, 1932-45**



Source: *Annual reports of the DLGPH, 1932-33 to 1944-45*

<sup>65</sup> The survey was re-printed by the Old Drogheda Society in 2000.

The 1932 Act was passed by the Dáil on 3 August and by the end of the month a circular letter was issued by DLGPH to all local authorities setting out its priorities:

It is the aim of the government to have the housing needs of the people fully satisfied within a period of ten years, and to this end, local authorities are requested to formulate at once and submit to the Minister, proposal[s] to deal with at least one-fourth of their slum problem and to provide at least one-fourth of their estimated total housing need within the next three years.<sup>66</sup>

Figure 5.3 shows the new housing programme began to have an impact in provincial towns with the number of dwellings completed rising from an average of just over 400 in the years 1929-33 to 1,390 in 1933-34.. Of the 430 houses built by municipal authorities in these towns in 1932-33, almost half were in Sligo (59), Drogheda (56), Bray (58) and Tralee (30). These schemes however were in the planning stage in late 1931 at a point when the 1931 Act was being considered. Drogheda Corporation had been the most active of all municipal authorities in the years 1924-31, building 186 dwellings or over 10 per cent of the total in all provincial towns. The demand for housing in the town was acute. When a scheme of 16 three-roomed and ten four-roomed houses was completed in the summer of 1931 at Blackbutt Lane (later renamed Mount St Oliver) there were 92 applicants, 60 for the three-roomed and 32 for the four-roomed.<sup>67</sup> The demand for the smaller houses, with lower rents of 5s. 6d. as opposed to 7s. 6d., is significant as at this point the Corporation could only avail of the £60 per house subsidy under the 1929 Housing Act. The first scheme in Drogheda to benefit from the new subsidy regime under the 1932 Act, which the *Irish Press* heralded as the first in any town,<sup>68</sup> consisted of 44 houses at Crooked St and 12 at Hardmans Gardens. When the plans for these houses were initially considered it was proposed that the majority would be three-roomed, but following consultation with DLGPH, and in light of the 66 per cent subsidy available on loan repayments for re-housing those in condemned dwellings, it was decided to proceed with 30 four-roomed and 26 three-roomed houses. The rents were set at 4s. and 3s. 6d. respectively, representing reductions of 3s. 6d. and 2s. on rents for similar houses at Mount St Oliver.<sup>69</sup> The increased subsidies under the 1932 Act helped to persuade councils to build proportionately fewer three-roomed houses, and this 1932 scheme in Drogheda was the last built by the Corporation for four years to contain such dwellings. The housing scheme at Crooked Street (renamed Congress Avenue in March 1933)<sup>70</sup> marked the first step in the complete re-development of the area just

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<sup>66</sup> *Department of Local Government and Public Health Annual Report 1932-33*, Appendix XXXI, pp 240-44.

<sup>67</sup> Drogheda Corporation minutes, 25 April 1930.

<sup>68</sup> *Irish Press*, 22 September 1932.

<sup>69</sup> Drogheda Corporation minutes, 4 October 1932.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 March 1933.

south of Millmount Barracks, which appears to have been little changed from the mid-nineteenth century.

### **Early responses and local politics**

Drogheda Corporation's position as one of the first municipal authorities to avail of the provisions of the 1932 Act reflected its relatively high level of building activity through the late 1920s and early 1930s. In other towns more obviously political factors seem to have been at play. As discussed in Chapter 4, Ballina UDC had a substantial Fianna Fail/Labour majority following the 1928 local elections. While the town's Ratepayers Association and some councillors may have played a role in retarding the UDC's housing plans due to their influence with the Cumann na nGaedheal minister in 1932, all changed in 1932 after the chairman of the council, P.J. Rutledge, was appointed a minister in the Fianna Fáil cabinet. His resignation letter to the council in September made clear his continued commitment to the town, not to say his determination to maintain his political bailiwick. In highlighting the prospect of the town's housing problems being addressed, he assured the council 'that if I can be of any assistance in helping them on with their good work, the assistance will be fully and gladly given'.<sup>71</sup> The council was quite divided when it came to electing a new chairman. An Independent Republican councillor who was vice-chairman had the support of the non-Fianna Fáil/Labour block but he was defeated by Thomas Ruane who was a close associate of Rutledge.<sup>72</sup> This proved a significant choice as it provided the council, via its new chairman, with valuable access to a member of the cabinet, access which Ruane appears to have exploited to the full. By the time of the next UDC meeting in late September, Ruane was able to report that 'Mr Rutledge was of great assistance to him in getting the interview with [O'Kelly] arranged and Mr Rutledge had accompanied the Minister and did his best to get as much as possible for Ballina'.<sup>73</sup> He also reported that the Minister advised him the council were not building enough houses 'under the two-third grant' and that they should immediately undertake to build 100 rather than 60. Within seven weeks the council had formulated plans for 134 houses on six different sites, including 120 houses that would qualify for the two-thirds subsidy, and that a similar number of what it called 'slum clearance' houses would be built in each of the following three years.<sup>74</sup> In the following months the Department gave approval for 108 houses on three sites (48 on the Crossmolina Road, 12 on the Killala Road and 48 at Ardnaree on the eastern edge of the town)

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<sup>71</sup> Ballina UDC minutes, 6 September 1932.

<sup>72</sup> *Ballina Herald*, 3 September 1932.

<sup>73</sup> Ballina UDC minutes, 27 September 1932.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 November 1932.

and by May of 1933 work had started on all three sites.<sup>75</sup> The political context in which this very extensive housing programme was taking place was emphasised by Thomas Ruane as he told the council that

he found it very difficult to explain why some of the leading lights of that town for the past 20 years had not carried out a housing scheme ... and they had the lanes and the slums just as the present Council had ... But it had come down to the members of that Council who had come from the plain working people of the town to cater for the needs of the poor people of the town.<sup>76</sup>

In asserting Fianna Fáil's ownership of the programme, the debt due to P.J. Rutledge 'who now holds one of the highest offices in their land, the Ministry for Justice' was recognised. Ruane claimed 'only for him they would not be there that night declaring contracts for 108 new houses'.<sup>77</sup> Labour councillors were quick to associate themselves with Ruane's remarks, and Fianna Fáil's hegemony over local politics in Ballina appeared to be confirmed when the council unanimously passed a motion of thanks to Rutledge and the government.<sup>78</sup> As the UDC's housing programme expanded through the 1930s it was held up as a model of what might be achieved by the *Irish Press* in the course of its 'anti-slum' campaign in 1936, which was also keen to acknowledge the role of Ruane, 'the energetic chairman of the Council, assisted by Mr P.J. Rutledge, the senior member for North Mayo'.<sup>79</sup> It was a pace of housing construction that was sustained through the 1930s during which time Ballina UDC built a total of 471 houses, proportionately the highest rate of any town in the state.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 16 May 1933.

<sup>76</sup> *Western People*, 18 March 1933.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> *Irish Press*, 19 December 1936.

Figure 5.4

Seán T. O'Kelly performs the official opening of St Joseph's Terrace in Athy, 1934



Source: *Irish Press*, 6 April 1934

The initiative of individual councillors is not to be underestimated when attempting to explain the manner in which the response to the 1932 Act unfolded. One of the largest housing schemes completed in 1933-34 was that in Athy where 93 houses were built over three sites. As in the case of Ballina, it appears that one or two key political figures were instrumental in shaping a substantial response to the 1932 Act. In October 1931 the council's engineer submitted plans for a twenty-house scheme at Woodstock Street.<sup>80</sup> However, all plans were put on hold pending the change in government and the new Housing Act. In May 1932 the Medical Officer of Health, Dr James Kilbride, submitted a report on housing conditions in the town which showed '1,292 people living in 323 houses – these houses all containing not more than two apartments, all devoid of any sanitary accommodation whatever and many situated in closed off air and sun starved slums'.<sup>81</sup> The press report of the meeting conveys the sense that the councillors were surprised at the scale of the deprivation described. The discussion which followed was led by Bridget Darby, a schoolteacher and Fianna Fáil councillor, who appears to have been highly energetic in pursuing the housing issue. When she proposed that houses should be built and let at low rents, Michael Malone, an ex-National League Party councillor and a political opponent of Darby's, responded 'if you put forward such a scheme when we get the site I will support you'.<sup>82</sup> At the next meeting she proposed that 100 houses be built and a Clearance Area defined, and in October, having acquired three sites over the summer, the council invited tenders for the building of 93 houses. At around this time Miss Darby was the subject of some criticism from

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<sup>80</sup> Athy UDC minutes, 19 October 1931.

<sup>81</sup> *Kildare Observer*, 7 May 1932.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

her fellow councillors for making personal visits to the DLGPH. At a subsequent meeting she explained

I went to Dublin three times in order to hurry up the start of the work .... I went on my own responsibility in the interests of the unemployed of the town, many of whom had appealed to me to try and get the work started ... I make no apology to anyone for having done it; it was no time for standing on ceremony with so much suffering and hardship in the town.<sup>83</sup>

The fact that individual councillors could have such a decisive influence on the housing programme to some extent reflects the weakness of the institutional structures at the local level that had responsibility for delivering these relatively large projects. As we assess housing developments in individual towns, it is apparent that some municipal authorities such as Longford UDC were hampered by financial mismanagement. Others, such as Tuam Town Commissioners, made poor decisions in attempting to respond to a sudden increase in the demand for housing. In Listowel, the council elected in 1934 refused to take responsibility for the loans incurred by its predecessor and fought a protracted legal case against the DLGPH.

Within councils, the levels of incompetence and petty corruption described in earlier chapters is also evident in the 1930s. Drogheda Corporation failed to apply for housing subsidies to which it was entitled and was, apparently, unaware of its error for seven years.<sup>84</sup> Poor financial management also resulted in the theft of council funds, in the form of rents and rates, remaining undetected for prolonged periods. In July 1934 Athy UDC belatedly uncovered discrepancies in its rental accounts amounting to £159. The rent collector had absconded and informed the council that 'I deeply regret the discrepancies which have arisen during my term of office as cottage rent collector. I must admit that I put this money to my own use.'<sup>85</sup> Such instances were not uncommon and hardly inspired confidence on the part of the DLGPH about the capacity of councils to manage the building of hundreds of houses and the very significant finances involved. In fact in 1934 it appears that the Department was considering a very radical reform of local government that was tantamount to its abolition. In a Department of Finance memo from the spring of 1934, principally concerned with the question of reducing the interest rate on LLF loans, the author revealed

the Minister for Local Government has recently circulated a Memorandum to the Executive Council proposing the gradual abolition of Local Authorities by their merger in the Central Authority. The intention was to appoint Managers to replace County Councils and

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 22 October 1932.

<sup>84</sup> This episode is discussed in Chapter 6.

<sup>85</sup> Athy UDC minutes, 17 July 1933.



Urban District Councils and to postpone the local elections until the necessary legislative authority for the change was available.<sup>86</sup>

The only obstacle to proceeding identified in the memo was the difficulty in finding 'a sufficient number of men of the proper type as Managers'.<sup>87</sup> Daly speculates that some members of the cabinet may have regarded the proposals as unacceptable.<sup>88</sup> Later in the year they were referred to a cabinet sub-committee chaired by P.J. Little, government chief-whip and from its deliberations the scheme of county management, enacted in 1940 and discussed below, was gradually formulated.<sup>89</sup> The trend towards increased managerialism in local government had been triggered in Ireland by the adoption in 1929 of the Cork City Management Act, which defined reserved powers (including rating, borrowing, legislation and elections) for councillors and conferred responsibility for all other matters on a city manager. This proved to be a prototype for subsequent reforms in local government.

Local elections were held in June 1934 and the proposal did not resurface. Cumann na nGaedheal had postponed local elections due to be held in 1931 so that the members of councils operating in the spring of 1934, when O'Kelly's proposals were being considered, had been elected in 1928 when Fianna Fáil was still finding its electoral feet at the local level. In many rural areas 1934 was marked by anti-rates campaigns promoted by the Blueshirts and in some towns, such as Arklow discussed above, the government's housing programme appears to have been frustrated by its political opponents at council level.

Fianna Fáil's achievement in winning an absolute majority in the January 1933 general election was followed by further success in the local elections of June 1934. Fine Gael's leader, Eoin O'Duffy, had confidently predicted a landslide for the party but Fianna Fáil emerged as the biggest party on fourteen county councils to Fine Gael's six.<sup>90</sup> In combination with Labour, Fianna Fail took control of 23 UDCs, including Drogheda, Tralee and Athy while also winning outright control in Arklow, Ballina, Listowel and Enniscorthy. Councils in most of these towns proceeded to build an above average number of houses in the following decade as described in Chapter 7.

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<sup>86</sup> Tralee Urban District Council. Loan of £43,000 for erecting houses under the Housing of the Working Classes Act (NAI, F 61/47/33).

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Daly, *Buffer State*, p. 300.

<sup>89</sup> Roche, *Local Government in Ireland*, p. 105.

<sup>90</sup> Maurice Manning, *The Blueshirts* (Dublin, 2006), p. 131.

## The housing programme and the building industry

Tralee UDC built 183 houses by mid-1934, but this scheme was not without controversy and it casts light on the building industry, on tensions between the Department of Finance and DLGPH and on how senior civil servants in Finance viewed the whole building programme. In October 1932 a deputation from Tralee council met O’Kelly, seeking a grant of £10,000 for relief works to address the high level of unemployment in the town.<sup>91</sup> O’Kelly used the opportunity to impress upon the deputation ‘the necessity of inaugurating a Housing Scheme of the less expensive type so that work might be started with the least possible delay’.<sup>92</sup> His remarks may have reflected the fact that in the preceding decade Tralee UDC had concentrated exclusively on building five-roomed houses for sale. Local pressure was also exercised on the council, which had what can be described as an anti-Fianna Fail majority, by the local Fianna Fáil cumann which condemned it for its ‘delay ... in formulating a scheme for the building of working class dwellings’.<sup>93</sup> By February 1933 tenders were invited for the erection of 125 four-roomed houses at Cloonmore.<sup>94</sup> When the tenders were considered some weeks later, the lowest was that of local builder, Thomas Kennedy, at £315 per house. However, he almost immediately withdrew his tender stating that ‘owing to an oversight he omitted an important figure when totalling his prices’. The council re-advertised in early April but, again, the builder submitting the lowest tender, which this time was £330, withdrew.<sup>95</sup> Following a visit from an inspector from the Department, the council re-advertised for a third time in May, on this occasion seeking tenders for 142 four-roomed and 36 three-roomed houses. In June Minister O’Kelly criticised the high level of tenders submitted and pointed out that the overall cost per house would be £360. As the two-thirds subsidy was only available on the first £300 he emphasised that the excess costs would have to be borne by the ratepayers and the tenants.<sup>96</sup> A review of tender prices for similar houses published in the annual report of the Department for 1932-33 suggests an average of about £280 per house, indicating that prices in Tralee were exceptionally high.<sup>97</sup> Significantly, though, the Minister conceded ‘as these were the third tenders he was reluctant to refuse sanction’.<sup>98</sup> He sanctioned a loan of £43,000 for 125 houses, an overall cost of £344 per house.

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<sup>91</sup> *The Kerryman*, 1 October 1932.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 October 1932.

<sup>94</sup> *Irish Press*, 25 February 1933.

<sup>95</sup> *Irish Press*, 1 April 1933 and *Cork Examiner*, 15 September 1933.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 June 1933.

<sup>97</sup> *Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health 1932-33*, Appendix xxxiii, pp 262-65. For example, the report shows that four-roomed, two-storey houses in Ennis cost £285, Edenderry £232 and Tullamore £260.

<sup>98</sup> *Irish Press*, 9 June 1933.

At this point no one appeared to have questioned why the cost per house was rising as each successive set of tenders was submitted.

The following summer the council applied to DLGPH to sanction a loan of £28,000 to build a further 58 houses and thus complete the scheme of 183 envisaged the previous year. At this point the Department of Finance intervened and pointed out that this implied a cost of £483 per house, and they demanded an explanation from DLGPH. The response from DLGPH reflected the fact that its officials were very much on the defensive as they sought to justify their minister's original approval for the £43,000 loan in the previous June. It was suggested that labour costs were higher in Tralee than in most towns, but concluded by invoking the O'Kelly's concern for the town's housing crisis:

[He] was influenced by the fact that the housing survey of 1929 disclosed that 1,000 new houses were required in the urban District of Tralee, of which 650 were required to re-house persons displaced by the clearance of unhealthy areas and to replace other dwellings unfit for human habitation.<sup>99</sup>

Finance was convinced of 'the existence of a ring of builders determined to "get rich quick" by taking advantage of the Government's eagerness to provide the slum-dwellers of their own town with decent houses'. 'The builders', it concluded, 'had the situation in their hands'<sup>100</sup>. Frank Duff, a senior official in Finance, suggested that 'if the tenderers know that eventually the contract will be given to one of them, they will hold out despite repeated re-tenderings. They know it is only sword-play.'<sup>101</sup> And given the way in which the tendering process unwound, it is difficult to disagree with its assessment. Officials in Finance were particularly aggrieved that building work had already started on the 58 houses before the council applied for the additional loan. Ultimately the additional loan was approved and all Finance managed to extract was a commitment from DLGPH that in cases where building costs were likely to exceed £300 per house that it seek provisional sanction from it before allowing work to proceed. The surviving memoranda from Finance from this early period of the 1930s building programme suggest an abiding unease regarding the scale of public spending involved, irrespective of the kind of sharp practice evident in Tralee. At one point an official, with something apparently approaching despair, claimed that 'the position of Local Government appears to be that houses must be built at all costs'.<sup>102</sup> He went on to question the very sustainability of the LLF if the current extravagant levels of expenditure on housing was persisted with.

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<sup>99</sup> Tralee Urban District Council. Loan of £43,000 for erecting houses under the Housing of the Working Classes Act (NAI, F 61/47/33).

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

These issues surfaced later in the 1930s when building costs increased and local authorities sought to have an increase applied to the £300 upper limit on which subsidies might be claimed. However, it appears that there is an element of petulance attached to Finance's complaints regarding excessive costs in 1933 and 1934, as there is little evidence beyond the Tralee tenders for standard four-roomed houses exceeding £300. Table 5.2 shows that the average level of a selection of tenders for the years 1932-33 and 1933-34 was about £270.<sup>103</sup> Of course this includes a mix of house types from small, three-roomed to much larger five-roomed dwellings. Tenders for the popular G.1 type house, which was single storied, with four rooms, built of mass concrete and a floor area of 575 square feet, ranged from £250 to £289. Of the 85 tenders for which details were published for the years 1932-33 and 1933-34, only nine exceed £300 per house, and three of these were for larger five and six room houses. Of course it is likely that the stipulation that councils could only claim subsidy for the first £300 of the cost of a house set something of a target for building contractors when tendering. However, only 25 of the 85 tenders in these years fell between £280 and £300, which suggests that competition between contractors was a stronger factor in influencing prices than the type of collusion evident in Tralee.

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<sup>103</sup> Each year's DLGPH annual report included a table headed 'Tables showing particulars of certain tenders received by local bodies'. It is not clear if they are a representative sample; nevertheless they provide a valuable dataset of both prices and the house types being built by municipal authorities in these years.

**Table 5.2****Tenders for local authority housing in provincial towns, 1932-42**

Year	No.	Average Cost	Average Floor Area (sq ft)
1931-32	25	295	639
1932-33	35	266	593
1933-34	50	270	657
1934-35	21	258	651
1935-36	28	269	688
1936-37	18	271	638
1937-38	23	330	716
1938-39	15	361	673
1939-40	13	346	668
1940-41	6	399	659
1941-42	7	444	696

*Source: Annual reports of Department of Local Government and Public Health 1933 to 1942*

By March 1934 there were almost 2,500 local authority houses in the course of construction in 45 provincial towns and the *Irish Press* could proclaim with some justification that a 'building boom' was in progress.<sup>104</sup> In the Dáil it was reported that the numbers employed in house building had increased from 5,200 in 1931 to 15,200 in 1934.<sup>105</sup> The question arises as to how the construction industry responded to this greatly increased demand and how local councils managed the tendering process related to their housing programmes.

<sup>104</sup> *Irish Press*, 23 October 1934.

<sup>105</sup> *Dáil Debates*, 12 December 1934, Vol. 54, No. 6.

**Table 5.3****Data on tendering for housing schemes in provincial towns, 1932-41**

Town	No. of housing schemes	Ave. No. of Contractors Tendering	% Contracts won by local builders
Athy	7	3.9	71%
Fermoy	2	5.0	0%
Drogheda	30	3.9	95%
Ballina	11	5.0	91%
Arklow	2	8.5	0%
Clones	1	8.0	0%
Navan	6	4.3	17%
Tuam	4	6.5	0%
Average		4.5	69%

*Source: Minutes of Urban Council and Town Commissioners meetings and provincial newspapers*

A review of 64 invitations to tender for housing schemes in eight towns between 1932 and 1941 provides some useful insights into the level of competition between contractors and whether or not local contractors were favoured in the awarding of work.<sup>106</sup> Table 5.3 shows that on average between four and five contractors tendered for each scheme. It is significant, however, that in Drogheda and Athy there appears to have been less competition with, on average, less than four responses to tenders to build council housing. Both towns had a number of building companies and it seems this had the effect of deterring outside contractors. Certainly in the case of Drogheda the majority of tenders were exclusively responded to by builders based in the town. Some of the larger schemes attracted responses from builders from Dublin and elsewhere but on only one occasion was such a bid successful. In May 1935 a large scheme of 136 houses at Hardmans Gardens attracted responses from three local and three builders from outside the town. The contract was awarded to John P. Cuffe of Manor St, Dublin whose tender at £36,469 was almost ten per cent less than the second lowest, that of local builder P.F. Hoey.<sup>107</sup> Cuffe was a prominent auctioneer, cattle salesman and builder based in Manor Street in Dublin, but in January 1936 work ceased on the site and the following month he sought the protection of the bankruptcy court. The Corporation's foray into working with outside contractors had not proved successful and the following month P.F. Hoey was asked to complete the contract.<sup>108</sup> In

<sup>106</sup> This data was compiled from council minutes and reports in provincial newspapers.

<sup>107</sup> Drogheda Corporation, Housing Committee minutes, 27 May 1935.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 February 1936.

May 1936 three tenders from local builders were received for the building of 22 3-roomed houses at Oulster Lane and Scarlett Street in the north of the town.<sup>109</sup> The Housing Committee considered all three tenders as being too high, and when the matter was referred to a full Corporation meeting it was decided that future invitations to tender would be advertised in the national as well as the local press 'so that more open competition may be obtained for our building contracts'.<sup>110</sup> At a minimum this suggests that the Corporation had not been particularly concerned to attract tenders from outside the town.<sup>111</sup>

To some extent the relatively low degree of competition among building contractors reflected the underdeveloped state of the construction industry in provincial Ireland. As shown in Table 4.5 in the preceding chapter, less than 1,800 houses were built in provincial towns in the four years between 1928 and 1932 which was clearly insufficient to sustain a network of substantial builders across the country. Laheen's study of housing development in Tuam in the first half of the twentieth century shows that there were about half a dozen builders in the town in the 1920s and 1930s, mostly involved in small scale private housing building.<sup>112</sup> Some tendered successfully for small four- and five-house schemes built by the Town Commissioners in the late 1920s but were not of sufficient scale to become involved in the much larger schemes of over 40 houses built in the 1930s. When Drogheda Corporation invited tenders for one of its largest schemes in 1935, 136 houses at Hardmans Gardens, such was its scale that only three of the local building contractors responded.<sup>113</sup> Others did not respond, including Murphy Brothers and J.J. Gogarty, who regularly won contracts to build ten and twenty house schemes. When Doyle & Sons, a company based in Kells, won the contract to build twenty houses in Athy in 1934 it withdrew, as it subsequently won the contract to build Arklow's first 1930s scheme and indicated that it did not have the capacity to fulfil both.<sup>114</sup> On occasion councillors sought to break up large housing schemes into smaller ones so that local builders might be in a position to tender, but this was generally opposed by architects and engineers as it complicated the business of completing schemes on time and to a uniform standard.<sup>115</sup> A pattern evident in the tendering process in most towns is that smaller building contractors cherry picked.

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<sup>109</sup> Drogheda Corporation, Housing Committee minutes, 14 April 1936.

<sup>110</sup> Drogheda Corporation minutes, 5 May 1936.

<sup>111</sup> Lack of competition in tendering was not confined to provincial towns. Daly, in *Buffer State* (p.244), notes that 'on several occasions in 1937 and 1938 the Corporation received only two tenders for large contracts'.

<sup>112</sup> Maurice Laheen, *Twentieth-century housing in a rural town: housing development in Tuam town 1900-1950* (Tuam, 1998), pp 114-23.

<sup>113</sup> Minutes of Housing Committee, Drogheda Corporation, 27 May 1935.

<sup>114</sup> *Kildare Observer*, 24 November 1934.

<sup>115</sup> See, for example, councillors on Carrackmacross UDC asking to have a 59 house scheme divided up to facilitate local builders as reported in the *Irish Press*, 6 January 1933.

In Athy between 1932 and 1936 local construction company D. & J. Carbery built seven of the eight public housing schemes. While all advertisements inviting tenders stated that the lowest tender might not necessarily be accepted, in practice the DLGPH seldom sanctioned anything other than the lowest tender, despite the sometimes strong support expressed by local councillors for local builders. In October 1932 Athy UDC received five tenders to build seventeen houses, four from outside the town and one from Carbery. The lowest tender was from Dwyer & Fogarty of Thurles, but it contained an error in that it omitted the cost of connecting the houses to the water mains. Although Carbery's was only the third lowest tender, at the next UDC meeting councillors were most anxious to express their support for the company's bid, with the chairman stating 'there is not a member of the Council that would not like to see Mr Carbery get this contract'.<sup>116</sup> Ignoring the fact that a builder from Templemore submitted the second lowest tender, one of the councillors suggested 'shouldn't we give the Department an indication to give preference of the contract under discussion to Mr. Carberry? ... An expression of opinion from the Council should weigh heavily.'<sup>117</sup> Daniel Carbery, managing director of D. & J. Carbery was, according to the councillors, a regular visitor to the DLGPH, and the lobbying bore fruit when he was awarded the contract some weeks later.<sup>118</sup>

The lack of competitive tendering was evident in August 1935 when only two tenders were submitted for each of two schemes, one at Rathsteward for 25 houses and one at Clonmullen for 20 houses.<sup>119</sup> Again, Carberry was successful but on this occasion approval from the DLGPH was withheld as the council favoured building in brick rather than in concrete, not least because the town was home to Athy Brick Co. Ltd. The Department, on the other hand, favoured the lower priced tenders for building in concrete. This suggests that the government's stated policy of having Saorstát-manufactured material used as far as possible in the housing programme was circumscribed by questions of cost. The previous year, at the opening of the first phase of the UDC's 1930s building programme, the owner of the company, P.P. Doyle, thanked the council for its decision to use local material and that as a result 'he had been able

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<sup>116</sup> *Kildare Observer*, 3 December 1932.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.* and minutes of Athy UDC, 19 December 1932. Lobbying on behalf of local contractors tendering for housing and infrastructure schemes was not generally successful. One of the best documented cases relates to a Waterworks Improvement Scheme in Navan in 1932-33 when the lowest tender of a Dublin company was rejected in favour of a local contractor. Despite a memorial signed by 250 ratepayers being sent to the Department and lobbying by local councillors and the local TD, E.P. McCarron stood firm and insisted that competitive tendering was essential and argued that no outside contractors would bid for work if local companies were favoured. The issues dragged out over the first few months of 1933 during which time local labour and unemployed groups campaigned for the scheme to start.

<sup>119</sup> Athy UDC minutes, 12 August 1935.



to employ 20 men constantly in his brick yard for over two years'.<sup>120</sup> Now, however, the Minister wrote to the council informing it that the £788 additional cost incurred by building the 36 houses in brick was sufficient to build three further houses and insisting that it accept the lower tender to build in concrete. When the council was again instructed to build 49 houses in concrete rather than brick in July 1936, it effectively marked the end for the Athy Brick Co.<sup>121</sup>

One of the reasons that councils tended to favour local contractors was the issue of employment of local labour. In fact most invitations to tender stipulated that local labour be employed 'as far as possible', and the issue emerged, along with the question of wage rates, as a significant cause of industrial unrest. In August 1933 the *Irish Builder* identified it as 'becoming a very serious problem for building contractors in Ireland'.<sup>122</sup> Labour councillors were particularly active on this issue when builders attempted to exploit the flexibility offered by the 'as far as possible' clause. When an outside contractor won a tender to build 25 houses in Navan in 1932, Cllr. Clusker, the local Labour stalwart, remarked that 'I assume that local labour will be availed of to the fullest extent, and that we won't have lorry loads of others coming here from outside.'<sup>123</sup>

In Clones, opposition to the employment of labourers from surrounding rural areas on its housing scheme started in 1933 reached the point where several strikes took place, and at one point strikers were baton charged by gardaí when they attempted to invade the site.<sup>124</sup> Clones UDC undertook one of the earliest and most expansive schemes to benefit from the provisions of the 1932 Act where a large estate of 118 houses was built between 1933 and 1935. The manner in which the tenders were managed casts light on an aspect of the new Fianna Fáil government's economic policy in the context of the 'economic war' and also on aspects of community divisions within the town. In November 1932 eight tenders were submitted, ranging from £39,182 (McEntyre Bros, Belfast) to £50,431 (John McGuinness, Dundalk). A discussion took place as to whether the second lowest tender of Thomas Kennedy & Sons of Galway should be considered 'owing to its Saorstát origin'.<sup>125</sup> However, councillors agreed unanimously to recommend the McEntyre tender as to do otherwise would 'of necessity reflect a hardship on the tenants' in the form of higher rents. Although not mentioned in the council minutes, the *Anglo-Celt* report on the meeting refers to the council deciding to set aside the '5% preference

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<sup>120</sup> *Kildare Observer*, 7 April 1934.

<sup>121</sup> Athy UDC minutes, 6 July 1936.

<sup>122</sup> *Irish Builder*, 12 August 1933, p. 670.

<sup>123</sup> *Meath Chronicle*, 12 November 1932.

<sup>124</sup> *Northern Standard*, 23 February 1934.

<sup>125</sup> Clones UDC minutes, 16 November 1932 (Monaghan County Library).

allowed Free State contractors'.<sup>126</sup> Two weeks later the council met again to consider correspondence received from Kennedy & Sons and from DLGPH. Kennedy had obviously been in communication with the Department complaining that the tender had been awarded to a non-Saorstata company. The letter from the Department reminded the council that 'had [it] elected to give [Kennedy] the usual 5% preference allowed to contractors resident in Saorstata Eireann, that their tender would be within the limit by £265'. Kennedy's letter also indicated that the company would be prepared to carry out all the joinery work in Clones should it be awarded the tender. The council was swayed by this new information and awarded the contract to Kennedy & Sons. The decision, however, was not unanimous. The two Protestant Defence Association (PDA) members of the council, together with a Fianna Fáil councillor, voted to adhere to the original decision to award the contract to McEntyre, but this was defeated by six votes to three.<sup>127</sup> The PDA generally had two or three of its members elected to the council and were recognised as representing what was viewed as a distinct community. Clones had the largest non-Roman Catholic community of any provincial town in the Free State with over 25 per cent of its population returned as Protestant in the 1926 census. The PDA councillors formed one of three distinct blocks on the council alongside 'the nationalists' and 'the labour interest'. Relations were generally cordial, although in 1926 the PDA councillors withdrew entirely from meetings for several years when an agreement to rotate the position of chairman was broken by the nationalist and labour blocks.<sup>128</sup> By 1932 the personnel had changed and one of the PDA councillors had been elected vice-chairman. Their vote on the housing tenders suggested they retained allegiances to their fellow Ulstermen to the north. This incidence of the exclusion of a Northern Ireland contractor was repeated in Castleblayney early in 1933, when the tender of McKenna & Sons of Armagh for the building of 26 houses was rejected by the DLPPH despite being approved by the local council.<sup>129</sup> Subsequently most invitations to tender for housing published by urban councils in the border area explicitly stated that contractors must be resident in the state and, in some instances, it was stated that those employed on the schemes must also be Saorstata residents.<sup>130</sup> This further restriction on northern contractors may have arisen because the five per cent advantage conferred on southern builders, as in the case of Clones, proved inadequate to deter unwanted competition.

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<sup>126</sup> *Anglo-Celt*, 18 November 1932.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 December 1932.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 February 1926.

<sup>129</sup> *Irish Press*, 6 March 1933.

<sup>130</sup> See, for example, the invitation to tender published by Buncrana UDC for 64 houses published in the *Irish Independent* on 11 November 1933; that published by Belturbet UDC for 26 houses published in the *Irish Press* on 20 March 1934 and that of Cavan UDC for 16 houses published in the *Anglo-Celt* on 8 April 1933.

## The housing programme and planning

In one respect the housing scheme built in Clones in 1933-35 was unusual in one respect for a relatively small provincial town at this time in that it was designed by an architect. In June 1932 Frank Gibney was engaged by the UDC to prepare plans. Later in his career Gibney went on to prepare detailed plans for several towns including Tralee (1939), Drogheda (1940), Navan (1943), Waterford (1943), Cavan (1945), Listowel (1947) and Ballina (1950), and he is best known for the housing schemes he designed for Bord na Mona across the midlands. It appears that relatively few town plans were drawn up prior to 1945 and that despite the passing of the Town and Regional Planning Act in 1934 the legislation had little impact on the design, layout or location of residential housing before 1945. This is hardly surprising given the ambivalent attitude of government. In 1930, on returning from a town planning conference in Rome, Richard Mulcahy stated that the country 'could not afford to indulge in town planning undertakings', albeit he committed himself to the introduction of a town planning bill some weeks later.<sup>131</sup> Speaking in 1938, O'Kelly, as the minister responsible for the implementation of the act, assessed its impact by focusing almost exclusively on its provisions to limit the number of houses per acre and went on to encourage local authorities to avail of the act's powers 'to ensure that our people enjoy proper sanitary surroundings both in home and workshop'.<sup>132</sup> Such remarks reflect a narrow conception of what town planning might entail.

The 1934 Act does not feature in the deliberations of local councils in the years 1934-39 when the public housing programme had its greatest impact in provincial towns. Tralee UDC completed 200 council houses in 1939-41, but the acquisition of sites and design of the two schemes involved pre-dated Gibney's town plan.<sup>133</sup> The Clones scheme may have been one of the first projects Gibney undertook for a local authority, having taken over the offices of Francis Russell in Westmoreland Street, Dublin.<sup>134</sup> The layout and design of the Clones scheme, named O'Neill Park in December 1933 after a local priest, shows some of the characteristic features that came to identify Gibney's work. These include the use of cul-de-sacs and at key locations the use of 'feature houses' as slightly more elaborate versions of basic house types (Figure 5.5).

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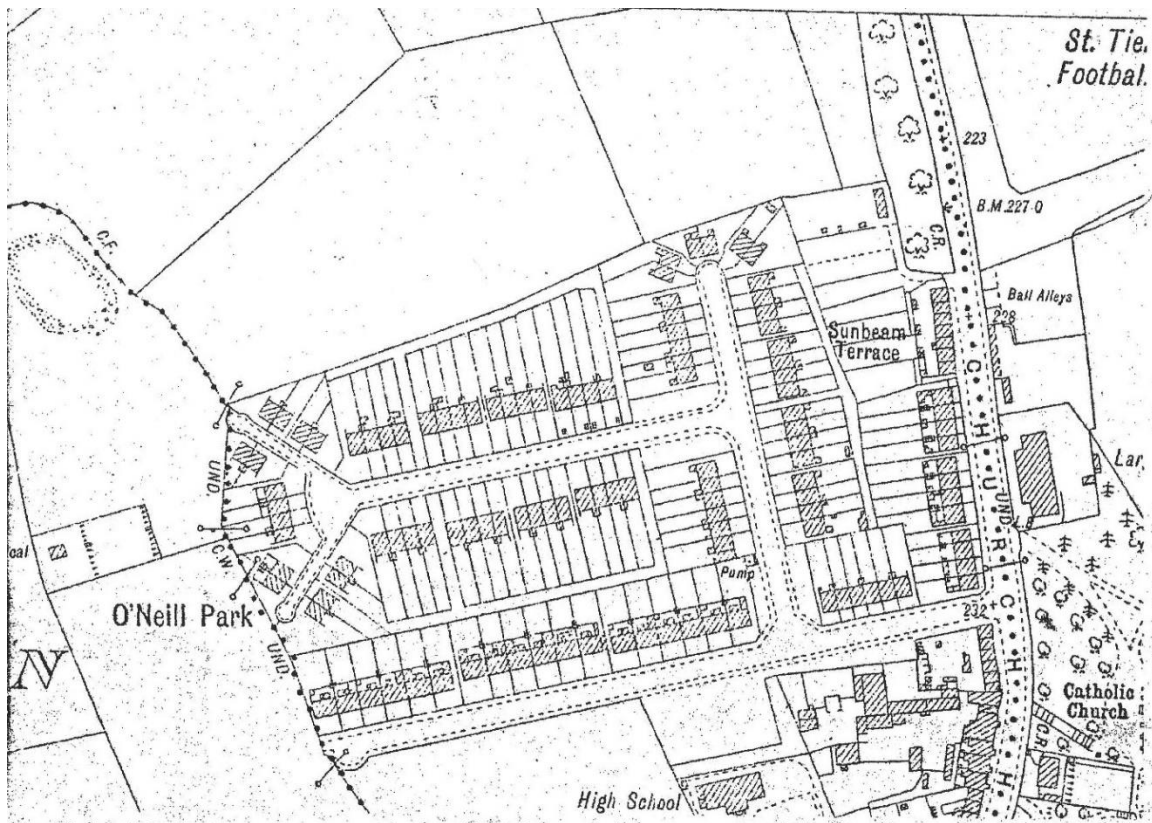
<sup>131</sup> *Irish Builder and Engineer*, Vol. lxxii, p. 180, quoted in O'Leary, *Sense of Place*, p. 62.

<sup>132</sup> *Dáil Debates*, 26 October 1938, Vol. 73, No. 1.

<sup>133</sup> *The Kerryman*, 6 January 1940.

<sup>134</sup> Irish Architectural Archive, Dictionary of Irish Architects 172001940, Frank Gibney, <http://www.dia.ie/architects/view/2123/GIBNEY-FRANK> [accessed 13 April 2016].

Figure 5.5 O'Neill Park, Clones



Source: MNCA, uncatalogued collection relating to O'Neill Park Clones

When Gibney came to claim his fees in April 1933 it was apparent that the council had been unenthusiastic about employing an architect but realised its own engineer had no experience of managing such a large scale project.<sup>135</sup> Many councils were content to rely on the expertise of their resident engineer and to build houses from the 'off the shelf' plans supplied by the DLGPH. In some cases the process involved an almost complete lack of coordinated planning. This is best understood by viewing the housing programme promoted by the DLGPH as an aspect of the government's economic stimulus programme, designed to address unemployment and support native industry. And the 12,500 houses built in provincial towns between 1932 and 1945 were, to a large extent, constructed in the absence of a town planning framework. The 1929 Town Planning Bill, introduced in the Seanad by Tom Johnson, was still-born and the 1934 Town and Regional Planning Act was effectively ignored by all but the largest local authorities until the end

<sup>135</sup> *Anglo-Celt*, 8 April 1933.

of the 1930s.<sup>136</sup> The Act placed no obligation on municipal authorities to adopt plans and Nowlan makes clear that the DLGPH and O’Kelly displayed little interest in encouraging them to do so.<sup>137</sup>

O’Connell’s discussion of the quality of public housing built in the 1930s poses the question as to whether the ‘drive against slum housing’ can be characterised as ‘second class homes for second class citizens’.<sup>138</sup> He argues that the high cost of housing loans charged to local authorities, and the financial burden this entailed, led them to cutting costs ‘by using less expensive materials than usual’, a strategy he terms ‘skinning down’.<sup>139</sup> He quotes evidence from the *Irish Worker’s Voice*, the paper of the Communist Party of Ireland, relating to houses in Marino that the Medical Officer of Health deemed unfit for human habitation. He further argues that ‘low cost dwellings’ required substantial ongoing maintenance, culminating in the Remedial Works Scheme of the 1980s which addressed ‘serious deterioration affecting certain rented houses mostly built under low cost arrangements’.<sup>140</sup> This characterisation of the 1930s housing programme, certainly as it evolved in provincial towns, appears somewhat simplistic. It is true that municipal authorities were determined to keep costs as low as possible and most of the houses built were simple three and four roomed concrete structures. Up to 1945 very few houses were provided with bathrooms, for example. When a motion came before Athy UDC in 1935 that it ‘consider the advisability of including bathrooms in all future housing schemes carried out by the Council’ it was defeated on the grounds that the higher rents involved could not be afforded by prospective tenants.<sup>141</sup> In addition, we have seen that the Department in most cases insisted on councils accepting the lowest tender submitted in the face of lobbying on behalf of local contractors and firms. However, there is very little evidence of the type O’Connell quotes regarding houses being uninhabitable. Instead, the evidence points more in the direction of incompetence and negligence on the part of builders and council staff and an unfamiliarity with some of the new materials and techniques used. One of the more high profile cases relates to Wolfe Tone Square in Bray, completed in January 1936. This was one of the largest schemes built in any provincial town and consisted of 184 four-roomed and 102 three-roomed houses. It soon became apparent that many of the houses were affected by damp and

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<sup>136</sup> Bannon points out in Michael Bannon, ‘Irish Planning from 1921 to 1945’ in Michael Bannon (ed.), *Planning: the Irish Experience* (Dublin, 1986), pp 13-70, that although advisory reports were prepared under the Act for Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford, none were implemented.

<sup>137</sup> K.B. Nowlan, ‘The evolution of Irish Planning, 1934-1964’ in Bannon (ed.), *Planning the Irish Experience*, p. 74.

<sup>138</sup> Cathal O’Connell, *The State and Housing in Ireland. Ideology, Policy and Practice* (New York, 2007), pp 27-44.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 34-35.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>141</sup> Athy UDC minutes, 25 June 1935.

that the western end of the estate was liable to flooding with the drainage system inadequate to carry away rainwater. At a meeting of the Bray Ratepayers Association it was reported that residents had to wade through flood waters to get to mass.<sup>142</sup> Conditions on the estate were raised by local Fine Gael TD, Dermot O'Mahony, in the Dáil in the spring of 1937 where he supported the demand of the Ratepayers Association for a sworn public inquiry

in view of the complaints of the great majority of the tenants, who have been moved from comparatively dry houses to these new houses which, they allege, are reeking with damp ... , are a breeding ground of consumption. As a very large sum of ratepayers' money has been sunk in this scheme, we demand this inquiry for the purpose of fixing the blame on the responsible parties.<sup>143</sup>

In reply to the debate O'Kelly referred to the experimental use of a 'string course of brick put into these houses as an attempt at variety and to make them a little more pleasing to the eye' but that this had not been successful.<sup>144</sup> He pointed out that the builder had completed satisfactory schemes in other towns and that

It cannot be expected that the Minister, or the Minister's inspectors, should be on the job supervising the building of houses in Bray, Kildare, Castlebar or anywhere else .... The plans of local authorities are sent in and are examined by our engineering and architectural staff, but it would not be reasonable that our inspectors should be held responsible for every house built in the country.<sup>145</sup>

Although the Minister went on to refer to the Bray borough surveyor in positive terms, he pointedly pushed back responsibility for the poor drainage of the site to the local authority and its staff. He pointed out that it was an exposed site while James Everett, the local Labour TD, described it as 'a swamp'. It appears, then, that a combination of inadequate provision of drainage by the local engineer for what was a difficult site, combined with an ill-advised use of brick as a design feature, lay behind the poor conditions in the scheme rather than an over-arching commitment to cut costs.

Evidence from Fermoy suggests that engineering inspectors from the Department set more exacting standards regarding completed schemes than local councils and their staff. An inspection carried out by the Department on a sixty-two house scheme at the Railway Field in 1936 found that 'the timber work is not of very good quality and there are some doors and frames of such poor quality due to knots, shakes etc. that they should not have been permitted

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<sup>142</sup> *Irish Press*, 24 March 1937.

<sup>143</sup> *Dáil Debates*, 8 April 1937, Vol. 66 No. 4.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

into the works'.<sup>146</sup> The houses were eventually occupied in 1937 but in January 1938 a further departmental inspection reported a litany of faults including poor internal plastering, warped doors and cracked window sills. Significantly, the inspector concluded 'cracks previously identified have reopened and several do not appear to have been repaired at all ... I cannot agree with [local] Engineer that cracks and other defects have been satisfactorily repaired'.<sup>147</sup> Reflecting its desultory approach to the report, the council failed to discuss it for a further four months when it asked its engineer to prepare specifications for the repairs.<sup>148</sup>

O'Connell also argues that pre-World War I public housing was of a superior specification than the houses built under the 1932 Act and cites as evidence their longer life span and lower requirement for ongoing maintenance.<sup>149</sup> The use of mass concrete and concrete blocks in the 1930s schemes proved to be a cheaper option than brick but led to problems with damp unless a good quality exterior plaster was applied. Inexperience in the use of concrete also caused problems. In St. Patrick's Avenue in Athy, for example, in the early 1930s timber floors were laid directly on concrete with the result that the floors rotted within four years.<sup>150</sup> However, there were equally disastrous episodes in the pre-war period arising from incompetence on the part of builders and council staff. One of the more striking examples relates to Tuam Town Commissioners' first scheme at MacHale and Parkmore Terraces was described in Chapter 3. The Town Commissioners were culpable for the very poor sanitary condition of MacHale Terrace with sewerage from the houses flowing into an adjoining field.<sup>151</sup> The contractor unilaterally built stud and lathe internal partitions rather than concrete and when inspected by the Town Commissioners' engineer the plaster was falling from the walls. At MacHale Terrace the lime plaster and pebble dashing on the exterior was found to be inadequate to keep out moisture.<sup>152</sup> The contractor responded that he was 'pleased to know he found so little fault with my work'.<sup>153</sup> The Town Commissioners remained in dispute with the tenants of these houses well into the 1920s.

The absence of any real planning legislation obliged Drogheda Corporation to devise its own planning controls in 1933. As outlined in Chapter 4, the Corporation was amongst the most active municipal authorities in the years between 1922 and 1932 and built 265 houses up to

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 6 October 1936.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 26 January 1938.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 24 May 1938.

<sup>149</sup> O'Connell, *The State and Housing in Ireland*, pp 34-35.

<sup>150</sup> Athy UDC minutes, 20 January 1936.

<sup>151</sup> Tuam Town Commissioners minutes, 6 May 1924.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 5 December 1916.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 1 February 1916.

early 1933, representing about 8 per cent of the total housing stock.<sup>154</sup> By 1933 it recognised that the recently passed Housing Act contained provisions that would facilitate the redevelopment of large parts of the town through generous government subsidy. One of the problems it identified related to the image of the town: its decaying thatched houses were 'for the most part, situate on the main entrances to our town which tend to give the impression to people passing through that the town is poor and decaying'.<sup>155</sup> A failure to demolish condemned houses from which families were rehoused in the late 1920s and early 1930s meant that many were quickly re-occupied, reflected the acute shortage of accommodation. In September 1933 the Corporation engaged Nicholas O'Dwyer, a former senior inspector in the DLGPH, to prepare a general layout plan of the town.<sup>156</sup> Although the details of this plan do not survive in the archives it appears to have informed the very significant re-modelling of the town that took place during the following ten years, much of it propelled by the public housing programme. When O'Dwyer's plan came before the Corporation in March 1934 it identified 364 houses to be demolished and the sites on which 571 could be built, some of which would have to be purchased. O'Dwyer's plans proposed opening up the area to the east of Hardmans Gardens with new roads and required 'private individuals intending to build houses [to] in future deposit the plan and layout plan so as to conform with the general Town Planning layout'.<sup>157</sup> Town Planning legislation would eventually have an impact in Drogheda in 1940 when the Corporation commissioned Gibney to draw up a town survey but by then it had built almost 700 houses within a framework devised by O'Dwyer and essentially coming from within the town's own administration. Figures 5.6 and 5.7 show the complete re-development of the area south-east of Mill Mount, south of the River Boyne. The houses shown on the 1861 OS map were almost exclusively thatched cabins. These were progressively demolished as first Mount St. Oliver (1931), then Congress Avenue (1932), Platin Road (1933-35), Priest's Lane (1934) and Halpin Terrace (1934) were built.

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<sup>154</sup> *Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1932-33*, Appendix xxxiv, pp 266-69.

<sup>155</sup> Drogheda Corporation, Housing Committee minutes (undated, early 1934).

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*; Irish Architectural Archive, Dictionary of Irish Architects 1720-1940, Nicholas O'Dwyer, <http://www.dia.ie/architects/view/4137/O'DWYER-NICHOLAS> [accessed 17 April 2016].

<sup>157</sup> Drogheda Corporation, Housing Committee minutes (undated, early 1934).

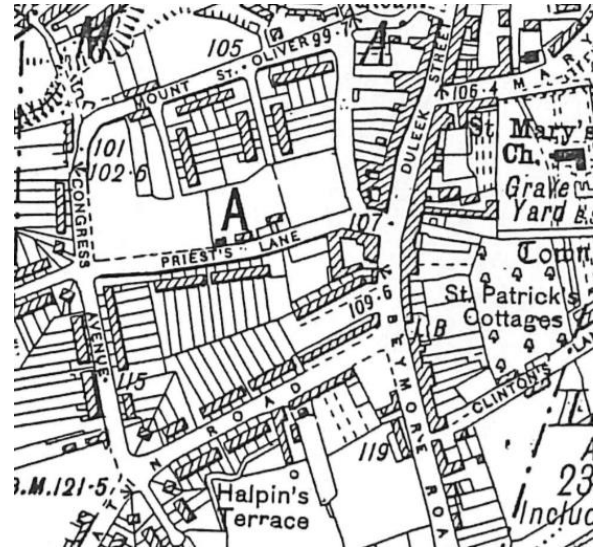


**Figure 5.6**  
Area of Drogheda south-east of Millmount, 1861



Source: *Drogheda*, published by UCD Library, University College Dublin, <<http://digital.ucd.ie/view/ucdlib:41348>>

**Figure 5.7**  
Area of Drogheda south-east of Millmount, 1948



Source: Ordnance Survey, Louth, Sheet 24, 1948

Tuam Town Commissioners' refusal to apply for urban district council status and assume responsibility for the sanitary infrastructure of the town resulted in considerable problems there in the 1930s as it attempted to accommodate the new labour force from the Tuam Sugar Factory and deal with its 'slum' problem. The disconnect between the Town Commissioners having responsibility for housing and the Galway Board of Health having responsibility for sanitation reduced the prospect of coordinated planning. In the summer of 1933 Mark Killilea, the local Fianna Fáil TD, led a deputation of town commissioners to meet O'Kelly and seek support for both housing and sewerage schemes for the town. The Sugar Beet Factory was to open later that year and, already, there was an acute shortage of housing in the town. Although O'Kelly appears to have promised a substantial grant towards a sewerage scheme,<sup>158</sup> the Board of Health continued to prevaricate as county councillors resisted imposing a county-wide charge to fund the scheme, the impending local elections in the summer of 1934 stiffening their resolve.<sup>159</sup> The Galway County Medical Officer condemned the delay, noting that 'repeated outbreaks of diphtheria and scarlet fever have occurred [in Tuam] during the year, the cause of which has been attributed to defective sewerage'.<sup>160</sup> In March 1934 the DLGPH refused the Town Commissioners permission to acquire part of the town's fair green for a housing scheme

<sup>158</sup> *Connacht Tribune*, 8 July 1933.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 June 1934.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 July 1934.

in the absence of proper sewerage facilities.<sup>161</sup> Eventually, at the end of 1934, with the first beet harvesting season in progress and the Sugar Factory in production, the sewerage scheme was approved by the Board of Health. In parallel, the DLGPH approved a compulsory purchase of land at Farranabox and Tubberjarlath on the southern edge of the town for a 90 house scheme. Tenders for a further 70 houses in the area were accepted in June 1935.<sup>162</sup> Work on the sewerage scheme eventually started in April 1936 just as the first of the houses at Tubberjarlath were being completed.<sup>163</sup> O’Kelly duly opened the first phase of the housing scheme in October, although it appears that all may not have been well with the scheme’s sewerage as a deputation of tenants demanded that cesspools be removed from the area.<sup>164</sup>

**Figure 5.8**

**Opening of the Tubberjarlath scheme in Tuam in 1936 performed by Seán T. O’Kelly**



*Source: Irish Press, 10 October 1936*

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<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 March 1934.

<sup>162</sup> Tuam Town Commissioners minutes, 18 June 1935.

<sup>163</sup> *Connacht Tribune*, 18 April 1936. These two large scheme, totalling 160 houses, presented the Town Commissioners with numerous problems through 1937. Some of this is discussed later in the chapter in relation to the Town Commissioners’ decision to only apply for the one third loan subsidy for these houses, with the result that rents were set at quite a high level. The other difficulty was the seasonal nature of the work at Tuam Sugar Beet Factory with most employment limited to the four months between October and January. An oral source quoted by Laheen in *Twentieth century housing in a rural town* (Tuam, 1998) stated that ‘once the campaign was over a lot of them left the houses there. This happened for the first few years after the houses were built. People were coming and going. And then they began to settle down and stay in the houses.’

<sup>164</sup> A further complaint by the tenants related to the fact that all front door keys to the houses were identical. See Tuam Town Commission minutes, 6 October 1936.

The population of Tuam increased from 3,293 in 1926 to 4,181 in 1936, or by over 25 percent. The absence of a planning framework was compounded by the limited capacity of the town's municipal authority to commission the basic infrastructure required to support its housing programme and to deal with the demands of a rising population. Of course the Town Commissioners had it within their own remit to apply for urban district status and were regularly encouraged to do so by Galway County Council and its Board of Health. In April 1937, as the Town Commissioners sought approval for the second phase of its sewerage scheme, the County Galway Board of Health refused sanction 'as they had already expressed the opinion that Tuam should be an Urban District and responsible for its own sanitary arrangements'.<sup>165</sup>

A challenge facing most municipal authorities was the acquisition of suitable sites which, in turn, had a significant effect on the size and location of the schemes they built. Housing legislation going back to 1890 included provision for compulsory purchase, but, based on the experience of towns such as Navan, Tuam and Fermoy, there appears to have been a reluctance to resort to this ultimate step.<sup>166</sup> As we have seen in the case of Castlebar, landowners often displayed a marked reluctance to sell land for housing and in the earlier years of the 1930s housing programme, and under pressure from the DLGPH, councils were often obliged to accept what appeared to be inferior or smaller sites. In Clones the council was fortunate in being able to buy three contiguous plots of land at Church Hill, north of the town centre, which allowed it to build on one large site.<sup>167</sup> The manner in which the location of housing schemes in Athy was determined illustrates the complete lack of a planning framework. In 1934 the UDC put forward plans for 178 houses on six different sites.<sup>168</sup> The DLGPH approved the sites, but it was left to the Town Clerk to advise the council some months later that three of the sites were

too scattered and situate too far from existing shopping. The question of its acquisition should be deferred until the Council consider the feasibility of acquiring one large site for development to accommodate all the houses at present proposed for these three sites.<sup>169</sup>

In 1931 the chairman of Longford UDC bemoaned the difficulty in obtaining sites for building and the unpopularity the pursuit of sites could attract for councillors. He claimed

from the moment the suggested sites were mentioned the people in whose land it was proposed to build, and the people living in the

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<sup>165</sup> Tuam Town Commissioners minutes, 6 April 1937.

<sup>166</sup> Housing of the Working Classes Act 1890 (53 & 54 Vict. c.70), Part I, section 8, Part III, section 57.

<sup>167</sup> Clones UDC minutes, 4 July 1932.

<sup>168</sup> Athy UDC minutes, 3 May 1934.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 September 1934.

localities raised their objections, and each and every one of them became more or less antagonistic to the Council.<sup>170</sup>

The suggestion that the prospect of council housing in an area would elicit opposition from local residents is a recurring, if often, subterranean theme when the question of sites was being considered. In the summer of 1929 the Department of Local Government received two objections to a proposed scheme of 24 houses put forward by Navan UDC on a site on the Trim Road. One was from the owner of Greenmount House, a substantial property about 300 yards from the field. This objection was dismissed. The other was from the secretary of the Representative Church Body of the Church of Ireland (RCB). The RCB owned the entire frontage opposite the proposed site and had recently built a glebe house there. The departmental inspector's report stated that

the erection of diminutive reduced standard cottages opposite to such a fine residence as the Glebe (value £54 15s) to my opinion is properly open to objection as long as other suitable sites without such objection are available.<sup>171</sup>

This part of the inspector's report was the subject of heated debate at the UDC, with some councillors claiming that Mr. Hipwell, Navan's Church of Ireland rector, had initiated the objection lodged by the RCB. Others, including the chairman, stated that they had been informed by Mr. Hipwell in person that he played no part in the objection and that 'he would not stand in the way of improving the housing conditions of the people of the town'.<sup>172</sup> In any event the effect of the objection was to postpone the scheme for four years.

In attempting to acquire sites, a regular response of landowners was that they intended to build 'better class' houses on the sites themselves and that the character of the area would be affected by the imposition of council housing. In 1934 Ballina UDC sought to acquire land on the Crossmolina Road owned by H.C. Bourke through a Compulsory Purchase Order. Bourke objected to the Order and at the ensuing public inquiry stated that 'it was always his intention to build Villa residences on the land'.<sup>173</sup> The council had already built houses on the opposite side of the road, and he suggested that 'it was not a good thing for town planning to have houses like these on both sides of the road'.<sup>174</sup> If cottages were put on these land', he argued, 'it rendered the other portion useless to him to develop into decent residences ... . It was a great town for building by the middle classes'.<sup>175</sup> On the other hand, Thomas Ruane, UDC chairman,

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<sup>170</sup> *Longford Leader*, 6 June 1931.

<sup>171</sup> Navan UDC Public Health and Housing Committee minutes, 4 July 1929 (MCL, NUDC/M/7).

<sup>172</sup> *Meath Chronicle*, 10 August 1929.

<sup>173</sup> *Ballina Herald*, 26 May 1934.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

argued that sites away from the town centre were required 'as they had in mind a scheme of town planning. They did not want to go back to the bye-ways and slums as they had years ago... They were going to build the houses, if possible, on the main road.'<sup>176</sup> Bourke's solicitor then questioned Ruane as to whether rehousing those from the back lanes to the main roads would 'only be transferring one slum in one place to another', as, he maintained, 'it is not the house that makes the slum but the people who dwell in it'.<sup>177</sup>

Of course the cost of sites was also a factor and this explains why most housing schemes in the 1930s, as was generally the case in the preceding decades, were built on the edges of towns rather than on town-centre sites that were more expensive to acquire. The acquisition of town centre sites was generally linked to Clearance Orders and Compulsory Purchase Orders (under the 1931 and 1932 Housing Acts owners of condemned dwellings were only entitled to the site value).<sup>178</sup> The public inquiries associated with the declaration of Clearances Orders, discussed in some detail in Chapter 6, were followed by separate public hearings if the area was being acquired by the local authority by Compulsory Purchase Order. In 1933, for example, Navan UDC decided to declare the Barrack Lane/Sandymount area a Clearance Area and to build houses on the site.<sup>179</sup> Located just north of the town centre at Market Square (see Figures 5.9 and 5.10) most of the dwellings had been condemned in the early years of the century. The public inquiry relating to the Clearance Order was held in April 1934 but, consistent with the provisions of the Act, it concerned itself exclusively with individual properties that should be condemned as unfit for human habitation, and the inspector ruled that issues of compensation could only be dealt with in a subsequent inquiry.<sup>180</sup> This inquiry took place in December and, apart from the small claims made by those who owned small plots of ground, the owner of a car hackney business claimed compensation of £550 and an 'urban farmer' housing five milch cows claimed £800.<sup>181</sup> While council officials contended that these were very inflated claims, compensation of several hundred pounds in total was awarded at a time when building land could be acquired on the outskirts of the town at £100 per acre. Ultimately the last condemned houses at Sandymount were demolished in 1936 and a terrace of council houses was completed on the northern side of the site, the only town centre location for public housing in the town.

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<sup>176</sup> *Western People*, 2 June 1934.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>178</sup> Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 1931, Part I, section 7.

<sup>179</sup> Navan UDC minutes, 12 September 1933 (MCL, NUDC/M/8).

<sup>180</sup> *Meath Chronicle*, 28 April 1934.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 December 1934.

Figure 5.9

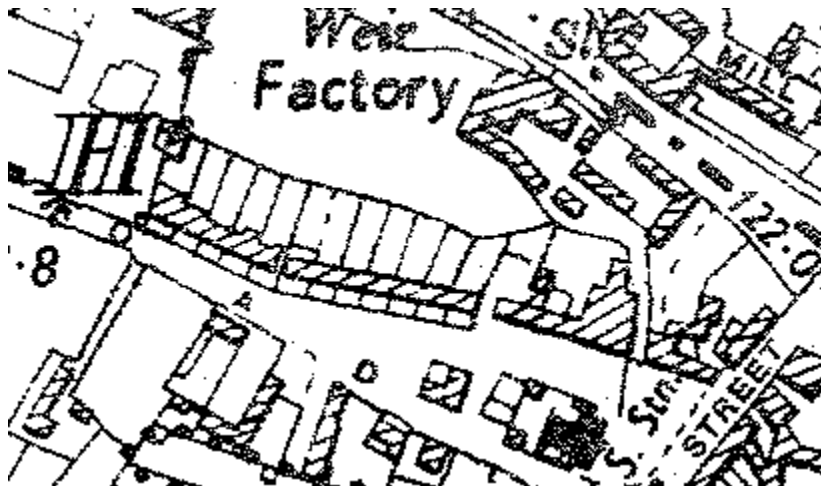
Sandymount/Barrack Lane area in Navan showing Clearance Area in 1895



Source: Ordnance Survey of Ireland Index to the Map of the Town of Navan County Meath – <https://digital.ucd.ie/view/ucdlib:41393>

Figure 5.10

Sandymount/Barrack Lane area in Navan in 1955



Source: Ordnance Survey, Meath, Sheet 25, 1955

A further factor that sometimes led to new housing schemes being dispersed around towns was the insistence on the part of councillors that each electoral area 'got its fair share'. Drogheda, for example, was divided into three electoral wards, Ballina into two and Athy into two. In Drogheda a separate register for each ward was maintained of those applying for new houses which was effectively what we would understand as a housing waiting list.<sup>182</sup> This system encouraged councillors from each ward to insist that their area obtain a proportion of whatever

<sup>182</sup> Drogheda Corporation minutes, 7 August 1934.

houses were being built. Athy, a relatively small town with a population of 3,500 was divided into two electoral areas, East Urban and West Urban. When a deputation of councillors visited the Department in 1934 they were advised to plan their housing programme around the existing sewerage system. The councillors insisted, however, that ‘people living in homes in East Urban did not wish to go into new houses in West Urban and vice-versa’.<sup>183</sup>

Athy also provides one of the best examples of the uncoordinated nature of the housing programme as it unfolded in many provincial towns. Athy UDC responded to the prompting of the Department and the chronic shortage of adequate housing in the town by building almost 200 houses between 1933 and 1939. However, the town’s water and sewerage systems were entirely inadequate even in the 1920s and were not developed in tandem with the expansion in housing. The result was that some housing schemes built in the 1930s remained without water-based sanitation for over a decade. Construction work on Plewman’s Terrace, a terrace of 24, two-storied, four-roomed houses on the Kilkenny Road began in late 1935 (Figure 5.11). This followed a motion passed by the council which urged that the construction begin as soon as possible ‘in order to relieve unemployment in the district’.<sup>184</sup> Figure 5.8 shows that the site was beyond the south-west edge of the town where the existing housing at Upper William Street and Blackparks consisted of small two and three roomed dwellings. Residents from these houses and a further thirteen families from the nearby Canal Side were re-housed in Plewman’s Terrace when the scheme was completed towards the end of 1936. In April 1936, as the terrace was being built, the council decided to ‘have dry closets installed in houses on Plewman’s site pending the completion of sewerage scheme’.<sup>185</sup> By the end of 1937 it was apparent that the terrace was in a highly insanitary state and the Medical Officer of Health reported that sewerage was soaking into the gardens of the houses.<sup>186</sup> Three years later, in 1940, tenants were complaining that nothing had been done to address the problem. Given the dangers to public health, the Medical Officer of Health suggested piping the terrace’s sewerage into the nearby Grand Canal, but the council’s solicitor advised that such a course of action would be illegal.<sup>187</sup> In the absence of any alternative this solution remained a topic of discussion for several years at council meetings until, eventually, in 1947 the terrace was connected the town’s sewerage

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<sup>183</sup> Athy UDC minutes, 29 November 1934.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 October 1935.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 April 1936.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 December 1937.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 April 1940.

system. In June 1949, almost thirteen years after the houses were first occupied, Plewman's Terrace had WCs installed.<sup>188</sup>

In the lull in house building at the end of the war there was some reflection on the part of officials in the DLGPH on the lack of planning and poor design of what had gone before. Daly quotes one housing inspector as 'lamenting the monotonous pattern of existing housing schemes' and noted that most were based on 'off the shelf' plans provided by the Department which were replicated across the country.<sup>189</sup> It was suggested that local authorities be obliged to hire technical expertise to assist in both the house design and the layout of schemes. James Deeney, the medical officer of the Department, suggested that playgrounds should be located near all schemes and that cul-de-sacs should be a feature of their layouts.<sup>190</sup> In a memo, quoted by Daly, he puts forward a perspective singularly lacking from the consideration of either town councillors or Department officials in the 1930s:

Men, all over the world, are singularly lacking in thought for the welfare of their womenfolk ... All over this country hundreds of thousands of women depend for every drop of water on half-filled cans – drawn from surface wells sometimes hundreds of yards away. Therefore for the plain and simple reason that of all the people in this country the mother or housewife deserves most from the community, the provision of piped water and better still a domestic hot water system, should be our first consideration in household planning.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 June 1949.

<sup>189</sup> Daly, *Buffer State*, p. 340.

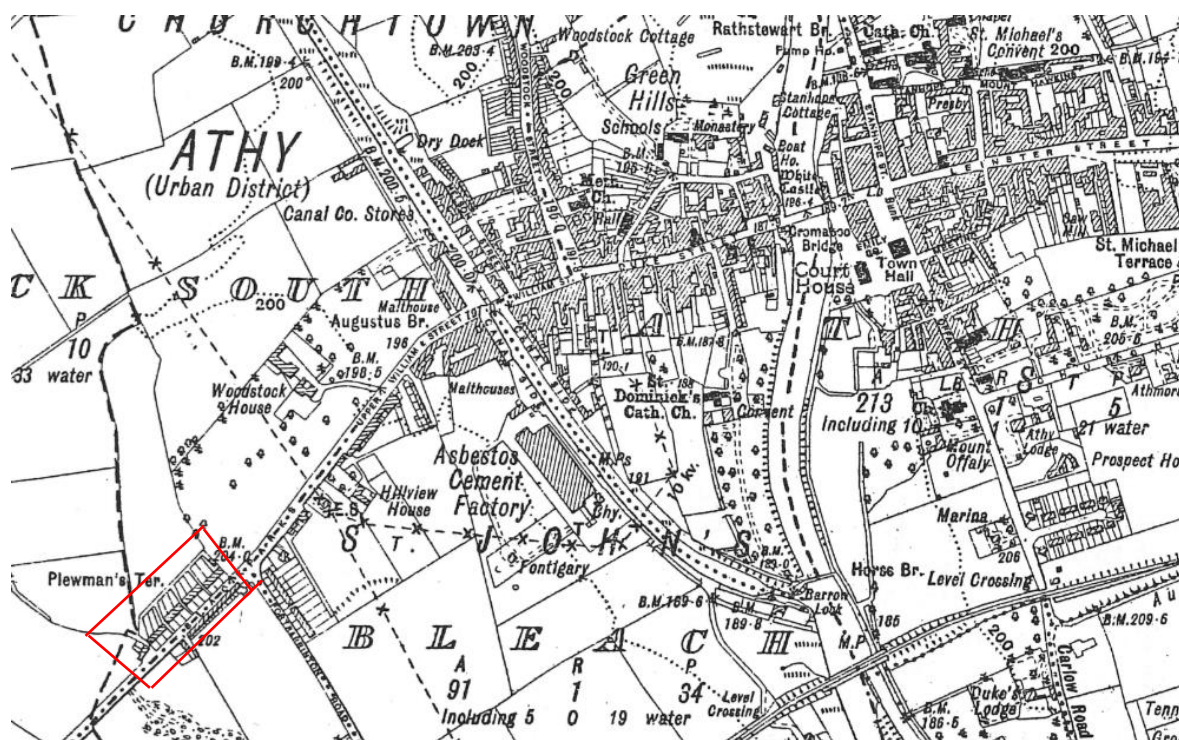
<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 341.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 340-41.



Figure 5.11

Map of Athy showing Plewman's Terrace, 1939



Source: Ordnance Survey, Kildare, Sheet 35, 1939

### Winding down of the housing programme

When, in 1934, the Department of Finance agreed to sanction a cut in the interest rate for loans for housing from the LLF from 5.75 per cent to 4.75 per cent, it insisted that this should be accompanied by some reduction in the level of subsidies paid.<sup>192</sup> O'Kelly successfully resisted any change to the levels set out in the 1932 Act and this regime remained in place until 1937. By then building costs were starting to rise and councils were claiming that the housing programme would grind to a halt in the absence of increased subsidies. Modest inflation in 1937 resulted in an increase in the cost of building materials, and builders also claimed that the provisions of the Conditions of Employment Act of 1936, which included six days paid holidays for employees and a maximum 48 hour week, contributed to higher costs. An inflationary trend in the level of tenders awarded for four-roomed council houses from 1937 onwards is shown in Table 5.4. Among the case-study towns, the first indication of rising costs was evident when tenders were submitted for a 22-house scheme in Drogheda at Marsh Road in July 1936.<sup>193</sup> The lowest tender was for £330 per house with the all-in cost totalling £369. Because the two-thirds

<sup>192</sup> Rates of interest charged by Local Loans Fund (NAI, F 60/10/33).

<sup>193</sup> Drogheda Corporation, Housing Committee minutes, 28 July 1936.

loan subsidy was only available on the first £300, the town clerk advised the Housing Committee that this would mean an additional 1s. 7d. on rents. No reference, on this occasion, was made to the potential additional cost to ratepayers. Many of those being rehoused from Clearance Areas were struggling to pay rents for houses built in 1934 and 1935 costing less than £300. The prospect of ratepayers having to make a greater contribution to subsidising rents because of higher building costs was not one which councillors viewed favourably. Across all 70 of the 74 provincial towns that had built houses in 1935-36 (and not sold them off), council house rents were, on average, subsidised by 8d. per week per house by ratepayers.<sup>194</sup> Drogheda Corporation decided against proceeding with the 22-house scheme at Marsh Road and sought a meeting in the DLGPH to ask for higher subsidies. Surprisingly, the deputation was told that 'there was a possibility that the government would have to grant the two thirds subsidy on the all-in cost per house up to £350'.<sup>195</sup> Having held out the prospect of an increase in the subsidy, the DLGPH engaged in a fifteen-month battle of wills with the Department of Finance which resolutely opposed any increase. In early 1937 an internal Finance memo indicates that O'Kelly's officials had sought an increase to £350 to which the subsidy could be applied or an equivalent cut in the interest rate charged for LLF loans.<sup>196</sup> Finance expressed its resolute opposition to a cut in the interest rate and reminded DLGPH that the original decision taken in 1934 to cut the rate to 4.75 percent was supposed to be accompanied by a reduction in the amount of subsidies paid.<sup>197</sup> Finance attempted to deflect any decision on increasing the subsidy limit by claiming there was no information regarding the proportion of tenders exceeding £300, adding that 'an advance in the subsidy maximum would almost inevitably result in an all-over increase in contract prices, irrespective of whether such increases were justified.'<sup>198</sup> Local authorities also exerted pressure on the government to increase the subsidy limit; in April 1937 the executive council of the AMAI passed a resolution demanding an increase to £400, without which 'Councils anxious to help the Minister to help the housing problem will be reluctantly compelled to cease building until building costs are considerably reduced'.<sup>199</sup> In July O'Kelly informed the AMAI that he had made

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<sup>194</sup> The contribution made by the rates (described as 'loss falling on rates') was published for each town in the annual reports of the DLGPH. The data certainly contains some anomalies with very significant fluctuations from year to year for some towns. Some of this is accounted for by circumstances where councils were obliged to start making repayments on housing loans before tenants had occupied the houses and started paying rent. This occurred fairly regularly when Clearance Orders failed to be confirmed before schemes were completed. In these circumstances councils could not be guaranteed the two-thirds loan subsidy and, therefore, were obliged to postpone granting tenancies.

<sup>195</sup> Drogheda Corporation, Housing Committee minutes, 24 August 1936.

<sup>196</sup> State aid for housing, urban and rural (NAI, S 32/2/37).

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>199</sup> *Irish Press*, 10 April 1937.

representations to the Minister for Finance to increase the subsidy, thereby directing political pressure on Minister McEntee and making clear he stood alongside councillors on the issue.<sup>200</sup> The annual conference of the AMAI in September again issued the veiled threat to cease building unless its demand for increased subsidies was acceded to.<sup>201</sup> Contributions at the conference, as reported in national newspapers, conveyed the distinct impression that delegates were primarily concerned at ensuring that ratepayers were not further exposed to subsidising the 'slum clearance' programme. Despite Finance's continuing insistence that 'the existing burden on the Exchequer by reason of the financing of Housing operation [sic] by Local Authorities is as much as, if not more, than it should equitably be called on to carry',<sup>202</sup> the increase to £350 was conceded, and O'Kelly was able to report his most recent victory over Finance to the AMAI in November.<sup>203</sup>

**Table 5.4**  
**Tenders for 4-roomed houses in provincial towns, 1934-42**

Year	No.	Average tender
1934-35	19	257
1935-36	17	272
1936-37	16	271
1937-38	21	329
1938-39	11	337
1939-40	13	346
1940-41	5	369
1941-42	5	404

*Source: Annual reports of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1934-42*

Despite O'Kelly's success in increasing the ceiling for which loan subsidies would be paid, municipal authorities proved more circumspect in undertaking building programmes from 1938 onwards and this is reflected in Figure 5.2. House completions in the 74 provincial towns fell from 1,631 in 1938-39 to 1,281 in 1939-40 and to just 436 in 1940-41.<sup>204</sup> A more accurate picture of the rapid decline in building activity is captured in Table 5.5 which shows the number of council houses for which tenders were approved in these years. The public housing building programme in provincial towns effectively ended in 1939 when tenders for only 151 houses were approved. During the war years only one substantial scheme was completed, consisting of 124 houses in Arklow. The drawn out process which saw the Arklow scheme eventually

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 July 1937.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 September 1937.

<sup>202</sup> State aid for housing, urban and rural (NAI, S 32/2/37).

<sup>203</sup> *Irish Press*, 18 November 1937.

<sup>204</sup> *Annual reports of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1938-39 to 1940-41.*

completed in the summer of 1944 underlines the difficulties faced in these years. The lack of activity in the construction industry in 1940 was reflected in the fact that sixteen builders submitted tenders for the scheme.<sup>205</sup> The contractor, Thomas Thornbury, insisted that ‘war clauses’ be included in the contract to protect his margins in the event of increased costs of materials or labour.<sup>206</sup> The council agreed to supply some of the building material at an agreed price and after various labour issues were resolved construction started in the summer of 1941. In May 1942 the Town Surveyor reported that ‘the contractors are experiencing difficulty in securing materials, also referring to the increased cost of materials’. He suggested that the council consider abandoning the scheme temporarily.<sup>207</sup> Building was in fact halted over the summer due to a shortage of cement, reinforced iron, plaster slabs and water pipes.<sup>208</sup> In Drogheda, plans to build 32 houses at Gallows Lane were considered in 1941 and initially shelved. Subsequently the tender was awarded to B.J. Corcoran, but within a month he was writing to the Housing Committee informing it that ‘there were difficulties in obtaining materials; that he was in communication with suppliers and on hearing from them would communicate immediately’.<sup>209</sup> The contract was eventually taken over by the Tredagh Building Co. and was not completed until 1947.<sup>210</sup>

**Table 5.5**  
**Tenders approved for council housing in provincial towns, 1936-40**

Year	Houses approved for those displaced from condemned dwellings	Total council houses approved
1936-37	1243	1320
1937-38	1558	2069
1938-39	356	530
1939-40	77	151

*Source: Annual reports of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1936-40*

The virtual end of the 1930s building programme in provincial towns coincided with a cabinet reshuffle and O’Kelly’s appointment as Minister for Finance in 1939. His replacement in Local Government and Public Health, P.J. Rutledge, despite his role in helping to facilitate the very

<sup>205</sup> Arklow UDC minutes, 18 September 1940 (Wicklow County Archives)

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 February 1941.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 May 1942.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 September 1942.

<sup>209</sup> Drogheda Corporation, Housing Committee minutes, 1 September 1941.

<sup>210</sup> Erection of 32 houses at Gallow’s Lane (LCA, DBC/HSG/001/019/013).

extensive house building programme in his native Ballina, appears to have had little of the zeal for housing possessed by his predecessor.<sup>211</sup> Of course circumstances had changed, but his contributions in the Dáil appear perfunctory when issues relating to housing were discussed, an accusation that could not be levelled at O’Kelly. When moving the Housing (Amendment) Bill, 1940 he informed the Dáil that ‘it is the same Bill as last year, the provisions are the same, and it is merely a question of extending the provisions for a further year’.<sup>212</sup> The opposition had become accustomed over the course of seven years to O’Kelly’s rather more effusive contributions, and Henry Dockrell (Fine Gael) responded that ‘the Minister’s remarks are, no doubt, correct but it is rather a disappointment that the Minister has not something more to say on the housing question’.<sup>213</sup> None of this is to over-emphasise O’Kelly’s personal influence in shaping the housing programme and, in particular, its very significant impact in provincial towns. The manner in which O’Kelly operated vis-à-vis the Department of Finance and its strictures regarding public expenditure on housing was part of the wider Fianna Fáil agenda to increase social spending in ways that built up its electoral constituency.<sup>214</sup>

**Figure 5.12**

**New housing scheme opened at Tirawly Park, Ballina in 1936**



Source: *Irish Press*, 19 December 1936

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<sup>211</sup> Cousins, *The Birth of Social Welfare in Ireland* (p. 90) points out that Rutledge was ill for much of his time in office and resigned in August 1941.

<sup>212</sup> *Dáil Debates*, 30 April 1940, Vol. 79, No.16.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>214</sup> See, for example, Cousins’ conclusions regarding the introduction of Children’s Allowance in his *Birth of Social Welfare in Ireland* where he links Fianna Fáil initiatives in social policy to its focus on electoral success.

By the autumn of 1939 when O’Kelly moved to Finance, over 11,000 houses had been built by municipal authorities in provincial towns under the 1932 Housing Act, representing almost one in six of their housing stocks. In contrast, just over 2,000 houses had been built in these towns by private individuals and Public Utility Societies with the aid of state subsidy. In contrast to Dublin, and certainly in contrast to rural Ireland, the public housing programme in towns was dominant. Some towns such as Athy (199 houses), Ballina (455), Kilrush (196) and Tuam (244) had, in effect, been re-made in the preceding eight years, and more than one in four private dwellings were new council houses.

In assessing the provision of public housing prior to 1922 in Chapter 3, the pattern of provision appeared to undermine the notion of a benevolent state responding to housing needs. Great variations in levels of activity on the part of the ‘local state’, in the form of Town Commissioners and Urban Councils, indicated that many factors were in play, other than a simple response to poor housing conditions. At the state level there was also a disconnect between the LGB’s promotion of public housing as part of its public health agenda and the allocation of most houses built between 1890 and 1922 to the better-off strata of the working class. The Housing Acts of 1931 and 1932 contained provisions that had the potential to address the issue of sub-standard housing with the level of subsidy in the 1932 Act for rehousing those displaced from condemned dwellings representing a realistic attempt to underpin the financing of slum clearance. The evidence presented in this chapter suggests that the legislation provided an opportunity for town councils to address the chronic problem of poor housing. As in the period 1890-1922 there were significant variations in the extent to which councils exploited the opportunity. These are explored in Chapter 7. In Chapter 6 the impact of the ‘slum clearance’ programme is explored.

### **The County Management Act**

Although the passing of the County Management Act in 1940 was to have a profound impact on the administration of local government, its impact on the provision of public housing within the timeframe of this study was more muted. Centralisation and bureaucratisation had been to the forefront of local government reform in the preceding decades and, as referred to above, some consideration had been given to the abolition of councils and urban councils in the mid-1930s.<sup>215</sup> The Cork City Management Act of 1929 was the template for the 1940 legislation in that it removed a set of executive powers from councillors and placed them in the hands of the City

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<sup>215</sup> See Potter, *Municipal Revolution*, pp 293-301.

Manager. These included the drawing up of the annual budget, responsibility for the routine business of the council and control of the workforce. The 1940 Act stipulated that managers acted not only for county councils, but for all local authorities within the county, including boroughs, urban district councils and town commissioners.<sup>216</sup> Opposition to the legislation was widespread amongst councillors and found expression at a special conference of the AMAI in early 1940.<sup>217</sup> The minutes of municipal authority meetings are replete with condemnation of the Act as councillors anticipated a loss of power and a cull of their numbers.<sup>218</sup> The Act was implemented immediately after the local elections held in August 1942 but its effect was to engender fairly widespread apathy regarding the poll. No elections were held in over a dozen provincial towns where the number of candidates did not exceed the number of seats.<sup>219</sup> Reports of municipal authority meetings from 1942 onwards show poor levels of attendance with some postponed due to being inquorate.

Councillors soon found their powers much diminished in areas where they had valued their influence, especially in relation to housing. Some instances from Tuam illustrate the manner in which the new regime limited the scope councillors traditionally possessed. Conflicts between the new County Managers and urban councillors often exposed issues that councillors regarded as their vital concerns. In 1943, for example, the tenanting of vacant houses was undertaken by the County Manager, much to the displeasure of the town commissioners. They directed the town clerk 'to make a protest to the County Manager ... and request that the Commissioners' recommendations be accepted in the matter of selecting suitable tenants'.<sup>220</sup> In 1944 the Manager proposed a rate of 3s. 8d., including 1s. 8d. for housing. The Town Commissioners sought to cut this by 2d. as it included £400 for repairs to council houses. In response, the Manager stated that 'he could not allow the council's property to deteriorate'.<sup>221</sup> On questions of wider housing policy the commissioners were also overruled by the County Manager. In considering plans for a new housing scheme in 1945 the commissioners 'enquired as to the powers [they had] for the provision of houses for the middle classes'.<sup>222</sup> The Manager's response that 'the Board were not entitled to compete with private enterprise, and it was the

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<sup>216</sup> For a detailed discussion of the evolution of the new management system see Desmond Roche, *Local Government in Ireland* (Dublin, 1982), pp 100-115.

<sup>217</sup> *The Kerryman*, 24 February 1940.

<sup>218</sup> Typically, medium sized towns such as Ballina, Tullamore and Navan had their councils reduced from fifteen to nine members. Larger councils, such as those in Wexford and Clonmel, were reduced from twenty four to twelve.

<sup>219</sup> These towns included Athy, Castlebar, Kilkenny, Killarney, Kilrush, Listowel and Westport.

<sup>220</sup> Tuam Town Commissioners minutes, 6 April 1943.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 March 1944.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 November 1945.

first duty to cater for the working classes' is very much a personal interpretation of the housing legislation in place in the mid-1940s but perhaps revealing regarding the ideology of the new cadre in charge of local government.<sup>223</sup> Apparently stymied at every turn the Commissioners passed a motion declaring that 'local authorities elected by the people are now left virtually without any powers or purpose of existence'.<sup>224</sup> A long running dispute between councillors on Arklow UDC and the Wicklow County Manager regarding the setting of rents is an interesting illustration of opposing perspectives. The 1942 local elections in Arklow returned three Fianna Fáil and two Labour councillors so that this group retained control of the new nine person council. In January 1944 the council's 124 house scheme at Connolly Street / Griffith Street was completed. The councillors were informed that the economic rent for these houses would be 8s. 8½d. but nevertheless decided to recommend setting the rent at 5s., including rates.<sup>225</sup> The Manager responded that he believed such a low rent would 'place an undue burden upon the ratepayers', amounting to 3s. 8d. in the pound.<sup>226</sup> The councillors appealed to the Department for a ruling but in its absence the Manager set a rent of 6s. per week for twenty of the houses.<sup>227</sup> Despite the Manager's opinion that high ratepayer subsidies would result in their being 'unable to meet further demands for housing', the Department eventually came down largely on the side of the councillors and set the rents for the remaining 104 houses at 5s. 9d. per week.

The introduction of County Managers into the decision making process around public housing provision in provincial towns to some extent signified the end of era in terms of the role of councillors, stretching back to the late nineteenth century. The identification of sites for housing, negotiations relating to purchase, evaluation of tenders, the setting of rents and the selection of tenants were now largely the business of a professional bureaucracy and, ultimately, central government.

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid. Roche, *Local Government in Ireland* (p. 107) makes the point that some of the new managers took a literal view of their role and quotes the Sligo-Leitrim manager as defining himself as 'responsible for practically all the functions of the local authority'.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 3 August 1943.

<sup>225</sup> Arklow UDC minutes, 6 December 1943.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 3 January 1944.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 6 March 1944.



## Chapter 6

### 'Clearing the slums'

*There was no Government, perhaps even in the world, that had provided such generous grants for housing as had been given in the country since 1932.<sup>1</sup>*

The 1931 Housing Act was the first piece of housing legislation that placed an obligation on municipal authorities to re-house those displaced by the clearance of 'unhealthy areas' or condemned dwellings.<sup>2</sup> Of course this was not the first legislation to incorporate a 'sanitary' approach to the housing question. Part I of the Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890 gave municipal authorities power of compulsory acquisition of land and property in what constituted an 'unhealthy area'.<sup>3</sup> But, as we have seen, this provision was not used. Part II of the 1890 Act imposed a duty on local authorities to inspect houses in their districts and issue statutory notices to owners to make good their dwellings; failure to do so resulting in the issuing of closing or demolition orders.<sup>4</sup> As we have also seen, this regime was operated in a fairly haphazard manner and condemned houses were seldom closed up or demolished, given the lack of alternative accommodation. The annual reports of the DLGPH from 1933-34 onwards record the number of houses in Clearance Areas, the individual condemned houses demolished under the 1932 Act, and the corresponding number of families displaced. Over the twelve year period the totals in the 74 provincial towns were 8,161 houses and 8,559 families, all of whom the local authorities were obliged to re-house. When we compare these numbers to the total number of houses built by local authorities in these towns – 12,543 – it is apparent that the housing programme as implemented in provincial towns to a large extent falls within the 'sanitary approach' rather than in one designed to meet the deficiency in the overall supply of housing. The definition of a Clearance Area in the 1932 Act derived from the 1931 Act and the key phrase is '[buildings] unfit for human habitation or dangerous or injurious to health'.<sup>5</sup> In fact much of the phraseology in this part of the Act is taken directly from the Greenwood Act (1930), reflecting the fairly high levels of interaction with British civil servants, certainly up until 1932.

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<sup>1</sup> *Irish Independent*, 20 May 1940. Speech given by Seán T O'Kelly at the opening of the O'Molloy Street housing scheme in Tullamore.

<sup>2</sup> Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 1931.

<sup>3</sup> Housing of the Working Classes Act 1890 (53 & 54 Vict. c.70), Part I, section 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Part II, section 32.

<sup>5</sup> Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 1931, Part II, section 5.

The demolition of thousands of houses and in effective the forced re-housing of their inhabitants in the interest of public health raises obvious questions regarding the exercise of state power, social control and the lack of agency available to its citizens. At the national level, and certainly amongst policy makers at that level, the discourse around 'slum clearance' tended to focus on the plight of those in poor housing conditions and the effort required to remove 'the stain' on the nation's image. During the debate on the 1931 Act the cost to the health system of the ill-health caused by poor housing featured prominently, and commentary only occasionally veered into the moral conduct of 'slum dwellers'. Independent senator Thomas Foran referred to the effects of the slums 'on citizenship, on unemployment, on the conduct of people and on the health of the people principally'.<sup>6</sup>

Given his influential role in shaping social policy the remarks of Seán Lemass in a Dáil debate on the same Act are revealing:

They will tell you that those who live in the slums will, when they enter the other houses, take in lodgers, put the coals in the bath and things like that. Until we can meet and counteract that argument and show that a person who has lived all his life in the slums is capable of being taught how to care for property, we will not get the full force of public opinion bearing upon this problem. I think there is an opportunity here to teach them. When a clearance order is made, and a building demolished, some temporary accommodation must be provided for the people who have been deprived of their dwelling, until new accommodation is available. It is possible to use that period of temporary accommodation in training and instructing the people how to care for the new homes that are to be made available.<sup>7</sup>

This reflects a view that the housing programme was about making new citizens and through the exercise of a firm paternalism the slum dwellers would become worthy of their new surroundings.<sup>8</sup> In general, these kinds of remarks were seldom espoused by politicians at the national level. But there is little doubt that themes of moral degeneracy and physical contagion formed a backdrop to much of the public discourse on the 'slum question'. Felix Driver uses the phrase 'moral geographies' to capture the new ways of thinking about space and society that emerged as part of the new social sciences in the second half of the nineteenth century. These

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<sup>6</sup> *Seanad Debates*, 17 December 1931, Vol. 15, No.5.

<sup>7</sup> *Dáil Debates*, 18 November 1931, Vol. 40, No. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Although there is no evidence that Lemass was aware of its existence, a scheme similar to the one he envisaged operated in Holland from the mid-1920s through to World War II. 'Undesirable families' rehoused from condemned dwellings were offered places on specially built estates until they were 'promoted' to municipal housing. See Elizabeth Denby, *Europe Rehoused* (Oxford, 2015), pp 123-25. An even more strict regime was implemented in Mussolini's Italy where 'unsatisfactory' families displaced as a result of slum clearances were housed in one-roomed apartments in hotels and were subject to regular inspections by both Blackshirts and police. See Denby, *Europe Rehoused*, p. 212.

were a set of ideas that had a form of environmentalism at their core. In illustrating the mid-Victorian mapping of behaviour to particular types of environment, Felix Driver uses a quotation linking 'dirty, crowded back streets' to a lack of 'health or virtue'.<sup>9</sup> This belief in a link between environment and moral behaviour informed some of the more influential commentary on the housing question in 1930s Ireland. The prominent Jesuit priest, J.E. Canavan, addressing the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland in 1937 on the question of clearing the slums, observed

Slum-dwellers by their vices do not make the slums in the first instance: the slum breeds the slum mind. They have found in England that in an average industrial slum area about 10 per cent, were irreformable and that in the housing schemes about this percentage had to be evicted for their filthy and vicious habits.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 6.1**

**Opening of Falgarragh Park, Ballyshannon in 1936**



*Source: Irish Press, 10 March 1936*

At the opening of an 80-house scheme in Ballyshannon in 1936 (Figure 6.1), Seán T. O'Kelly remarked on the impact that improved housing conditions had on rates of infant mortality and tuberculosis. Judge G. Moonan, K.C., chose to highlight what he perceived as a different dividend when he added 'bad housing did more to breed crime than anything else. To provide

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<sup>9</sup> Driver, 'Moral Geographies', p. 277.

<sup>10</sup> J. E. Canavan, 'Slum clearance in Dublin' in *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, xvi, no. 1 (1937/1938), p. 22.

people with good houses would considerably lessen the work of the Judges.’<sup>11</sup> This latter comment reflected views that were quite widely articulated in earlier decades. Writing in 1912, a columnist in *The Kerryman*, musing on poor housing conditions in Tralee, concluded ‘there is no question about it: the slums are forcing houses for crime and disease’.<sup>12</sup> Echoing Senator Foran’s remarks quoted above, Councillor Smith, on the occasion of the official opening of a housing scheme in Drogheda in August 1939, opined that ‘unless they had decent houses they could not expect to have a decent citizen with a decent mind’.<sup>13</sup> Others pronouncing on the problem of the slums displayed a barely disguised self-interest. The Irish Construction Co. Ltd viewed home ownership as an antidote to the evils of the slums. Its spokesman, Mr Symmons, proposed

The financing of a big project of 20,000 houses assumed at £10,000,000 would best be done in the form of loans to the families, enabling them to buy their homes... . From every social and economic consideration, the perpetuation of tenancies should be abolished... .Whether it is to eradicate from the slum dweller the destructive practices he learns from childhood, to inculcate the virtues of home-owning, or to prevent a financial loss to the building administration, the plan of selling houses to the people is superior to renting them. Every builder, public authority doctor and welfare worker will support that view.<sup>14</sup>

The moral threat posed by the slums featured regularly in media commentary and in that of local government officials such as Medical Officers of Health. Dr James Kilbride’s description of housing conditions in Athy in 1932 went farther than most doctors when he stated that ‘the housing must be held responsible for all the moral short coming and physical ill-health that is [sic] at present existent in the town’.<sup>15</sup> When Athy’s first large post-1932 housing scheme was opened by O’Kelly, the Council’s address to the Minister echoed its Medical Officer of Health’s earlier remarks:

We all know that both the moral and physical ill-health and degeneracy have their roots, mainly in bad housing conditions, and that the Minister’s scheme will go further than any other man’s that could be devised to cure the many social evils that exist, to raise the moral standard of the people and to lessen the necessity for such institutions as hospitals, sanatoria, etc.<sup>16</sup>

O’Kelly’s numerous speeches at the opening of housing schemes across the country suggest that he had a particular type of citizen in mind, and they also provide clues as to his own motivation

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<sup>11</sup> *Irish Press*, 10 March 1936.

<sup>12</sup> *The Kerryman*, 28 December 1912.

<sup>13</sup> *Drogheda Independent*, 26 August 1939.

<sup>14</sup> *Irish Press*, 14 October 1936.

<sup>15</sup> *Kildare Observer*, 7 May 1932.

<sup>16</sup> *Kildare Observer*, 7 April 1934.

in promoting the housing programme. Given his key role in that programme, a brief exploration of some of the ideas that informed his approach is appropriate.

At the opening of the Duffry Gate scheme in Enniscorthy in 1937 he stated

One of the greatest works of Christianity that a citizen of their country could be associated with was the provision of proper houses in which their people could live Christian lives. Housing was a great Christian and social work, a magnificent work, God's work, one might say.<sup>17</sup>

'Despite the unchristian conditions that the poor had been forced to endure', he added, 'they had brought up families that were a credit to themselves, to their country and their church'.<sup>18</sup>

While references to the Church and religion were a recurring meme in most public speeches in the 1930s, O'Kelly's consistent linking of the provision of decent housing with his duty as a Christian reflected his own deeply held religious beliefs.<sup>19</sup> His continued membership of the secret Catholic society, the Knights of St. Columbanus, despite the disapproval of his close political ally and friend Eamonn de Valera, is a testament to his tenacious hold on those beliefs.<sup>20</sup> For O'Kelly, the provision of housing was set in a moral framework, in tone, at least, quite different from that of the Victorian sanitary reformers. In a radio broadcast in 1933 he spoke of 'evil housing [that] strikes at all Christian beauty in home life, the privacy of the home, the shelter of the family, the moral protection of the young, parental care and authority'.<sup>21</sup> A speech he gave at the opening of a housing scheme in Carlow in 1934 hinted at a further dimension to his motivation. He repeated his customary remarks that 'there is no more Christian work that the lay man or public man can be associated with than the provision of houses for the working classes'.<sup>22</sup> Turning to the threat of communism, he continued

knowing which gospels are being preached we must bear these things in mind and try as Christian men to meet that propaganda and meet it by Christian social methods. Our policy of the housing of the working classes is the best possible means of stemming that tide.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Irish Press*, 7 May 1937.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> O'Kelly was one of two members of the cabinet at this time who were suspected of being members of the Knights of Saint Columbanus. The other was Seán Lemass, although he seems to have been quite averse to making public pronouncements suffused with reference to religion in the manner engaged in by O'Kelly.

<sup>20</sup> Evelyn Bolster, *The Knights of Saint Columbanus* (Dublin, 1979), p. 70. In assessing de Valera's attitude to the Knights of Saint Columbanus, Bolster suggests his 'ambivalence vis-à-vis his erstwhile IRA comrades following his assumption of government was noticeably absent in his attitude to secret societies in general and to the Knights of Saint Columbanus in particular'. (p. 70).

<sup>21</sup> *Irish Press*, 21 March 1933.

<sup>22</sup> *Irish Press*, 21 June 1934.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

Mary Daly, in assessing O’Kelly’s tenure as Minister for Local Government, describes him as ‘determined to pursue his personal agenda’, often by breaching cabinet procedure in pursuit of funding for his Department.<sup>24</sup> Part of that personal motivation was clearly shaped by Catholic social teaching, an ideology that appears to have informed his thinking to a greater extent than his cabinet colleagues. Addressing a meeting of the Cercle Catholique of Geneva in 1933, he outlined the goals of the government as ‘endeavouring to build up a Catholic Social State’.<sup>25</sup> He assured his audience that ‘in the Irish Free State ... neither Continental Socialism nor communism had made any headway. He thought he might call what was being attempted in the Saorstát Catholic Action in practice.’<sup>26</sup> On the question of housing, apart from the clearing of the slums, he emphasised the encouragement being given to those to whom houses had been given ‘to become each the owner of his own house’ as this reflected ‘the teaching of the Holy Father as to the wisdom of a wide division of property’.<sup>27</sup>

During the autumn of 1936 the *Irish Press* launched a ‘campaign against the slums’, which brought the appalling housing conditions, particularly in Dublin, to national attention. The presentation of those featured in the campaign was entirely sympathetic and any moral failure identified was linked to a ‘national shame’ that such conditions should exist in a Christian country. These views, of course, did not exclude portraying the housing problem as a legacy of British misrule,<sup>28</sup> and, in its more partisan moments, the *Irish Press* was capable of attaching blame to the Cumann na nGaedheal government for its neglect of the issue in the 1920s.

### **‘Slum clearance’ versus ‘general provision’**

The shift from ‘general housing provision’ which, to varying degrees, had characterised public housing policy from the 1890s through to 1932, became apparent as soon as Fianna Fáil took office. In March 1932 Fermoy UDC received a circular from the DLGPH indicating that ‘the Minister considers that local authorities should confine their efforts for the present to the provision of small houses of three- or four-roomed types and the specifications should, with due regard to the durability of the houses, eliminate all non-essentials.’<sup>29</sup> A fuller statement of the policy was included in the 1934-35 annual report of the DLGPH:

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<sup>24</sup> Daly, *Buffer State*, p. 198.

<sup>25</sup> *Irish Independent*, 9 October 1933.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Irish Press*, 10 October 1933.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, *Irish Press*, 1 October 1936.

<sup>29</sup> Housing Supply Schemes and Maintenance, 1899-1950 (CCA, CCCA/UDC/FY Box 35 /20).

The housing work of the urban authorities falls under two main heads: one, the clearance of slum areas and the demolition of individual unfit houses, together with the simultaneous provision of new houses, directly related to such clearances and demolition, and the other, the provision of new houses for the working classes. The clearance of the slums is the more urgent and difficult part of the work. It necessitates the displacing of large numbers of persons of the poorest classes from their existing dwellings, and transferring them to new houses, the rents of which must be proportionate to their rent-paying capacity.<sup>30</sup>

Figure 6.1 shows the trend in council house completions in provincial towns from 1932 through to 1945 together with the number of condemned houses that were demolished in each year. We cannot make an assumption that all households in the 8,082 houses that were demolished were rehoused in the 12,500 new dwellings but these numbers do define the character of the housing programme in these towns and suggests that the Department's stated priority of 'slum clearance' was given precedence over 'new houses for the working classes'.<sup>31</sup> In terms of public housing provision, this pattern was quite similar to that in many provincial cities in Britain in the 1930s, with houses built under the Greenwood Act representing the majority of council housing built between 1933 and 1939.<sup>32</sup> At the town level the linkage is quite clear between the building of new schemes, the declaration of Clearance Areas, the demolition of houses in those areas and the rehousing of the residents.

A close reading of discussions at municipal authority level suggests an on-going tension between the Department's insistence that the rehousing of those in insanitary conditions take precedence over a desire on the part of local councils to meet general housing needs and build 'better class houses'. The British literature on the implementation of the Greenwood Act suggests a marked reluctance on the part of local authorities to avail of its provisions in the years 1930-33 when, at the same time, subsidies for general building under the Wheatley Act were also available. The prospect of clearing slum property, involving protracted public enquiries and Compulsory Purchase Orders, was not an attractive one. Ryder points out that it was only after 1933, when the Wheatley subsidies were completely withdrawn, that local authorities concentrated on tackling the rehousing of those in insanitary dwellings.<sup>33</sup> Two factors had a

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<sup>30</sup> *Annual Report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1933-34*, p. 138.

<sup>31</sup> A similar pattern is evident in the cities of Cork and Limerick as reported in the *Annual Report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1944-45*. 1,237 families were displaced from condemned houses in Cork city in 1932-45 and the Corporation built 1,876 houses. The corresponding figures for Limerick Corporation are 1,209 and 1,646.

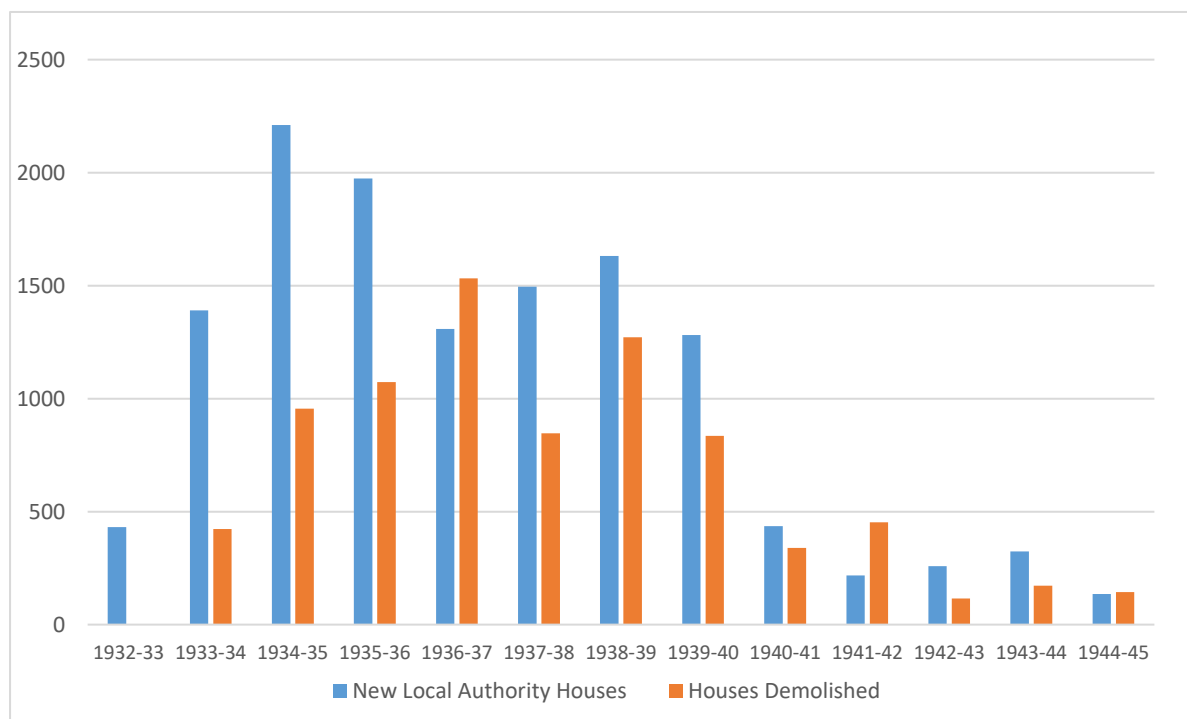
<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Robert Finnigan, 'Council housing in Leeds, 1919-39: social policy and urban change' in Daunton, *Councillors and tenants*, pp 104-54.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Ryder, 'Council house building in County Durham', pp 66-67. Ryder also points out that the 1933 Housing Act also obliged local authorities to draw up five year plans to raze all insanitary dwellings and rehouse their occupants.

decisive influence in ensuring the Department’s priorities held sway in the Free State. The first is that the Department insisted that municipal authorities make progress with their ‘slum clearance’ schemes before embarking on building houses for ‘general provision’.<sup>34</sup> All schemes had to obtain departmental approval and while councils regularly proposed non-slum clearance schemes these were only given approval when it was apparent that good progress was being made in rehousing those in condemned housing. This ‘general provision’ housing fell into two categories. The first were houses built to more or less the same specifications as those provided to accommodate ‘slum clearance’. These attracted the one-third loan subsidy on the first £300 cost of each house and were usually located in the same schemes as ‘slum clearance’ houses. The second category of non-slum clearances houses were usually referred to as ‘better class houses’ and were of a higher specification, including a bathroom (rather than a WC on the ground floor) and a parlour. These houses were built as separate schemes, but had to cost less than £450 to attract a loan subsidy of 20 percent on the first £350.

**Figure 6.2**

**New council housing and condemned houses demolished in provincial towns, 1932-45**



*Source: Annual reports of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1932-45*

<sup>34</sup> For example, Athy UDC was informed in 1936 that the erection of 25 better class houses was deferred pending the completion of a slum clearance scheme (Athy UDC minutes, 5 October 1936).



The Department's insistence that 'slum clearance' take priority did not always meet with the approval of councillors, who regularly pressed for 'better class schemes' to be built, claiming 'decent' houses were in high demand. In Trim, where the council had remained dissolved since 1925 and was administered by a commissioner, a petition was raised by ratepayers requesting such a scheme.<sup>35</sup> At a sworn inquiry in Mullingar in 1936, held in connection with the raising of a housing loan of £20,700, one of the Town Commissioners stated 'there was a definite scarcity of better class houses in Mullingar. If a house became vacant there were usually fifteen applications for the tenancy'.<sup>36</sup> The chairman of the Town Commissioners added 'these people were employed in good positions, the Post Office, railway etc.'. <sup>37</sup> Most towns, and certainly all of the larger ones, succeeded in building small schemes of these better-class houses, but often only after protracted lobbying of the Department. Of the 73 houses built by Monaghan UDC between 1933 and 1937, 62 were to house those displaced from condemned dwellings.<sup>38</sup> In 1936 the Department has refused to sanction a scheme of better-class houses, insisting that no subsidy would be provided until 'the other houses were built to relieve the slums'.<sup>39</sup> When the matter came before a council meeting early the following year it was claimed 'there was a dearth of better class houses' and that 'it was the duty of the Council to build a better class of house than they had been building'.<sup>40</sup>

A discussion at Midleton UDC in 1935 exposed the potential for sharp political divisions between those favouring the building of 'better class houses' and those seeking to address substandard housing. The council had a Ratepayers/Cumann na nGaedheal majority, and when a proposal to build a 25-house scheme was tabled, the chairman remarked 'you'll get plenty of tenants agreed, but no rent (laughter)'.<sup>41</sup> When it was pointed out that Cobh UDC were able to rent houses at 2s. 9d. a week, a response was that 'Yes, they are costing the ratepayers £300 a year there'.<sup>42</sup> The chairman went on to propose that the council build twelve houses that could be rented at 6s. 6d. a week and which 'would be an asset to the town in several ways'. His proposal envisaged the traditional 'trickle up' pattern of housing provision, that 'some people at present living in small houses may leave them for those the Council might erect'.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Meath Chronicle*, 13 December 1936.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 April 1936.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Annual Report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1936-37*, Appendix xxxviii, pp 330-33.

<sup>39</sup> *Anglo-Celt*, 16 January 1937.

<sup>40</sup> *Anglo-Celt*, 16 January 1937.

<sup>41</sup> *Southern Star*, 4 May 1935.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

In 1935, having already completed 93 'slum clearance' houses which attracted the two-thirds loan subsidy, Athy UDC passed a motion approving the building of 12 'better class' houses.<sup>44</sup> Initially this was approved by the Department with the proposal that they be let at between 10s. and 12s. per week.<sup>45</sup> By June 1936 an extended scheme of 24 'better class' houses and 25 'slum clearance' houses had gone to tender with the UDC's favoured builder, Carberry, submitting the lowest bid.<sup>46</sup> Through the summer, however, the council's precarious financial position became apparent as it failed to pay instalments on its existing housing loans.<sup>47</sup> Work on all housing schemes ceased at this point when the council failed to pay its contractors. In October, the Department withdrew its sanction for 'better class' houses 'pending the completion of slum clearance portion of scheme and the financial position thereof has been ascertained'.<sup>48</sup> The correspondence from the Department suggests that it considered 'better class' or 'general provision' housing as very much a secondary activity for councils and that it should not interfere with its primary aim of slum clearance.

In Ballina, on the other hand, the council's progress in building homes to rehouse those in Clearance Areas resulted in the Department approving schemes that were turned down elsewhere, although it was certainly helped in this by its seat at the cabinet table in the form of P.J. Rutledge, In May 1933 the council's chairman proposed 'that the Council should do something for the persons who were not resident in slum areas and who were living in rooms as it was impossible for them to get a house'.<sup>49</sup> The council's engineer drew up plans for twenty five-roomed villa-type houses costing £410 each.<sup>50</sup> Some months later Rutledge gave approval for the scheme, the Department's letter indicating that his lobbying may again have been influential :

Normally he would not be prepared to approve of the erection of such costly houses by local authorities but in view of representations made that there is a special need for these 20 five-roomed houses in the town, he has given his conditional approval to the scheme being proceeded with. The Minister's approval is given on the distinct understanding that no further proposals of this nature will be put forward by the Council.<sup>51</sup>

The Department's insistence on slum clearance schemes posed problems in some towns where growth in industrial employment was generating an increased demand for housing. Although

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<sup>44</sup> Athy UDC minutes, 8 August 1935.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 August 1935.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 June 1936.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 July 1936.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 October 1936.

<sup>49</sup> Ballina UDC minutes, 30 May 1933.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 August 1933

Medical Officers of Health regularly focused on overcrowding when assessing housing conditions in Clearance Areas, the 1931 and 1932 legislation excluded it as criterion for declaring a dwelling unfit for human habitation.<sup>52</sup> This marked a departure from the approach adopted in 1930s British legislation with the 1935 Act obliging local authorities to survey their localities and ensure dwellings conformed to detailed standards relating to bedroom accommodation and persons per room.<sup>53</sup> Because the issue of overcrowding and shortage of accommodation fell outside the 'slum clearance' programme, it had a lower priority from the Department's perspective. And, of course, houses built to address 'general needs' attracted loan subsidies at the reduced rate of one-third. Local councils were understandably drawn to the generous subsidies available for slum clearance housing but in some circumstances the prospect of addressing general housing needs were more compelling. Towns such as Tuam and Arklow, both with high proportions of their populations in sub-standard housing, experienced significant growth in industrial employment from the mid-1930s. With the opening of the Sugar Beet factory in Tuam at the end of 1934, the Town Commissioners immediately prioritised the provision of housing for the influx of new workers, rather than the clearing of the dozens of insanitary dwellings so long a feature of the lanes and suburbs of the town. Giving evidence to a Compulsory Purchase Order inquiry in July 1934, the Town Commissioners' solicitor reported that

There are at least 100 families living in the houses of other people and 40 or 50 families have taken rooms or flats, and since work started in the factory, heads of families who cannot get housing accommodation have to come several miles to work.<sup>54</sup>

The acquisition of the land was approved and 180 houses were built at Tubberjarlath and the Athenry Road. However, when the Town Commissioners came to set the rents at 6s. per week and indicated to the Department that they intended to only apply for the one-third loan subsidy, they received a reply from the Minister indicating he 'would not approve of the present housing scheme being utilised for normal housing while 300 houses are required in the town for the rehousing of persons living in unhealthy areas etc.'<sup>55</sup> By late 1935 the Town Commissioners were preparing to formulate a slum clearance scheme but were keen to draw a distinction between

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<sup>52</sup> The Act included a limited provision relating to overcrowding that was not in the 1931 Act. This stipulated that in the case of a family occupying a one-roomed dwelling, if 'one or more members of any such family exclusive of the parents has or have attained the age of sixteen years', then the rehousing of such families should be given priority, second only to those whose dwellings were to be demolished'. See No. 19/1932 – Housing (Financial and Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 1932.

<sup>53</sup> Brian Lund, *Understand housing policy* (Bristol, 2011), pp 193-94.

<sup>54</sup> *Connacht Tribune*, 28 July 1934.

<sup>55</sup> Tuam Town Commissioners minutes, 3 December 1935.

it and the new housing at Tubberjarlath and the Athenry Road. Those displaced from Clearance Areas would, they contended, 'be provided with new suitable houses erected in their own locality, where it was felt they wished to live, convenient to their work ... and in the area most suited to them'.<sup>56</sup> Ultimately the O'Kelly conceded the Town Commissioners' point and the Tubberjarlath and Athenry Road houses were largely tenanted by workers from the Sugar Beet factory.<sup>57</sup>

As small scale industries started up in provincial towns as part of Fianna Fáil's policy of import substitution, the demand for schemes other than slum clearance became louder. At the turning of the first sod for a scheme of 62 'slum clearance' houses in Athlone in 1936 the parish priest urged the council to build better-class houses 'for workers who earn good wages',<sup>58</sup> while in Kells councillors claimed there was

a demand for a better class of house. A new boot factory has been established and there is a possibility of another new factory in the near future. There are people living in houses too small and unsuitable and not condemned and are desirous of obtaining a better-class modern house and are able and prepared to pay a higher rent.<sup>59</sup>

Despite the Department's prioritising of slum clearance, Councils had two further incentives to build houses for general provision as opposed to slum clearance. Firstly, they recognised that the low and irregular incomes of many of those living in Clearance Areas was likely to result in rent arrears and evictions when they were rehoused in new council schemes.<sup>60</sup> In many cases arrears could only be met by increased contributions from the rates. This involved a transparent cross-subsidy from ratepayers which was resented by some councillors and, on occasion, exposed sharp divisions amongst different interests at council level.

The issue is well illustrated in Monaghan in 1934, following the completion of a 42 house 'slum clearance' scheme. In November, J.T. Duffy, the single Labour representative on the council, proposed that the rents of the houses be reduced as arrears were accumulating and tenants were being threatened with evictions. 'I am ashamed to see poor people being thrown on the street', he stated, 'poor families with their little children ... . The rest of the town should

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 January 1936.

<sup>57</sup> This proved problematic for the Town Commissioners as many of the workers were only employed seasonally (from November through to February) and it soon became apparent that the rents (plus rates) of 7s. 6d. were beyond their means. As arrears accumulated in 1937 the Department conceded that the loans associated with 84 of the houses could benefit from the two-thirds subsidy and as a result the rents of these houses were reduced.

<sup>58</sup> *Irish Press*, 19 September 1936.

<sup>59</sup> *Meath Chronicle*, 11 May 1935.

<sup>60</sup> The difficulties faced by those rehoused from Clearance Areas is discussed later in the chapter.

be made pay to make these houses an economic proposition for these tenants'.<sup>61</sup> Other councillors strongly disagreed. Walter Greacen, one of the three Protestant Association councillors, insisted '[the] Council was not a philanthropic society. They were there in the interest of the ratepayers in general, not in the interests of a section'.<sup>62</sup> Further comments indicated that there had been opposition in principle to the scheme with Major Fitzgerald (Protestant Association) claiming 'they were practically coerced into the scheme. He had studied all the finances and he could not see why the Council should put an additional penny on the town'.<sup>63</sup> The four Fianna Fáil councillors supported Duffy's motion but it was defeated by the combined votes of United Ireland Party and Protestant Association councillors. At a subsequent meeting the Council came into conflict with its own Medical Officer of Health and the DLGPH when it adjourned consideration of a further 'slum clearance' scheme of 37 houses. The majority of councillors were particularly incensed by a letter from the Department reminding them that the 1932 Housing Act empowered the Minister to 'invest himself with powers of the local authority on their default to carry out any of the functions under the Housing of the Working Classes Acts'.<sup>64</sup> Councillor Greacen insisted that 'they were not going to be intimidated by a threat to take over their powers'.<sup>65</sup> The council's solicitor advised that the council was obliged to act on the Medical Officer's report which had identified up to 69 houses in the town unfit for human habitation. The jaundiced view held by some councillors of the Department was expressed by a UIP councillor who complained 'if we do not adopt the doctor's report a man will be sent down to run the Council at a salary of £800 or £1,000 a year and they had enough £1,000 running about Monaghan at present'.<sup>66</sup> The concern of the UIP/Protestant Association majority on the council at the prospect of a further 'slum clearance' scheme requiring subsidy from the rates held sway in the short term, but the Department's edict had the desired effect and tenders for a 31-house scheme were invited some four months later in April 1935.<sup>67</sup>

A further incentive for councillors to promote non-'slum clearance' schemes was the much greater flexibility it afforded in allocating houses. Households displaced from Clearance Areas were entitled to a council house and most schemes built to accommodate those displaced were entirely occupied by such households. Because such houses were so generously subsidised by the state the DLGPH insisted on approving the allocation of each house, with councils obliged

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<sup>61</sup> *Anglo-Celt*, 24 November 1934.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 December 1934

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 April 1935.

to submit lists of proposed tenants, including details of their previous accommodation, the size of the household and its income. In Fermoy in August 1932 the council's solicitor's advice that if the two-thirds loan subsidy was accepted then those displaced from Clearance Areas would have to be rehoused elicited a revealing response from the Medical Officer of Health. He pointed out that 'the Council should be careful in the selection of tenants so that any undesirable persons may not be appointed as tenants as the Council should consider their other property adjoining the site'.<sup>68</sup> When, the following year, the houses were to be allocated, the chairman stated 'his difficulty was in regard to the selection of tenants for the new houses as under the 2/3 grant the Council were not allow any discretion in the matter'.<sup>69</sup>

As discussed below, councils could not have been unaware of the difficulties those living in small, condemned properties, paying low rents of 1s. 6d. or 2s. would face when obliged to pay rents of 4s. or 5s. in new council houses. This constituted the explicit reason why councillors were keen to promote non-slum clearance housing. The less explicit reason was that general purpose housing offered additional opportunities to dispense patronage. The allocation of houses attracting the one-third loan subsidy and 'better class' houses did not receive the same level of scrutiny from the Department and there is little evidence that councils employed any formal systems for evaluating the housing needs of those applying to become tenants of non-slum clearance houses. The manner in which these houses were allocated varied from council to council and mostly offered ample opportunity to individual councillors to claim credit for obtaining a tenancy. When, in Ballina, a 20 villa-type house scheme was completed at Mill Street in July 1934, the selection of 20 tenants was 'via the usual method of each councillor voting for 20 applicants'.<sup>70</sup> This system had the advantage of allowing councillors claim credit for supporting twenty different applicants and, on this occasion, neatly coincided with the 1934 local elections.

In Drogheda the Corporation appeared to allow itself a good deal of discretion in the allocation of tenancies, which partly reflected its unusual position as one of the principal landlords of insanitary housing in the town. As long leases expired a considerable amount of dilapidated property reverted to the Corporation which it began to demolish in a systematic way from 1932 onwards. In all, the Corporation built 766 houses between 1932 and 1945, and the allocation of tenancies occupied much of the attention of the Corporation and its officers. In the early to mid-1930s there was an overwhelming demand for new council houses; for

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<sup>68</sup> Fermoy UDC Housing sub-committee minutes, 11 August 1932 (CCA, CCCA/UDC/FY Minute Book 38).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 25 August 1933 (CCA, CCCA/UDC/FY Minute Book 39).

<sup>70</sup> Ballina UDC minutes, 20 July 1934.

example, there were 164 applicants for a total of 16 houses in Scarlet Street and Slate Row in January 1934.<sup>71</sup> Some months later, when tenants were being selected for a new scheme of 36 houses at Hand Street, the Town Clerk warned councillors that some of those selected were living in lodgings, that these dwellings would not be demolished and that the Corporation was in breach of the legislation if it applied for the two-thirds loan subsidy for all 36 houses.<sup>72</sup> His objections were brushed aside however and he was ordered to record that these households were granted houses due to the overcrowded conditions in which they lived.<sup>73</sup>

In the following years the Corporation, in contravention of the legislation, continued this policy. In 1940 it emerged that the Town Clerk had failed to submit any of the necessary documentation to the Department in support of the higher two-thirds subsidies. As a result the Corporation received only the one-third loan subsidy for each of the 528 it built up to 1938 but had been setting rents on the assumption that the two-thirds subsidy was being paid.<sup>74</sup> The accumulated losses first became apparent in the summer of 1939 and were compounded by the fact that the rent collector had embezzled the Corporation to the tune of £652.<sup>75</sup> Initially some councillors blamed the Department for the failure to have the higher level of subsidies paid with one asking ‘the fact was that the government owed them £7,000. What kind of incentive was that for the building of houses?’<sup>76</sup> At around this time the Town Clerk wrote a personal letter to H.S. Moylan, a senior official in the Housing Section of DLGPH, admitting that the Corporation had effectively ignored the provisions of the 1931 and 1932 Housing Acts, that no Clearance Orders had been adopted but that the two-thirds subsidy had still been claimed. The letter concluded somewhat plaintively that ‘the loss [of the higher subsidy] would be so great that the rates could not bear the burden’. It ended ‘I would be glad if you could help me in this matter’.<sup>77</sup>

Apparently unaware of this letter the Mayor queried why audits carried out by the DLGPH had not uncovered the underpayment of subsidies, while some councillors claimed that the work of the Housing and Finance sub-committees of the Corporation had been undermined by being packed with Fianna Fáil members.<sup>78</sup> The full scale of the error is shown in Figure 6.3, which is taken from the summary of rates estimates for the year ending 31 March 1937. Housing

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<sup>71</sup> Drogheda Corporation Housing committee minutes, 24 January 1934.

<sup>72</sup> Drogheda Corporation Housing Committee minutes, 6 June 1934.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 June 1934.

<sup>74</sup> Drogheda Corporation minutes, 2 July 1940.

<sup>75</sup> His case came before Drogheda District Court in February 1940 and was reported in the *Drogheda Independent* of 10 February.

<sup>76</sup> *Drogheda Independent*, 10 June 1939.

<sup>77</sup> Correspondence between Drogheda Corporation, F Gibney & Co Ltd and S Henly & Sons Ltd, building contractors (LCA, DBC/HSG/001/026/009).

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 April 1940 and 29 June 1940.

subsidies at £7,500 represent the second highest source of projected income for the Corporation and were clearly entered in the ledger as being based on the two-thirds level. A full audit of the Corporation's finances was carried out in the summer of 1940; the Town Clerk was placed on sick leave and, following a tense meeting between a delegation of councillors and the Minister, an acting Town Clerk reviewed the entire building programme and submitted claims for the two-thirds loan subsidy for almost 300 houses.<sup>79</sup> The Department agreed to pay £6,305 immediately, with payments for more recent schemes being provisionally approved.<sup>80</sup>

Figure 6.3

Drogheda Corporation Statement of Estimated Income for Year Ending 31 March 1935

<u>I N C O M E.</u>		
Leasehold & Yearly Tenancies .....	£3700.	
Weekly & Monthly Tenancies .....	10578.	
Mayoralty House Lettings .....	300.	
Bounty in lieu of Rates .....	82.	
Tolls of Markets .....	190.	
Court Fines .....	30.	
Dividends from Investments .....	1050.	
Recoupment from Water Works Dept. ....	203.	
Public Lavatories .....	30.	
Road Fund Grant .....	599.	
School Meals Grant .....	175.	
Housing Fund & Sanitary Salaries .....	107.	
Miscellaneous .....	100.	
Other Refunds .....	100.	
Refund from Loan for concreting footpaths	579.	
Do. Do. Dublin Rd. Development Scheme	151.	
Do. Do. Purchase of Machinery .....	439.	
2/3rds. Loan charges under Housing Act		
1932 .....	7600.	
Arrears of Collectible Rates .....	500.	£26513. - . - .
<u>WATER WORKS DEPARTMENT.</u>		
Cr. Balance at Bank at 31.3.36 .....	249. 14. 7.	
Meter Rents .....	1700. - . - .	
Special Water Rate .....	275. - . - .	
Pipes & Fittings .....	50. - . - .	
Arrears of Collectible Rates .....	100. - . - .	
Miscellaneous .....	100. - . - .	£2474. 14. 7.
		£28987. 14. 7.
Balance to be provided by Rates .....		£12322. 18. 8.
		£41310. 13. 3.
A Rate of 9/7 in the £. on assessable		
valuation of £25717.5.6. yields .....	£12322. 17. - .	
Add estimated Income .....	28987. 14. 7.	£41310. 11. 7.

Source: Drogheda Corporation minutes, 26 June 1936

<sup>79</sup> Drogheda Corporation minutes, 6 August 1940.

<sup>80</sup> Drogheda Independent, 10 August 1940.



In August 1939 O’Kelly opened a new 66-house scheme at Platten Road. At the opening ceremony tributes were paid on all sides and Councillor John R. Smith remarked that ‘he hoped that in the near future, when Mr O’Kelly collaborated with the Minister for Finance, and opened up the money-bags, they would have more money to spend in Drogheda. They would like to look on the minister as a rich uncle who had come among them.’<sup>81</sup> Perhaps such attitudes lay behind the very poor level of financial management evident in the Corporation in the 1930s. The scale of mismanagement relating to a crucial element of public housing policy appears to have been unique in provincial towns at this time. However, the liberal manner in which councillors chose to interpret the housing legislation regarding the distinction between ‘slum clearance’ and ‘general provision’ was more ubiquitous and, among other things, reflected their impulse to seek to control the allocation of a scarce resource. In Drogheda, prior to 1937, the procedure for allocating tenancies was that a list of applicants for council houses was drawn up by the three Medical Officers of Health (one from each ward), the Town Clerk and the Sub-Sanitary Officer, and from this list members of the Housing Committee chose the successful applicants. In February 1937 the Mayor complained to the Housing Committee (of which he was chairman) that ‘the selection of tenants for new houses were being conveyed to applicants who had not been selected and that he and other members of the Committee were being subjected to abuse from these people ... . Other members of the Committee also stated that they had been subjected to abuse.’<sup>82</sup> In order to defuse this situation it was decided that in future Corporation officials would draw up the list as before but that the names of successful applicants would be drawn by lottery. Later that year, when a large scheme of houses at Hardmans Garden was being discussed, councillors reconsidered their earlier decision. The scheme was to include 24 one-third subsidy houses and these were to be excluded from the lottery. Instead, members of the Housing Committee, reasserting their role, would allocate them in committee.<sup>83</sup>

Logan’s work on working-class housing in Limerick city casts light on a further aspect of the interest councillors had in allocating housing. When a new scheme was completed in 1943 Corporation officials there recommended that only those with a record of prompt payment of rents should be considered. Intuitively, one would expect councillors to accept this advice. On

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<sup>81</sup> *Drogheda Independent*, 26 August 1939.

<sup>82</sup> Drogheda Corporation Housing Committee minutes, 3 February 1937.

<sup>83</sup> Drogheda Corporation minutes, 7 December 1937. When allocating ‘slum clearance’ houses councillors had discretion as to which house a tenant might obtain. End of terrace houses were often at a premium as they generally had larger gardens attached. When allocating houses in a new terrace at Clonmullen in Athy in 1936 Frank MacNeary, a councillor, was given house No. 1, at the end of the terrace. However, following representations from the Reverend Mother in the nearby Mercy Convent (from whom the site was purchased), a Mr Murphy was allocated No. 1 in MacNeary’s place. Murphy was a gardener in the convent. (Athy UDC minutes, 26 January 1936).

this occasion, however, the recommendation 'was opposed by councillors who argued that to hand-pick tenants would be unfair to the private landlords who would be burdened by those left behind'.<sup>84</sup> Such an explicit alignment of council and landlord interests did not feature regularly in the public domain. The legislation relating to Clearance Areas and condemned dwellings had the effect of limiting any support councillors may have felt was due to landlords of such property. Subsidies for new houses were only paid by the Department once confirmation had been received that condemned properties had been demolished so, in these circumstances, landlord interests were sacrificed.

Despite the pressure at local level to build non-slum clearance housing, the data produced by the DLGPH indicates that the rehousing of those displaced from condemned dwellings dominated the programmes of municipal authorities in provincial towns, certainly up to 1937. The annual report of the Department of that year shows that of the 7,200 houses built between 1932 and 31 March 1937, 6,083 or 84 percent fell into that category.<sup>85</sup> Up to that point of the 70 provincial towns that built houses under the 1932 Housing Act, 36 had concentrated exclusively on 'slum clearance' housing.<sup>86</sup> The contrast with Dublin is striking where just 37 percent of new units were for those displaced from condemned dwellings. Subsequent annual reports from the Department do not supply the equivalent data. Instead, the number of displaced families is recorded, together with the total number of houses built under the 1932 Act. The annual report for 1944-45 shows that in the 74 provincial towns, 73 municipal authorities built 12,504 houses under the 1932 Act up to 31 March 1945 (Roscommon was the exception). The report states that 8,559 families were displaced and that 8,161 dwellings were demolished, but we cannot conclude that 8,599 families came to occupy that number of newly built houses.<sup>87</sup> When we examine this data for the fifteen case-study towns, with the benefit of a more intimate knowledge of housing operations in each town, we can see that in ten of the towns the number of families displaced is close to the number of houses built. The data is presented in Table 6.1. In Athy, Kilrush, Fermoy, Tralee, Ballina and Clones a close reading of the relevant sources (council minutes and newspaper reports) confirms that most houses were built to accommodate those displaced from condemned dwellings. In Drogheda and Tuam, as we

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<sup>84</sup> John Logan, 'Frugal Comfort: housing Limerick's labourers and artisans', p. 575.

<sup>85</sup> *Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1936-37*, Appendix xxxix, pp 334-37.

<sup>86</sup> There are some obvious errors in the published data. All but 10 of Drogheda's 538 houses are classified as slum clearance when, in reality, the correct figure is about 300. On the other hand, none of the 104 houses built in Listowel were classified in this way when most were actually slum clearance.

<sup>87</sup> *Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health 1944-45*, Appendix xxxix, pp 210-13.

have seen, there were particular circumstances that led to their local authorities availing of the one-third rather than two-thirds loan subsidy. In Navan most of the poorest housing had been demolished or abandoned before 1932 and the greater part of the 168 houses that the Council built after 1932 addressed a general shortage of housing and overcrowding. In Listowel, there was concerted opposition to both the housing programme and the clearance of condemned dwellings, which partly explains why quite a high proportion of the 104 houses built there were allocated on the one-third subsidy basis to those in overcrowded conditions.

**Table 6.1**

**Pattern of new council houses and families displaced in case-study towns, 1932-45**

Town	Houses completed to 31 March 1945 under 1932 Act	Number of unhealthy houses ordered to be demolished - Clearance Areas	Number of families displaced	Families displaced / Houses completed
Athy	199	208	226	114%
Longford	44	34	34	77%
Drogheda	766	381	381	50%
Navan	168	65	63	38%
Tullamore	224	222	212	95%
Edenderry	38	14	40	105%
Enniscorthy	263	180	330	125%
Arklow	272	136	136	50%
Kilrush	196	180	157	80%
Fermoy	103	79	82	80%
Tralee	451	363	459	102%
Listowel	104	60	58	56%
Tuam	244	74	74	30%
Ballina	471	341	344	73%
Clones	118	102	99	84%
<b>Total</b>	<b>3661</b>	<b>2439</b>	<b>2695</b>	<b>74%</b>

*Source: Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1944-45, Appendix xxxix*

**Clearance Orders and Clearance Areas**

The process whereby Clearance Areas were declared in urban Ireland in the 1930s, with thousands of dwellings demolished and tens of thousands of people displaced, is a neglected aspect of the country's twentieth-century economic and social history. As discussed above, the 1931 Housing Act, with enhanced provisions in the 1932 Act, gave draconian powers to local authorities to have 'unhealthy' areas defined and dwellings therein demolished. Individual

houses outside such areas defined as unhealthy were also subject to demolition. In both cases the owners of condemned property were obliged to clear the sites. The legislation contained no provision for the payment of compensation except where the local authority chose to purchase the sites or where demolition involved 'the disturbance of trade or business'. For the owners of condemned properties the legislation could represent a significant challenge to their economic interests. For the occupiers it implied opportunities and threats, the prospect of a decent house, but at a higher rent and possibly in a new setting.

As described above, soon after the 1932 Act was passed by the Dáil councils received a circular letter from the Department instructing them to 'formulate at once and submit to the Minister, [a] proposal to deal with at least one-fourth of their slum problem'.<sup>88</sup> While councils responded with varying degrees of urgency, the response generally took the form of discussing the acquisition of sites and, subsequently, the drawing up of plans for housing schemes. Initially, and understandably, councillors lacked a clear understanding of the full implications of the provisions of the Act and how they would impact on their housing programmes. For many, their experience of Medical Officers of Health reporting on insanitary housing and declaring it as unfit for human habitation had resulted in occasional prosecutions of recalcitrant landlords. Now, whole areas of their towns were to be demolished with the resultant protests of both landlords and tenants. The generous two-thirds loan subsidies for new housing attracted the attention of councillors but the bureaucratic and logistical hurdles to be negotiated were less clearly understood. As this level of subsidy could only be claimed for new dwellings used to rehouse those displaced from Clearance Areas and/or condemned houses, a series of formal procedures had to be adopted. These included the passing of a Clearance Order at council following a report from its Medical Officer of Health, the publication of the details of the Order in the local press and, if any objections were forthcoming, the holding of a public inquiry.

Athy was reasonably typical of the sequencing of events and of the level of confusion relating to the legislation in 1933-34 and the failure of even the most engaged councillors to comprehend the details relating to Clearance Areas. Councillor Bridget Darby, as described above, was the driving force behind the first schemes built under the 1932 Act. She grasped the significance of the declaration of Clearance Areas at an early point and, even before the legislation was passed, produced her own map of proposed areas at a council meeting.<sup>89</sup> Although building commenced on a number of schemes totalling 93 houses in late 1932, no

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<sup>88</sup> *Department of Local Government and Public Health Annual Report 1932-33*, Appendix xxxi, pp 240-44.

<sup>89</sup> *Kildare Observer*, 28 May 1932.

formal Clearance Order was placed before the council, and this remained the case until July 1933 when some of the houses were close to completion.<sup>90</sup> Even at that point the Clearance Area defined by the council was rejected by the Department as it was spread over a wide area and contained numerous houses that would not be subject to demolition. A similar error was made by Fermoy UDC whose first Clearance Area consisted of disparate groups of houses (see Appendix 9).<sup>91</sup> The Athy Clearance Order was eventually sent to the Department in February 1934, some months after most of the new houses had been completed and at the same time as tenants were allocated to most of the houses.<sup>92</sup> The public inquiry associated with the Clearance Order was held at the end of March and it was only when the Department's inspector, D.J. Hickie, confirmed the Order that the council could be confident that it would receive the two-thirds subsidy for the houses already occupied by those displaced.

The adoption of Ballina UDC's first Clearance Order and related inquiry also post-dated the completion of the housing schemes built to accommodate those displaced. Building work started on 108 houses over three sites (Crossmolina Road (48), Lord Edward Street (48) and Killala Road (12)) in March 1933 and was completed in the summer of 1934. In March the list of houses proposed to be included in the Clearance Order was published in the *Ballina Herald* as a prelude to the holding of an inquiry. At a subsequent council meeting the point was raised that this caused 'considerable inconvenience' for some of the town's landlords 'who wanted to get their rents' but now their tenants 'put forward the plea that their houses were not fit for human habitation'.<sup>93</sup> Other councillors were less sympathetic and claimed 'the Council was doing what the landlords should have done years ago'.<sup>94</sup> Four months later the new houses were completed, but still the public inquiry had not been held and the Clearance Order remained unconfirmed. Such was the clamour of applicants for the houses that sixty people 'invaded' a Council meeting in September. Here it emerged that the Council was only willing to grant a tenancy to those who could produce a letter from their landlord containing a guarantee that he would demolish their current dwelling, provided it was in the provisional Clearance Area, thereby securing its claim to the two-thirds subsidy.<sup>95</sup> The overwhelming demand for housing in Ballina at this time is reflected in individual pleas for tenancies made at the meeting. Patrick Lyons stated

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 8 July 1933.

<sup>91</sup> The 1931 Act clearly distinguished between Clearances Areas, where most of the dwellings therein would be subject to demolition, and Improvement Areas, where some dwellings were condemned and others subject to reconstruction.

<sup>92</sup> Athy UDC minutes, 19 and 23 February 1934.

<sup>93</sup> *Ballina Herald*, 24 March 1934.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 22 September 1934.

that he was recently evicted from a slum house situated in a lane off James Connolly Street. He was taken into his father-in-law's house which was also a slum house, his wife, six children, himself and nine persons made up his father-in-law, mother-in-law and family and were at present trying to live in a room and a kitchen and that was impossible. He urgently requested the Council to grant him a cottage.<sup>96</sup>

The inquiry into the Clearance Order was not held until December, with part held over until January 1935. The six-month gap between the completion of the three housing schemes and the confirmation of the Clearance Order had financial implications for the Council as some of the houses remained untenanted with the consequent loss of rents. The particular policy it adopted requiring written guarantees that landlords would demolish houses listed in the Clearance Order in advance of the inquiry is likely to have caused considerable tension between tenants and landlords in the town. The resistance on the part of landlords to having their property demolished is reflected in the fact that objections were lodged to 374 of the 416 dwellings listed in the Clearance Order, although some of these would have originated with tenants. However, the failure of local authorities in 1933 and 1934 to coordinate neatly the completion of housing schemes built for displaced households and the formal confirmation of Clearance Orders is hardly surprising given the quite radical nature of what the latter proposed. Owners of insanitary dwellings could claim an assault on their property rights, while their tenants saw the prospect of eviction from their homes at the hands of their local council. The public inquiries held to confirm Clearance Orders provided an opportunity for all sides to air their grievances and set them against the perspectives of doctors, engineers and bureaucrats who at times challenged their interests.

### **Clearance Orders and Public Inquiries**

Hundreds of public inquiries relating to Clearance Orders were held across the country from 1933 onwards, with their proceedings, in many cases, reported on in the local press. Given the level of detail revealed about the living conditions of households at these inquiries, including rents paid and even sleeping arrangements, it is likely the reports generated considerable public interest. However, as a source for exploring the conflicting perspectives of those participating, they are of uneven quality and lack much of the information that the official record contains. The complete documentation, including transcripts of a limited number of these inquiries, has recently become accessible at the NAI begins the process of cataloguing the archives of the DLGPH. An in-depth exploration of the archives relating to Clearance Orders in Kilrush provides

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<sup>96</sup> Ballina UDC minutes, 11 September 1934.

an opportunity to dissect the forces at play, those setting the agenda regarding housing being confronted by those resisting change.

Local government had been particularly ineffective in Kilrush through to the 1920s. An active Town Tenant's Association complained in 1922 that

No attempt had been made to build houses in the town. On the contrary, a deliberate attempt to keep the present hovels. Why? To suit a few landlords who demanded an exorbitant rent ... . There were houses in Kilrush and it was criminal to ask people to live in them. How these poor people could be healthy morally or physically passed comprehension?<sup>97</sup>

In 1924 the council was dissolved having accumulated unserviced debts of £8,000 while the town had no water supply or sanitary services.<sup>98</sup> Reinstated in 1925, the council's record regarding public housing consisted of six houses built under the £1 million scheme and twenty built in 1929-30 for tenant purchase. Its response to the 1929 Housing Survey indicated considerable complacency, as it reported that just 24 were required to rehouse those in unhealthy areas and a further 40 to replace unfit houses.<sup>99</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the 180 houses that were condemned and demolished in Kilrush between 1932 and 1945 when a more rigorous regime was applied.<sup>100</sup> Between 1933 and 1940 four Clearance Orders were implemented by the council as shown in Figure 6.4. The first, at Crawford Street (or Grace Street) was passed in September 1933 involving 35 families in 29 houses.<sup>101</sup> Along with the Clearance Area itself, the council acquired land immediately to the east by Compulsory Purchase Order and built 22 houses to rehouse those displaced. The second Clearance Order covered the north side of Pound Street on the western edge of the town and two lanes, Tanyard Lane and Malthouse Lane, near the town centre. The Medical Officer of Health described these as 'real slums such as one would not expect to find in a rural town. None of the houses have sanitary accommodation and some have no yard so that night soil has to be deposited on the road.'<sup>102</sup> The site at Pound Street was acquired by Compulsory Purchase Order and many of the residents were rehoused in a new scheme at Pella Street. Because there was a delay in having a valuer determine the level of compensation due to those owning property in Pound Street, the houses were not demolished but were quickly occupied by a 'floating population' - despite being in a

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<sup>97</sup> *Clare Champion*, 30 September 1922.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 May 1924.

<sup>99</sup> *Annual Report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1929-30*, Appendix xxvii, pp 209-12.

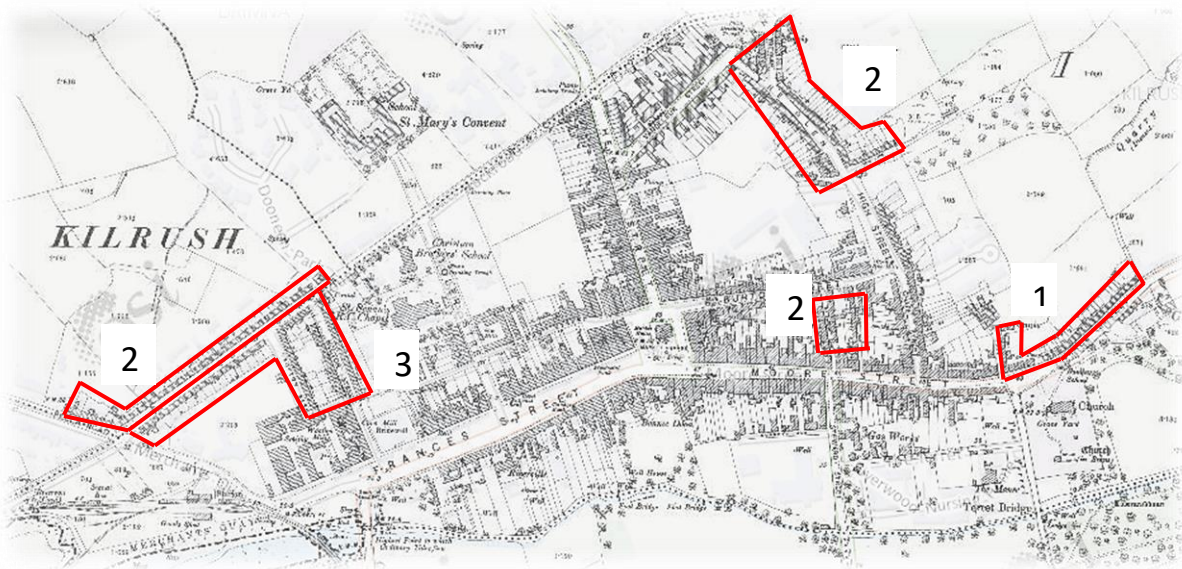
<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 1944-45, Appendix xxix, pp 210-13.

<sup>101</sup> Kilrush UD, Crawford Street Clearance Order 1933 (NAI, ENV/2013/94/1047).

<sup>102</sup> Kilrush UD, Clearance of unhealthy areas (NAI, ENV/2013/94/987).

'most dilapidated state'.<sup>103</sup> This pattern recurred in towns across the country as, in the absence of demolition, condemned property was reoccupied as soon as residents vacated and moved to their new council houses.

**Figure 6.4**  
**Clearance Areas in Kilrush, Co. Clare, 1933-40**



Of the three Clearance Orders implemented in Kirush the third, covering the south side of Pound Street and two small streets immediately to the south, Hector Street and Crofton Street, is the most fully documented in the archives. The issue of declaring it a Clearance Area first arose in 1934 when the Medical Officer of Health reported that there were only three houses fit for human habitation in the area.<sup>104</sup> However, the public inquiry to confirm the Order did not take place until June 1939 when Mr Ryan BE, a DLGPH inspector, presided at Kilrush Town Hall. The Clearance Order proposed the demolition of 57 dwellings as shown in Figure 6.5, and there were 30 objections lodged relating to the inclusion of properties in the Order. Data extracted from the inquiry is reproduced in Appendix 10 and 11.

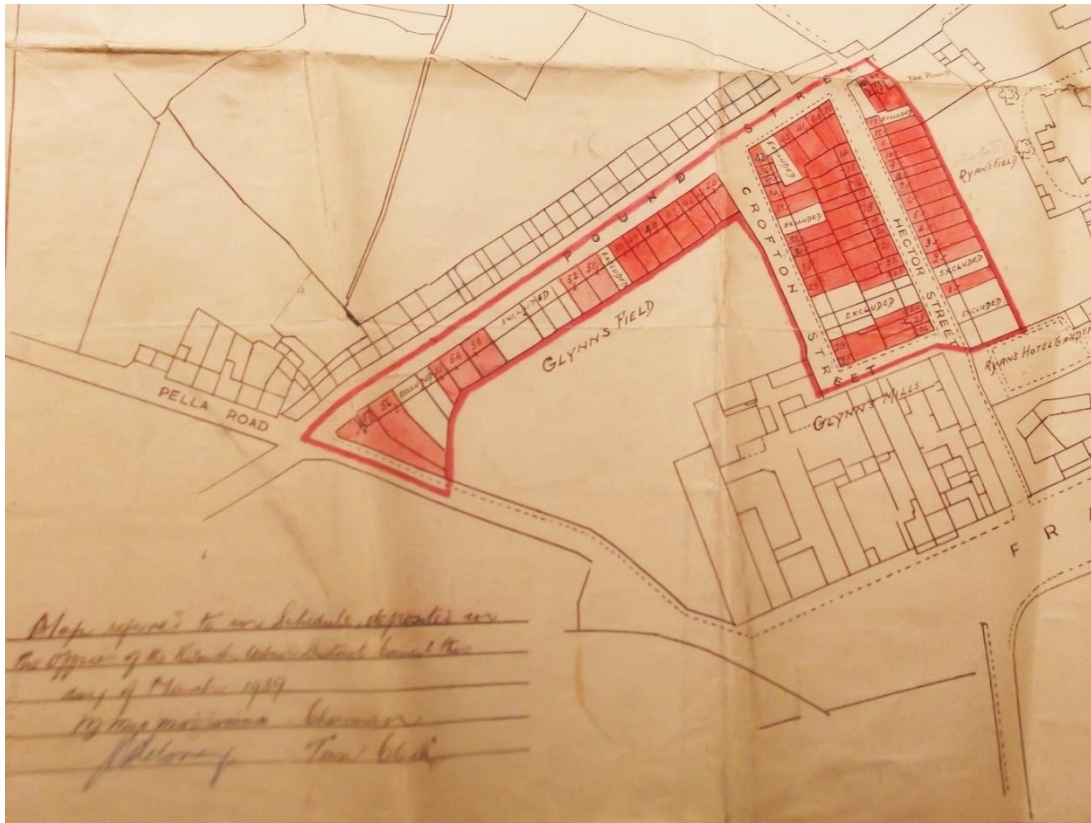
<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 10 September 1934.



Figure 6.5

Kilrush Clearance Area No.3 – Pound Street, Hector Street, Crofton Street



Source: Kilrush UD, Clearance of unhealthy areas (NAI, ENV/2013/94/987)

The inquiry opened with Mr Ryan’s questioning of the town clerk regarding the procedures associated with the declaration of the Order, then a questioning of Dr Daly, Kilrush’s Medical Officer of Health, by the council’s solicitor. Daly stated that he ‘always considered it one of the most unhealthy districts in the town’.<sup>105</sup> Daly was then brought through each of the thirty dwellings for which objections had been lodged and referred to the lack of sanitation, lack of air space, poor lighting and ventilation. Solicitors representing some of the objectors then questioned Daly, focusing on some of the redeeming features of the houses and arguing that they could be rendered habitable with some alterations and repairs. A number of the houses had only one or two occupants and this, the solicitor argued, meant they provided adequate accommodation. When asked if the town had experienced any recent outbreaks of infectious diseases, Daly replied that it had not in the past three or four years, but that he found the area covered by the Clearance Order ‘one of the most troublesome areas of the town with regard to infantile diseases’.<sup>106</sup> The County Medical Officer, Dr. McCarthy, provided evidence similar to

<sup>105</sup> Kilrush UD, Clearance of unhealthy areas (NAI, ENV/2013/94/987).

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

that of Daly. The following revealing exchange with Mr O'Shea, a solicitor representing some of the objectors, highlights the role that the medical profession assumed in setting housing standards and determining the conditions in which people lived:

O'Shea: Do you consider there are houses which although not first class houses would be sufficient for the occupants if repaired?

McCarthy: Possibly if the occupants were prepared to reduce their standards of the fitness of a house very considerably. It would have to be reduced amazingly.

O'Shea: But for the class of people occupying these houses who would be prepared to accept that standard of living would you consider the houses were sufficient for such people?

McCarthy: I am afraid they cannot set the standard of living at all. It is we who have to set them.

The radically different perspectives of the residents and the professionals tasked with providing a rationale for their rehousing is apparent in a number of further exchanges. Thomas Downes, a mill hand who lived with his wife in No.43, was questioned by his solicitor and asked to comment on the fact that the doctor had stated his house was not fit to live in. Downes replied 'I can say that the house is fit for the Doctor or the Priest himself to live in'.<sup>107</sup> The two-roomed thatched house was faulted by the Medical Officer of Health: 'lighting and ventilation in the kitchen is very bad. Good in the bedroom ...Bad roof ... dampness, low floor levels'.<sup>108</sup> When viewed by the inspector, he concluded 'house in very bad condition'.<sup>109</sup> But when Mrs Corbett (No. 7) was asked to comment on the fact that the Medical Officer of Health had identified a serious lack of light in her house, she replied 'I was very much surprised to hear that the house had not sufficient ventilation or light because I think our kitchen is splendid. Of course the Government wants a terrible lot of light and we could put in a bigger window ... I was very surprised at Dr Daly as I had a higher opinion of him.'<sup>110</sup> Mr Manning, who represented himself, succeeded in overturning the council's inclusion of his house in the Order. 'It is roofed and slated and when examined it had everything suitable in it. As for air I have too bloody much of it'.<sup>111</sup> The official's high regard for ventilation had an impact on a number of the witnesses. Mrs Walsh

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

(No.32), when asked if her house had adequate light and air, replied ‘Yes – we have too much of it – it is like a sanatorium’.<sup>112</sup>

Apart from the two medical witness, the other expert witness was Patrick Tubridy, the UDC’s engineer and assistant surveyor for Clare Co. Council. He outlined the physical dimensions of each of the houses for which objections had been lodged, including the total floor area and the size of each room, and commented on dampness, lack of eve shoots and floor levels. When cross-examined by the solicitors representing the objectors he continually referred back to the fact that all the houses failed to meet what he described as ‘the standard laid down by the Local Government Department’ of 500 square feet. At several points he referred to this as the ‘minimum space’ and, significantly, was not contradicted by any of the objectors or their solicitors. However, just as it makes no reference to overcrowding, the legislation relating to Clearance Orders makes no reference to minimum house size. The 500 square feet standard related to the minimum house size that could qualify for state subsidy or grant under the provisions of the 1931 Housing Act.<sup>113</sup> The inspector, when making his determinations at the end of the inquiry, noted that the engineer’s conclusion regarding a number of dwellings that they ‘must be brought up to 500 sq. feet to be rendered habitable’ was ‘at variance with law and housing practice’. He also described the engineer’s evidence as ‘unsound’.<sup>114</sup> House no. 16 was included in the Clearance order but the inspector remarked ‘again the Medical Officer and the engineer [in] condemning the house were considerably influenced by the fact the house was small and overcrowded’. While the quality of the houses in the Clearance Area can only be described as poor (something at least partially confirmed by the photograph of Hector Street in the early 1900s in Figure 6.6), the imbalance in power between the local government officials and the residents is striking, even for those with professional legal representation. This was compounded by the lack of detailed knowledge of the relevant legislation by both the doctors and engineers who, on a day to day basis, had considerable influence over the implementation of housing and sanitary legislation.

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> See Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions Act) 1931, Part VII, Section 63.

<sup>114</sup> Kilrush UD, Clearance of unhealthy areas (NAI, ENV/2013/94/987).

**Figure 6.6**

**Hector Street, Kilrush in the early 1900s**



Source: *Kilrush and District Historical Society* <https://www.facebook.com/Kilrush-and-District-Historical-Society-187907517330/photos/>

Evidence from all the Clearance Orders in Kilrush suggests that a significant number of residents purchased their properties from the Vandeleurs, the principal landlords in the town since the late seventeenth century.<sup>115</sup> About twelve of the objections at the June 1939 inquiry came from owner occupiers who faced the prospect of being removed from their homes, without compensation, and being rehoused as tenants of the council. Although not aired in Kilrush, in Ballina the issue of compensation for owner occupiers forced from their homes was raised at council meetings and suggests many councillors may have felt sympathy for those being rehoused against their will. Thomas Ruane, Ballina's most influential councillor who became a senator in 1934, told a meeting 'these people had put their life savings into the purchase price of their little shacks, and it was nothing short of a disgrace – it was an iniquity – that they should be put out on a few weeks' notice'.<sup>116</sup> Conscious of the electoral consequences of being associated with such an unpopular policy, Ruane added 'they were only twelve months from an election and would they have to go back to these people and ask them for support?'<sup>117</sup> Despite being Fianna Fáil's stalwart in the town, he was critical of the DLGPH which, unlike the councillors, was not immediately answerable to those being displaced. Other councillors blamed the landlords for persuading their tenants to purchase their homes. One claimed 'the landlord

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<sup>115</sup> Kilrush UD, Pound St Clearance Order 1936 (NAI, ENV/2013/94/1050). Documentation relating to Clearance Order No. 2 states that 'practically all' those rehoused from the north side of Pound Street were owner occupiers.

<sup>116</sup> *Ballina Herald*, 25 April 1936.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

saw that Ireland was becoming a land of milk and honey and sold the houses to those poor people ... it is not fair'.<sup>118</sup> One councillor went so far as to suggest that regarding houses in Hill Street 'landlords had tricked their tenants well knowing that the Council was about to condemn them'.<sup>119</sup> In Edenderry the Town Commissioners favoured compensating owner occupiers and small landlords who owned property in its Clearance Area. The chairman claimed 'if they were dealing with landlords in the proper sense of the word it would be all right to talk about public health and housing etc. ... . In most cases the owners were working men who invested what money they had in a house or two and, without approaching them in any way, a clearance order was declared.'<sup>120</sup>

In Kilrush some claimed to have invested in improving their dwellings, while most said they would carry out whatever repairs were required. Mrs O'Donnell (No.24) stated she 'spent £27 on it at one time and worked hard for that £27. We spent it on the attic over the big room and it is there for all to see.'<sup>121</sup> Some of the older occupants, solely reliant on the old age pension, simply asked to remain in their homes 'for the rest of their days', and told the inquiry they could not afford to pay for any improvements. Of the 54 households in the Clearance Area, seventeen were headed by a pensioner and this was a pattern replicated in most provincial towns.<sup>122</sup> Mrs Masterson (No.33), whose income was 10s. from the state pension stated 'I would not be able to do anything. There is no use in telling you a story that I would have no foundation for. It gives me enough to do to give a bite to myself.'<sup>123</sup> The inspector ultimately acceded to only one request to allow elderly residents remain in their homes. Miss Keane (No.49), who was described as deaf, old and feeble, asked that she be 'left [her] own little house, that is all'.<sup>124</sup>

In some instances residents saw an opportunity to exploit the provision of new houses by the council. Mrs Egan (No. 51) objected to the inclusion of her house in the Clearance Order and stated 'I am prepared to do everything they want if I am left in the house for my own life which will not be very long I suppose'.<sup>125</sup> Despite this plea the inspector recommended that the house be demolished as expenditure on improvements could not be justified. Mrs Egan and her husband subsequently wrote to de Valera, the local TD, claiming 'my little home is to be taken

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> *Western People*, 28 April 1934.

<sup>120</sup> *Kildare Observer*, 29 September 1934.

<sup>121</sup> Kilrush UD, Clearance of unhealthy areas (NAI, ENV/2013/94/987).

<sup>122</sup> Although the same level of detail is not available for other towns, newspaper reports of inquiries associated with Clearance Orders show that many of those objecting were pensioners, citing their long residence in the area and their inability to pay the rents of new council houses.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

from me, that I have lost my life savings on'.<sup>126</sup> The letter is reproduced in Appendix 12. The reality, however, was somewhat at variance with the picture painted by the Egans, who were residing with their daughter in a council house on Pella Road and, at the time of the inquiry, had tenants living in the Pound Street house.

Many of the more substantial objections to Clearance Orders were made on the part of landlords of property liable to demolition. The legislation represented an existential threat to their financial interests as their assets would be liquidated and they would be liable for the liquidation. Sections seven and eight of Part II of the 1931 Housing Act, which set out the provisions relating to the demolition of condemned dwellings and the obligation imposed on the owners to clear the sites, were, understandably, perceived by property owners as an attack on private property rights. The phrase 'an undue interference in private property' featured as part of the standard objection submitted by solicitors on behalf of landlords to councils and to public inquiries.<sup>127</sup> Although there appears to have been little debate on councils regarding the issue of compensation for landlords, Enniscorthy UDC did adopt a motion calling for reasonable compensation for 'landlords of slum property'. The chairman argued that 'where owners were getting a revenue from their property it was hard lines to deprive them without any compensation'.<sup>128</sup> Walter Greacen, presiding at a meeting of Monaghan UDC in 1933 expressed the view that the legislation 'seemed unreasonable' and 'pressed unduly on small landlords'.<sup>129</sup> Youghal UDC expressed sympathy with landlords who were unable to collect rents as soon as their properties were included in Clearance Orders. Asking them to pay rates on such property when it was about to be demolished without compensation, it argued, 'added insult to injury'.<sup>130</sup> A column appeared in *The Kerryman*, presumably written by the editor, arguing that 'consideration must also be given to the rights of the landlords and house-owners in the areas which will be cleared'.<sup>131</sup> Not all councils viewed the issue of landlord compensation in this light. Clonmel Corporation discussed the issue in 1936 and was told 'the landlords in some parts of the country have killed more than the Black and Tans and they have become millionaires from the rents they receive from the slum houses'.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> See, for example, the minutes of Athy UDC meeting of 14 December 1933 which includes this phrase in the objections lodged to the council's first Clearance Order.

<sup>128</sup> *Irish Press*, 5 January 1934.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 9 October 1933.

<sup>130</sup> *Irish Press*, 28 September 1936.

<sup>131</sup> *Kerryman*, 17 July 1934.

<sup>132</sup> *Irish Press*, 9 November 1936.

In reality most landlords of slum housing in provincial towns in the 1930s had either inherited the property or were relatively small-scale investors. The details of the long leases held by landlords in Drogheda, shown in Table 2.9, and the collections of cabins they rented, are quite representative of the scale of these holding in provincial towns. The details made public at inquiries associated with Clearance Orders show most held between five and fifteen houses, while some had more extensive investments in cheap property. In Athy Carbery, the town's most prominent builder who won the majority of council contracts to build houses, owned twenty-nine houses at Woodstock Street and Kelly's Lane, which were included in the town's first Clearance Area in July 1833.<sup>133</sup> In the same Clearance Order, Major William Cross, resident in Elstree in Essex, owned 24 houses in Meeting Lane, Garden Lane and Janeville Lane. He refused to carry out repairs to houses in Meeting Lane when ordered by the council in 1932, and his objections to the houses being demolished were rejected at the inquiry held in March 1934.<sup>134</sup>

Reasonably typical of those threatened by the demolition of their rental property was Patrick O'Brien, a shopkeeper in the Pound Street Clearance Area in Kilrush, who owned eleven houses in Hector Street.<sup>135</sup> The houses were amongst the worst in the area and at the inquiry his solicitor could do little more than make what he called 'a misericordiam appeal', suggesting 'it would be a case of extreme hardship to deprive him of the revenue of these houses' which amounted to £1 6s. 6d. per week. 'He spent his life building up this little income and it will be very hard if it is taken away from him', he added.<sup>136</sup> His solicitor emphasised that no complaints had been received about the condition of the houses on the part of his tenants. The inspector, however, was quite scathing in his report about their condition and considered them as 'properly condemned'.<sup>137</sup> Similar special pleading was made by a small landlord, Thomas Galvin, who owned eight houses in The Glen area, which was part of the second Kilrush Clearance Area. He claimed in a letter to the Minister that if he demolished the houses he would starve and in compensation 'expect[ed] one thousand pounds that I can invest at 4 per cent and then you can do whatever you like with them'. His evidence to the inquiry associated with the Clearance Order pointed to a further impact of the council's provision of new housing when he stated regarding his rental that it was '19s. 6d. a week at one time, but when the Urban Council built

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<sup>133</sup> Athy UDC minutes, 17 July 1933.

<sup>134</sup> *Kildare Observer*, 9 July 1932 and 31 March 1934.

<sup>135</sup> A Patrick O'Brien appeared as an objector at an earlier inquiry held in 1935 relating to the Clearance Order which included the north side of Pound Street. He was then described as 'the owner of a number of houses'. See Kilrush UD, Pound St Clearance Order 1935 (NAI, ENV/2013/94/1049).

<sup>136</sup> Kilrush UD, Pound St Clearance Order 1935 (NAI, ENV/2013/94/987).

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

new houses my tenants left me and I had to reduce the rents to get new tenants. At present I am only getting 12s. 6s. rent for them.’<sup>138</sup> Some landlords made quite exaggerated claims regarding their property and questioned the motives of the council in building new houses. Mary Howard, who owned seven properties in Clearance Area No. 2, objected on the grounds that

my houses are substantial buildings and with small outlay could be converted into splendid dwellings superior to any being built by Kilrush Urban Council ... The Council are building houses for the purpose of promoting shopkeepers in the worker’s houses to the detriment of the labourer who needs a house.<sup>139</sup>

The council files show, however, that five of the houses were ‘in ruins’ and one other had twenty slates missing from its roof.<sup>140</sup>

The scale of objections lodged at some inquiries reflected a combination of interests being threatened by Clearance Orders. The inquiry linked to Ballina’s first large Clearance Order was held in December 1934 and there were objections lodged in relation to 371 of the 410 properties.<sup>141</sup> Quite a few of the objections were withdrawn during the course of the inquiry as solicitors representing landlords realised that the inspector was summarily dismissing their concerns. All objections lodged on behalf of the Ahearne estate, for example, were withdrawn, while there was a pattern of landlords who held smaller property portfolios withdrawing some objections in the hope of having others upheld. Houses in laneways were sacrificed as the objectors’ solicitors recognised ‘it was futile to resist’,<sup>142</sup> and the Medical Officer of Health made clear in his evidence that the council were determined to eradicate the ‘laneway system’ in the town.<sup>143</sup>

### **Hovels to homes: rehousing**

The final group, and the group most profoundly affected by the operation of Clearance Orders, were those whose homes were being demolished and who were offered new homes by their local councils. A defining feature of the 1931 Housing Act was the provision to rehouse those displaced as a result of the demolition of condemned dwellings in Clearance or Improvement Areas. In retrospect it is unlikely the Cumann na nGaedheal government could have implemented the specific provisions relating to rehousing. The level of loan subsidy offered to

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Kilrush UD, Pound St Clearance Order 1935 (NAI ENV/2013/94/1049).

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> *Ballina Herald*, 1 December 1934.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.



municipal authorities was simply inadequate to bridge the gap between the economic rent and the rent that those being rehoused could reasonably afford, even allowing for an increased contribution from ratepayers. The 1931 Act set the level of loan subsidy at 30 percent for the first 15 years and 20 percent for a further 15 years for houses built to accommodate displaced families, and 15 percent over 15 years for other local authority housing.<sup>144</sup> For a £300 house this suggested a weekly rent (including rates) of over 8s. per week for rehousing those displaced, assuming no subsidy from the rates. This was above the level of rent being set for new council houses in the late 1920s when demand was limited to those in secure and reasonably well paid employment. The 1932 Act introduced much more generous levels of loan subsidy – two-thirds for rehousing those displaced and one third for others – and extended the loan period to 35 years. A circular sent out by the DLGPH soon after the Act was passed indicated that the Minister expected that in fixing the rents of houses ‘local authorities will be required to make a reasonable contribution from rates towards the loss in letting of the houses and will also be required to furnish such evidence as the Minister may require that the rents are not unnecessarily low in any year’.<sup>145</sup> There appears to have been some variation in the extent to which councils made this contribution from the rates, but the impact of the two-thirds loan subsidy was such that rents were generally set at 5s. or less per week. The sample of twelve schemes shown in Table 6.2 is typical of the rent levels set in the years 1933 to 1937 with the lower rents applying to three-roomed houses. The difficulty was that many of those being displaced were either paying no rents, in the case of owner occupiers, or 1s. 6d. to 2s. 6d. per week in the case of tenants. Apart from the natural opposition of older residents in these Clearance Areas to being removed from houses they may have occupied for decades, most of the other objectors at inquiries referred to the additional rent they would be required to pay in a new council house.

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<sup>144</sup> *Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1931-32*, pp 107-08.

<sup>145</sup> *Housing Supply Schemes and Maintenance, 1899-1950* (CCA, CCCA/UDC/FY, Box 35).

**Table 6.2**  
**Public housing rents in three provincial towns, 1933-38**

No. houses	Scheme	Rent	When set	Valuation	Rates	Rent + Rates*
Athy						
93	Dooley Tce & Lw St. Joseph's	2s. 4d.	11-Sep-33	£3 15s.	1s. 4d.	3s. 8d.
45	Convent View & Upp St Joseph's Tce	2s. 7d.	9-Jan-36	£3 15s.	1s. 4d.	3s. 11d.
24	Plewman's Tce	2s. 8d.	28-Dec-36	£3 15s.	1s. 4d.	4s.
12	Minch's Tce	2s. 8d.	28-Dec-36	£4	1s. 5d.	4s. 1d.
25	Geraldine Tce	4s.	12-Aug-38	£3 15s.	1s. 4d.	5s. 4d.
Drogheda						
18	Priests Lane		6-Mar-34			5s.
14	Platten Road		4-Jul-33			5s.
16	Congress Avenue		4-Jul-33			5s.
36	Hand Street		1-Aug-33			5s.
Navan						
27	Connolly Avenue		25-Oct-35			4s.
48	Emmet Terrace		1931-1933			4s.
14	Mellows Terrace		8-Dec-34			4s.

*Source: Minutes of Drogheda Corporation, Athy and Navan UDC meetings*

\* The rents refer to houses benefitting from the two-thirds loan subsidy. Some schemes also included houses where the one-third subsidy applied and rents were higher for these houses.

The setting of rents was now a critical issue for councillors: they were party to a process of demolishing the homes of their poorest constituents and offering them accommodation which, invariably, had higher rents. A high proportion of objectors at Clearance Order inquiries simply stated that they could not afford to move. Mrs Masterson, a pensioner living in Crofton Street in Kilrush, told the June 1939 inquiry that 'if I have to go to the new cottages and pay rent I would be absolutely down and out'.<sup>146</sup> Other witnesses, some pensioners receiving the old age pension of 10s. and others receiving unemployment assistance or home assistance, gave similar evidence. Ambrose Downes told the inquiry he paid only 7s. 6d. ground rent a year, that '[he] did not work 12 days in the past 12 months and was only drawing the dole', and that he could not rent a council house.<sup>147</sup> These objectors found a somewhat unlikely ally in the agent to the Vandeleur estate who claimed the council placed the estate in 'an invidious position', as it was obliged to evict its tenants despite their having paid their rent. In correspondence with the council, he argued 'if they go into the Council's new houses they will not be able to pay the

<sup>146</sup> Kilrush UD, Clearance of unhealthy areas (NAI, ENV/2013/94/987).

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

Council's higher rents they will have to pay. The result will be, of course, they will be ejected, and then they will have no place to go, save the County Home'.<sup>148</sup>

Precise data on the income of those households subject to Clearance Orders is not readily available beyond some files in the DLGPH archives associated with the Orders. The pattern of household incomes shown in Figure 6.6 is based on files relating to all 54 households in Kilrush Clearance Area 3 and a subset of 24 households in Clearance Area 2.<sup>149</sup> Although this is a small sample of the thousands of households displaced from Clearance Areas, there is good reason to believe the income distribution is not atypical. Of the 54 households, 17 were headed by a pensioner and 16 by a 'casual worker'. Evidence from council minutes for a number of towns indicate that their Clearances Areas had populations with a similar profile. In Ballina, when councillors discussed the difficulties tenants in the newly occupied Healy Terrace and Lord Edward Street had in paying their rents, it was pointed out that 'only 8 were working, the remaining 39 tenants were on the dole and in all cases large families had to be kept'.<sup>150</sup> The tenants' difficulties could hardly come as a surprise to the councillors as five months earlier the chairman admitted 'all the members of the Council knew very well that the persons taken from slum areas and put into these cottages are not in a position to pay 5s. rent and rates per week'.<sup>151</sup> When setting the rents for a new scheme of 41 houses in Ballinasloe in 1934 a councillor remarked that 'of the 41 tenants going in to the new houses 20 were old age pensioners or on home assistance. How, he asked, could people on 6s. per week home assistance pay 3s. 4d. rent?'<sup>152</sup> In Monaghan a councillor proposed reducing the rents on their first 'slum clearance' scheme as 'twenty five per cent of [the tenants] were being relieved through societies and so forth'.<sup>153</sup> A Dungarvan councillor claimed that 80 out of 86 tenants in a new council scheme were 'living solely by relief' and that 'the average money coming into those houses is 12s. 6d. a week'.<sup>154</sup> Of the 54 households in the Kilrush No.3 Clearance Area, 16 were headed by 'casual workers'. The income data from Kilrush reflects the level of the old age pension of 10s per week and of unemployment assistance, which for most households was less

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<sup>148</sup> Kilrush UD, Clearance Order 1939, No. 3 (NAI, ENV/2013/94/1051).

<sup>149</sup> The data on which this chart is based is reproduced in Appendices 8 and 9.

<sup>150</sup> Ballina UDC minutes, 3 September 1935.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 April 1935.

<sup>152</sup> *Connacht Tribune*, 9 June 1934.

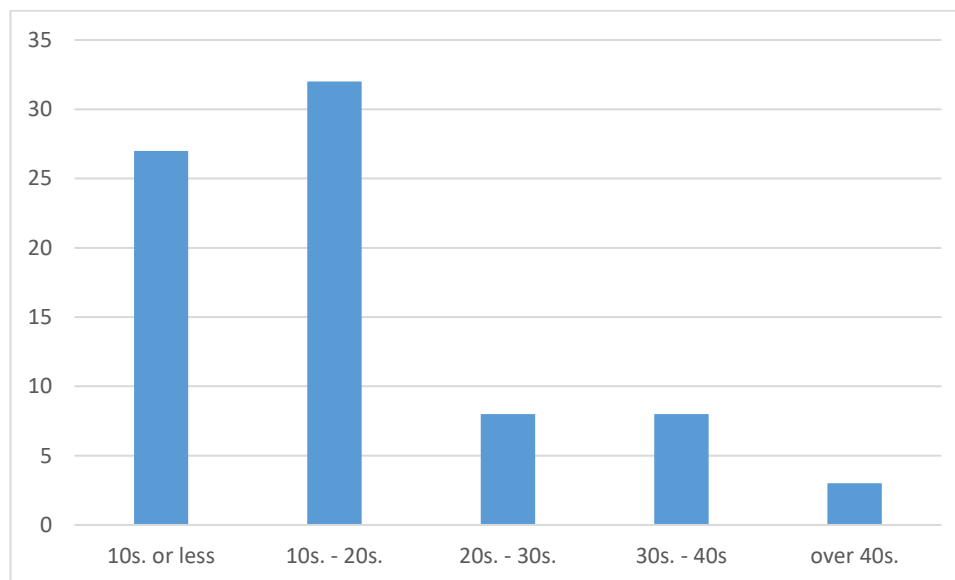
<sup>153</sup> *Anglo-Celt*, 24 November 1934.

<sup>154</sup> *Munster Express*, 29 March 1935.

than 15s. per week (Figure 6.7). Fianna Fáil introduced Unemployment Assistance in 1933,<sup>155</sup> but the rates of payment were very low compared to even labourers' wages.<sup>156</sup>

**Figure 6.7**

**Incomes of 78 households in Kilrush Clearance Areas No. 2 and 3**



Source: Kilrush UD, Clearance Order 1939, No. 3 (NAI, ENV/2013/94/1051); Kilrush UD, Clearance of unhealthy areas (ENV/2013/94/987)

The impact of rehousing those on very low incomes or in casual employment in new council housing, where rents were 5s. a week, soon became apparent. Addressing the Meath Board of Health in March 1934, Mr Griffin, a Fianna Fáil councillor in the Trim area, brought the plight of some of the tenants of the new council houses in the town to the attention of the meeting. He claimed that 'the rents of these houses were not within the means of the tenants and in certain cases in which there were large families the people were on the brink of starvation'.<sup>157</sup> A Thurles delegate to the 1937 Labour Party conference claimed that

Workers all over the country who went into the new houses were finding themselves in a very difficult position due to the high rents. A large amount of their earnings needed for food and other necessaries went in payment of these high rents, while young families were being raised in a state of semi starvation.<sup>158</sup>

<sup>155</sup> Cousins, *The Birth of Social Welfare in Ireland*, pp 60-73.

<sup>156</sup> The rate for a man with a wife and four other dependents was 14s. 6d. per week. This compared to an average of £2 5s. per week earned by building labourers on council housing schemes.

<sup>157</sup> *Meath Chronicle*, 2 March 1935.

<sup>158</sup> *Irish Press*, 9 February 1937.

Court reports in provincial papers also have numerous accounts of men being charged with fraudulent claims for Home Assistance with the defendants regularly referring to the burden of high rents in new council houses. In Waterford in 1934 the accused was charged with obtaining a Home Assistance voucher for 8s. under false pretences. He admitted that he had earned thirty shillings that week but that '26s. of that went on rent'. He claimed that his family of seven were living on 8s. a week dole and that his rent was 6s. 6d. The judge, sentencing him to seven days in prison, remarked 'the high rents were often the cause of starvation and trouble'.<sup>159</sup>

Although not explicitly designed to assess the impact of rents in council housing, a survey of 100 families in a new council estate in Dublin, conducted by Dr Charles Clancy Gore in 1943, exposed the extent of inadequate diet, particularly in larger families.<sup>160</sup> The methodology used was based on a study conducted by the British Medical Association (BMA) which calculated the cost of a minimum diet for working class families. Based on local shop prices in Dublin the survey concluded that an adequate adult diet would cost 14s. a week. The equivalent diet for children aged between 10 and 14 cost just over 11s. and that for younger children about 9 shillings. Allowing for the fact that these were wartime prices and that food prices in provincial towns are likely to have been somewhat lower, they do underline the highly precarious position of low income households obliged to pay 3s. or 4s. extra in rent in new council houses. Gore found that half of the survey participants spent less than seven shillings a week on food, half the BMA recommended level. The diet of larger and poorer families was dominated by bread which consumed half of all expenditure on food.<sup>161</sup> Ryder's work on slum clearance on County Durham in the 1920s and 1930s makes a more direct link between the increased rents paid by rehoused families and their physical condition. He quotes an analysis of the health records of families rehoused who experienced an increase in their death rate from 22.9 to 32.5 per thousand in the five years following their move.<sup>162</sup> The Medical Officer of Health attributed the increased death rate to a deficiency in diet 'which had been aggravated by the increased proportion of family income being taken by rent'.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> *Munster Express*, 3 August 1934. The issue of unaffordable rents for those rehoused to new council dwellings features in the British literature on housing in the inter-war years. See, for example, Colin Pooley, 'Patterns on the ground: urban form, residential structure and the social construction of space' in Daunt, *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, p. 449.

<sup>160</sup> Charles Clancy Gore, 'Nutritional standards of some working class families in Dublin, 1943' in *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, xxvii, pp 241-53. The survey is discussed in Moira J. Maguire, *Precarious childhood in post-independence Ireland* (Manchester, 2009), pp 27-28.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252.

<sup>162</sup> Ryder, 'Council house building in County Durham, 1900-39', p. 275.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 275-76.

Cousins points out that a requirement introduced by the new government in 1932 that those seeking work had to register as unemployed in their local labour exchange had the effect of revealing the true extent of unemployment and underemployment.<sup>164</sup> The Live Register rose from 32,000 in April 1932 to over 100,000 at the end of the year. The scale of agitation on the part of the unemployed and casually employed in provincial towns through the early and mid-1930s is a largely untold story but it features quite prominently in provincial newspapers and, occasionally, in the minutes of council meetings. Many towns had loose associations of the unemployed who regularly made representations to councillors and, occasionally, threatened more militant action. A banner regularly carried by such groups demanded 'Work or Maintenance' and the question of rents in new council houses featured prominently in the list of grievances. The Irish Unemployed Workers Movement, a 32-county wide organisation at least partly controlled by the Communist Party of Ireland, is recorded as holding public meetings in Dundalk, Longford and Athy.<sup>165</sup> In Athy speakers attacked the levels of payment available under the new Unemployment Assistance Act and demanded that 'the Government and the Athy UDC ... reduce the rents of the Council's new houses to 2s. a week'.<sup>166</sup> A more loosely organised Unemployed Workers' Rights Association which, according to the assistant secretary of the Longford branch, was 'entirely composed of faithful members of the Catholic Church', also campaigned on the issue of council house rents.<sup>167</sup> The association, which had Dublin headquarters and a countywide network of branches, had a large membership in Ballina with, at one point, 500 members marching on a council meeting.<sup>168</sup> Its chairman claimed 'the Government of the country did not know how the unfortunate people were living at all with the price of flour at £1 1s. a bag and high rents which the worker had to pay although unemployed'.<sup>169</sup> On St. Patrick's Day 1937 the branch organised what it called a 'hunger march' through the town and subsequently demanded that unemployed men be issued with rent vouchers as the 'niggardly pittance' of 12s. 6d. a week they were paid in Unemployment Assistance left only 7s. to live on from Thursday to Thursday when rents of 5s. 6d. were paid.<sup>170</sup> Occasionally O'Kelly, on his frequent trips around the county to open new housing schemes, was confronted by those campaigning against high council house rents. In contrast to the usual eulogies lavished on him at these events, in Ennis in 1935 (Figure 6.8), P.J. McNamara, a

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<sup>164</sup> Cousins, *The Birth of Social Welfare in Ireland*, p. 60.

<sup>165</sup> Matt Tracey, *The Communist Party of Ireland 1921-2011: Vol. 1, 1921-69* (Dublin, 2012), p. 80.

<sup>166</sup> *Kildare Observer*, 9 June 1934.

<sup>167</sup> *Longford Leader*, 30 December 1933.

<sup>168</sup> *Western People*, 20 March 1937.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 March 1937.

<sup>170</sup> *Ballina Herald*, 1 May 1937.

councillor representing the Ennis United Labourers Association, in his address told the Minister ‘the rents of the new cottages [at 5s. 10d.] are beyond the means of the new tenants, many of whom were receiving Unemployment Assistance’.<sup>171</sup> In general, though, the issue did not gain much political traction. At a Fine Gael campaign meeting in Carrick-on-Suir in the lead-in to the 1937 general election Councillor Ryan from Cashel claimed de Valera had abandoned the common people and went on to ask ‘what is the use of building houses when the people are not able to pay the rents?’<sup>172</sup> It was a reasonable question but not one to which Cumann na nGaedheal, Fine Gael’s predecessor, had provided an answer through the 1920s or in the 1931 Housing Act.

**Figure 6.8**

**Opening of a 60 house scheme by Seán T. O’Kelly in Ennis in 1935**



*Source: Irish Press, 3 October 1935*

The ‘rent strike’ tactic does not seem to have been widely employed with the exception of two interesting cases. In April 1935 tenants in a new built ‘slum clearance’ scheme in Athlone declared a rent strike when the council added 1s. 7d. for rates to their rent of 3s. 6d. The strike seems to have been a copycat action as it coincided with a strike in Belfast where it had been a tactic in the early 1930s. The Athlone strike was remarkably successful as the council conceded a reduction in rents to 1s. 11d.<sup>173</sup> Most councils were careful to include rates when calculating what tenants were liable to pay before they were offered tenancies. However, there was often resistance when rates increased as tenants tended to regard this as a rent increase. Councils

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<sup>171</sup> *Irish Press*, 3 October 1935.

<sup>172</sup> *Munster Express*, 25 June 1937.

<sup>173</sup> *Irish Press*, 8 April 1935.

with Fianna Fáil and Labour majorities such as Athy and Ballina tended to apply small rent cuts to balance any increase in rates, which effectively represented an increase in the ratepayers' subsidy of council rents.<sup>174</sup> Fine Gael or Ratepayer dominated councils such as Cavan and Carrickmacross tended to pass on the increase to their tenants.<sup>175</sup>

A further impact of rehousing those on low incomes was the growing scale of rent and rates arrears which accumulated from the mid-1930s onwards (Figure 6.9). This is illustrated in Figure 6.9 which shows the number of houses let by councils in 74 provincial towns alongside rent and rate arrears. Arrears rose from £5,267 in 1929-30 to £29,680 in 1940-41. Of course these arrears accumulated on a greatly increased number of lettings and it is quite evident that the scale of arrears in some towns was as much related to poor administration as to the struggles of tenants to pay their rents. As early as 1930-31 the arrears in Longford amounted to over £600 on the council's 124 houses and partly reflected a level of maladministration that led to its being dissolved in 1935.<sup>176</sup> The most spectacular level of arrears was accumulated in Ballina where by 1942-43 they amounted to over £4,000 on the 499 houses let by the council. Between 1933 and 1942, 344 households had been displaced from condemned houses and most rehoused in Lord Edward St, Healy Terrace, Bunree Road and Tyrawley Terrace. In these scheme alone the arrears amounted to almost £2,200.<sup>177</sup> When the County Manager described the levels of arrears as 'appalling', the response of some of the councillors indicated that, as landlord, the council had generally refused to evict tenants in arrears. The sentiments expressed by Councillor Walsh appeared to have been shared by majority of the councillors and marked an attempt to push the blame for the position the council found itself in and the plight of its tenants back to the state:

These people were taken out of comfortable houses they had at 1s. a week and put into houses at a rent they could not pay. He would sooner resign from the Council than force these people to pay rent. If it was not the duty of the Council to devise a scheme to deal with the existing state of affairs it was the duty of the Government. There was an old proverb that blood could not be knocked out of a turnip.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Ballina UDC minutes, 5 October 1935 and Athy UDC minutes, 13 June 1938.

<sup>175</sup> *Anglo-Celt*, 8 May 1937.

<sup>176</sup> A ratepayers' group considered petitioning the DLGPH to have the council dissolved prior to the 1934 local elections and to have the town administered by a commissioner. (See *Irish Independent*, 8 June 1934). Instead, the Longford Ratepayers Association ran a slate of candidates in the election.

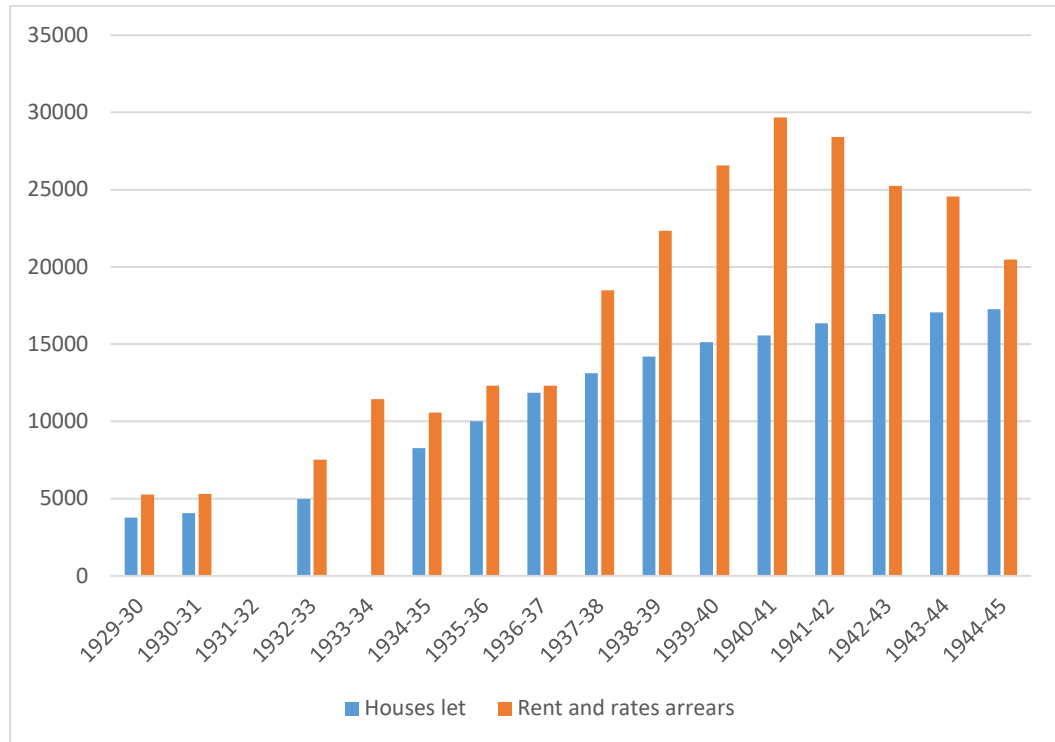
<sup>177</sup> *Ballina Herald*, 21 November 1942.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 6.9

Houses let and rent and rates arrears in 74 provincial towns, 1929-1945



Source: Annual reports of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1929-45

Not all councils were as sanguine regarding rent arrears, and rent collectors and, occasionally, town clerks came under sustained interrogation at council meetings regarding their perceived failure to protect the council's interests. In Navan the Town Clerk was removed following an audit showing the council's financial affairs were in poor order.<sup>179</sup> Regarding rent arrears, he subsequently told the council

There are 237 tenants, the appreciable arrears are confined to less than 50 tenants. On these over 300 warning notices and over 100 Notices to Quit were served. The majority of the defaulters are casual workers with numerous dependents; arrears accumulate in periods of unemployment and are paid off when work is obtained.<sup>180</sup>

Most councils took their tenants to court as a last resort since, although an eviction might be secured, there was little prospect of recovering arrears if they moved away. Judges generally allowed those in court a few weeks to show evidence that they were making an effort to pay. In Athy in 1935 James McCormack appeared in court owing £3 13s. 6d. in rent, claiming he '[had] been out of work for the past twelve weeks. [Had] nine in family and [had] been living on

<sup>179</sup> Navan UDC minutes, 4 December 1937 (MCL, NUDC/M/9).

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 1 February 1938.

12s. 6d. Home Help a week.<sup>181</sup> The judge put a stay of six weeks on the eviction. Reports of tenants in arrears simply giving up their properties are occasionally reported in council minutes. Some tenants simply surrendered their houses. In Athy, as a tenant gave up his house the council minutes recorded that 'the Council are personally aware that Mr Darling has no seizeable effects and that it would be throwing good money after bad to proceed further'.<sup>182</sup> Arklow UDC struck off over £300 of arrears in March 1939 'due by tenants [who] vacated Council houses'.<sup>183</sup>

Those confronted with being displaced from their homes and faced with paying higher rents in council houses pursued a number of different strategies. The most obvious form of resistance was to simply refuse to move or to re-occupy other condemned houses if the council followed through on its threat to demolish. By 1945 councils in provincial towns had designated 9,683 houses to be demolished; 8,161 of these were actually demolished.<sup>184</sup> There were a variety of reasons why councils failed to follow through on about 1,500 demolitions. These included the fact that, with the agreement of the local authorities, some were converted into stores and garages, while others could not be demolished without causing structural damage to adjoining buildings. Councils had a significant incentive to ensure that dwellings in Clearance Areas were demolished as the Department linked this to the payment of the two-thirds subsidy for those being rehoused. The Clearance Orders in Kilrush, for which the most comprehensive documentation is available, shows that two years after the passing of the Order relating to the Glen Street area, 13 of the 53 condemned dwellings were still occupied and a further 23 remained to be demolished.<sup>185</sup> In some towns this resulted in the council taking legal action against recalcitrant residents who simply refused to move. Two years after a Clearance Order was passed in Ballina, seven residents of Brook Street were brought to the district court for the second time by the council having failed to vacate their condemned houses.<sup>186</sup> If councils failed to demolish vacated houses quickly they were soon reoccupied. This occurred at Grace Street in Kilrush where the Medical Officer of Health pointed out to the council 'that houses formerly occupied by tenants now residing in [the] new scheme [of houses] are again being re-occupied... great difficulty is anticipated in the removal or displacement of those tenants at a later period'.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> *Kildare Observer*, 26 January 1935.

<sup>182</sup> Athy UDC minutes, 18 April 1932.

<sup>183</sup> Arklow UDC minutes, 10 March 1939.

<sup>184</sup> *Annual report of the department of Local Government and Public Health, 1944-45*, Appendix xxix, pp 210-13.

<sup>185</sup> Kilrush UD, Clearance Order 1939, No. 3 (NAI, ENV/2013/94/1051).

<sup>186</sup> *Western People*, 18 April 1936.

<sup>187</sup> Kilrush UD, Crawford Street Clearance Order 1933 (NAI, ENV/2013/94/1047).

A further strategy adopted by those rehoused in new council housing was to take in lodgers or boarders as a means of supplementing their incomes. Given the shortage of decent accommodation in provincial towns – almost a quarter of the population of the 15 case-study towns were living more than two per room in 1926 – it is not surprising this was a well-established pattern going back to when the first public housing was built in the 1890s. Research on new council housing in Co. Durham towns show that the practice of keeping lodgers was widespread but that councils had a more considered policy and made a clear distinction between lodgers and subletting.<sup>188</sup> Lodgers were single men or women who took their meals with the council tenant's family. Subletting, on the other hand, involved renting out part of the house as a self-contained unit to sub-tenant, usually consisting of a man and wife, possibly with children. Applications to keep lodgers were considered by municipal councils in Durham but there was a clear prohibition on subletting as it more obviously led to overcrowding and could lead to the dwellings' physical deterioration. The data from the Kilrush Clearance Orders shows that the average size of dwelling from which households were displaced was a little over 300 square feet and consisted of two room. The basic four-roomed council house built between 1933 and 1938 averaged 650 square feet and, for those tenants struggling to pay the rent, the additional space represented an obvious opportunity to generate some income. The keeping of lodgers and sub-letting was prohibited by the Department and the prohibition usually featured in tenancy agreements; however, local councils effectively turned a blind eye. At the annual conference of the IAMI in 1934 a Galway Borough councillor explained that that the only way labourers and fishermen could afford rents in new council houses was

by keeping lodgers, making a second scheme of tenements where the corporation were trying to demolish slums. The new slum system was worse than the first, for new knew houses in Galway where the man and wife tenant slept in the kitchen while the bedrooms were occupied by lodgers.<sup>189</sup>

A survey undertaken by Hetton UDC in Durham in 1931 showed that the rate of subletting by council tenants had fallen from 30 percent to 18 percent following a campaign of legal threats by the council.<sup>190</sup> We have no corresponding data for Ireland but evidence of the addresses of applicants for council houses suggest a high level of subletting, at least in some towns. In 1940 the Housing Committee of Drogheda Borough Council discussed the high levels of subletting of council houses as it considered claims for tenancy from those subletting when the council's

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<sup>188</sup> Ryder, 'Council house building in County Durham', pp 258-66.

<sup>189</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 12 September 1934.

<sup>190</sup> Ryder, 'Council house building in County Durham', pp 261-62.

tenant moved away or died.<sup>191</sup> In these circumstances in Tralee a councillor remarked that 'nearly every house there is sublet and we know it only too well to our cost'.<sup>192</sup> The previous year, when granting tenancies to 84 houses at Hardmans Gardens, 12 were let to applicants with addresses in existing council houses.<sup>193</sup>

Perhaps the most dramatic example of opposition and resistance to a Clearance Order occurred in Listowel where the residents affected were supported by the council which refuted its own Order. The issue was entangled with the rejection by the post-1934 council of the loans undertaken by the previous council.<sup>194</sup> These included loans of £34,000 for a proposed 104-house scheme and, linked to the scheme, a Clearance Order that provided for the demolition of 127 houses, many of them located at Convent Lane, shown in Figure 6.10. The Clearance Order became a key issue in the local elections of June 1934 and a majority of the new councillors, although they confirmed the Order in September, subsequently became aligned with the Listowel Citizens' Defence Committee who opposed the Order and whose agenda was the refutation of the council's loans. The evidence presented to the public inquiry linked to the Order held in January 1935 echoed in every detail that given in Kilrush. The residents expressed satisfaction with their dwellings whereas the Medical Officer of Health and the council's engineer characterized them as small, dark and often damp houses with no sanitation.<sup>195</sup> The town clerk, however, provided very ambiguous evidence and implied that the rates would have to be raised substantially to subsidise the housing scheme and 'that this would be a very serious matter for the ratepayers'.<sup>196</sup> This concern regarding an increase in the rates was the issue that principally exercised the Citizens' Defence Committee, but it certainly garnered additional support by its rejection of the new housing scheme and the associated 'eviction of 100 unwilling families'.<sup>197</sup> The council was dissolved following a public inquiry in July 1935 and after protracted legal proceedings regarding the legitimacy of the pre-1934 council and the loans it incurred, the new housing scheme, called O'Connell Avenue, was eventually opened by O'Kelly in 1937. What

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<sup>191</sup> Drogheda Housing Sub-Committee minutes, 2 September 1940.

<sup>192</sup> *Kerryman*, 17 October 1936.

<sup>193</sup> Drogheda Corporation minutes, 18 April 1939. It seems reasonable to assume these were sub-tenants as the Corporation had instituted a prohibition on granting transfers to its tenants.

<sup>194</sup> The history of Listowel UDC in the 1920s is an unedifying one. Prior to the 1928 local elections a proposal to develop a water supply from Lacca, about four miles southeast of the town, was adopted by the council. Some councillors resigned in protest at the proposal which was widely regarded as technically unfeasible. In the 1928 local elections to Listowel UDC there were no nominations and the three outgoing councillors (all others having been disqualified or resigned) were declared elected. Subsequently the Lacca water scheme proved unsuccessful.

<sup>195</sup> *Kerryman*, 19 January 1935.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>197</sup> *Kerryman*, 20 April 1935.

events in Listowel ultimately exposed was the fragile nature of the pact between the Department's policy of rehousing those in the poorest dwellings and the ratepayers' willingness to see their council commit to additional debt and expenditure. In towns across the country where Clearance Orders were executed, and households displaced and rehoused, the role of the council was critical. Apart from managing the process, they acted as its promoter and pushed through measures that elicited varying levels of opposition. In Listowel, where the council abandoned this role, an unlikely alliance of ratepayers and the poorest households in the Clearance Area was formed. Circumstances in Listowel were a highly unusual mix: the pre-1934 council's management of its financial affairs had been inept and the ratepayers were faced with a level of rates of over 30 shillings in the pound, and not unconnected with this, the town was unique for its size in having failed to build any council housing prior to 1932.<sup>198</sup>

**Figure 6.10**

**Convent Lane, Listowel**



Source: *Listowel Connection*,  
<http://listowelconnection.blogspot.ie/2015/11/christmas-knitting-hurleys-of-convent.html> [accessed 13 May 2016]

An approach councils might have adopted to the problem of unaffordable rents for those displaced from Clearance areas was the introduction of differential rents. Philip Monahan, Cork's city manager, introduced such a scheme in 1934, whereby rents were set based on the

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<sup>198</sup> The council's application for a loan to build fifteen houses was turned down by the National Bank in 1925 as reported in *The Kerryman* of 3 October 1925.

household's ability to pay. Monahan argued that that it would allow local authorities to promote social mixing 'by letting dwellings to households of varying incomes adjacent to one another'.<sup>199</sup> The terms in which he justified the policy suggested a view of public housing that went beyond a mere clearing of the slums and provision for the poorest groups in society – 'the larger housing schemes should be peopled by a characteristic sample of the working class community including a reasonable proportion of the well-to-do and poor'.<sup>200</sup> Monahan recommended the introduction of differential rents in Dublin when appearing as a witness before the Dublin Housing Inquiry of 1939-43 and, after some hesitation, Dublin Corporation introduced the scheme in 1945.<sup>201</sup> The main difficulty in introducing differential rents in provincial towns was the insufficient number of number of tenants who could afford to pay anything approaching economic rents. Without a reasonable number of such tenants, who would effectively subsidise the lower rents of those on lower incomes, the system would require higher subsidies from ratepayers. Through the 1950s the system was adopted on a country-wide basis as living standards rose and state subsidies for public housing were further increased. Much of what has been described above describes the problematic aspects of the demolition of dwellings in Clearance Areas and the rehousing of those displaced. This, however, is but part of the picture. Minister O'Kelly's standard speech at the opening of new council schemes, describing beautiful, spacious homes in airy surroundings, may have gilded the lily somewhat, but the overwhelming evidence is that these houses were in great demand. For households with a regular wage-earner the rents of four or five shillings were not financially crippling.

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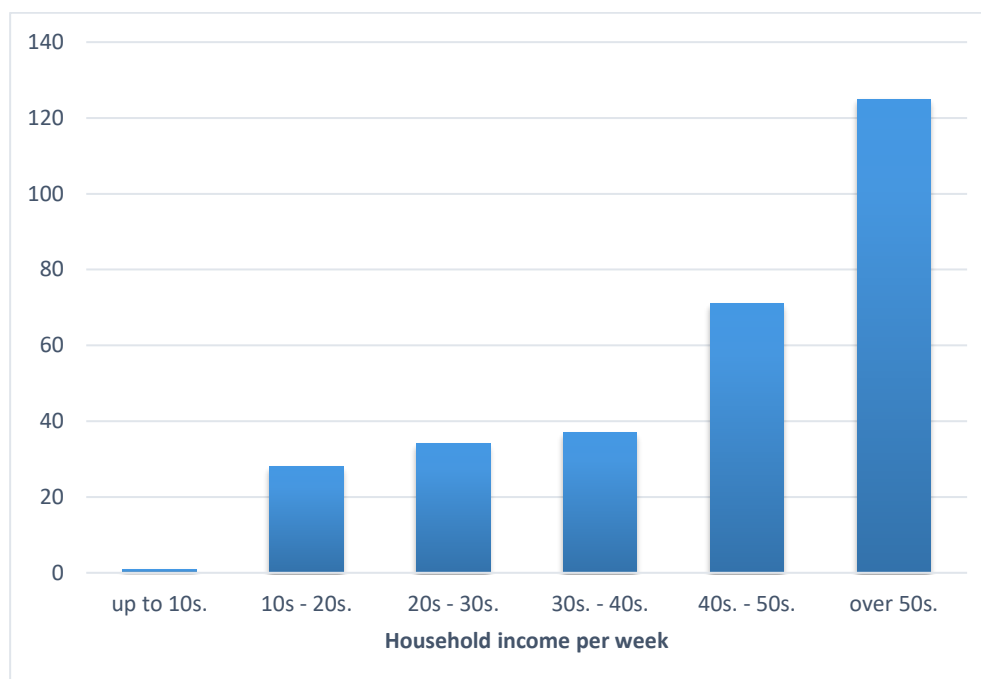
<sup>199</sup> O'Connell, *The State and Housing in Ireland*, p. 36.

<sup>200</sup> Quoted in Aodh Quinlivan, *Philip Monahan- A Man Apart: The Life and Times of Ireland's First Local Authority Manager* (Dublin, 2006), p. 145. The introduction of an on-going means testing of tenants' income could cause resentment, as shown in Finnigan's work on Leeds (Finnigan, 'Council housing in Leeds, 1919-1939', pp 114-20). In fact the issue caused a political storm in the city which damaged the Labour Party which had introduced differential rents. The manner in which the scheme was implemented, requiring weekly returns of income and expenditure on the part of tenants, caused huge resentment.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

**Figure 6.11**

**Income of 296 households applying for council housing in Drogheda, 1934-35**



*Source: Louth County Archives, DBC/HSG/001/005/001 and DBC/HSG/001/009/009*

Data from Drogheda, reproduced in Appendix 13, shows that the average income of 296 households applying for council housing in 1934 and 1935 was just under 50 shillings a week. The income distribution shown in Figure 6.11 is entirely different from that in the Kilrush Clearance Areas with two-thirds earning more than 40s. a week compared to only 2.5 percent in Kilrush.<sup>202</sup> All 296 households were living in dwellings condemned by the Medical Officer of Health and of the 293 households for which data is available, 180 (or 62 percent) were living in overcrowded conditions of more than two per room. Drogheda, therefore, had a housing crisis that was not as directly related to household poverty and the Corporation's building programme was meeting a significant pent-up demand. Just how significant that demand was is reflected in the number of applicants for new schemes. The 296 households documented in Appendix 13 relate to 163 applicants for 40 houses at Platten Road and 133 applicants for 34 houses at The Mell, subsequently named St Joseph's Terrace. The archives contain the names of 31 of the 34 successful applicants for the St Joseph's Terrace houses.<sup>203</sup> Ten of these lived in single rooms and the remaining 21 in two rooms; all but three lived in overcrowded conditions. 18 of the 31

<sup>202</sup> An important difference between the two datasets is that the Drogheda data relates to households applying for a council house whereas the Kilrush data is for all households in the Clearance Areas, including those who considered themselves unable to afford to move. However, the high number of households in Drogheda, with incomes of over 40 shillings a week is significant.

<sup>203</sup> Drogheda Corporation minutes, 5 March 1935.

households were six or more in size, with one family of nine living in two rooms and another of ten. It is also significant that the average income of the 31 successful applicants at 42s. 6d. a week was below that of the average of all 133 applicants at 49s. 8d. This suggests that the corporation did not discriminate in favour of more solvent applicants which would have been a feature of local authority policy before 1932.

**Table 6.3**

**Number of applicants for Corporation housing schemes in Drogheda, 1932-37**

Housing scheme	Date	No. of houses	No. of applicants
Hardmans Garden	Oct-32	12	73
Scarlet St & Slade St	Jan-34	16	164
Gallows Lane	Nov-37	18	>100
Platten Road	Oct-35	40	163
St Joseph's Tce	Apr-35	34	133

*Source: Drogheda Corporation minutes; minutes of Drogheda Corporation Housing Committee*

Table 6.3 provides an overview of the level of demand for houses built by the Corporation in Drogheda and leaves little doubt that obtaining a tenancy was highly desirable. Drogheda did not declare any Clearance Areas and operated its own system of allocating houses, but in other towns it is more difficult to judge the level of demand for council houses since most were allocated to those being rehoused at the behest of Clearance Orders. Reference to what the *Ballina Herald* in 1934 called the ‘hunger for houses’ has been made above, with sixty people invading a council meeting demanding houses.<sup>204</sup> However, most of the evidence indicating high demand related to the numbers applying once a council house became vacant. This was certainly the case in Drogheda where there were at least ten applicants for each house that became vacant in Bredin Street, Trinity Gardens and John Boyle O’Reilly Terrace in the late 1930s and early 1940s.<sup>205</sup> A fairly typical example of the continuing shortage of decent accommodation was documented in *The Kerryman* in October 1936 where the Sanitary Inspector’s report into the living conditions of the twelve applicants for a vacant house at Caherina was discussed by the council.<sup>206</sup> The 12 families consisted of 12 couples and 45 children, all living in condemned dwellings, five of which consisted of just one room. However increased levels of emigration to Britain during World War II appears to have resulted in council house vacancies. This was certainly the case in Athy where the council was obliged to adopt a policy whereby

<sup>204</sup> *Ballina Herald*, 22 September 1934.

<sup>205</sup> Drogheda Corporation Housing Committee minutes.

<sup>206</sup> *Kerryman*, 17 October 1936.



all tenants of Council houses leaving the country must hand up keys of houses to cottage rent collector and under no circumstances will tenants will allowed to hand over keys to any person other than the rent collector.<sup>207</sup>

Vacant houses were much sought after through these years with at least six applicants for each. Sub-tenants, who were quite numerous in the town, often proposed paying off any outstanding rent arrears that their departing landlords had incurred if they themselves were granted tenancy. Although the council turned a blind eye to subletting, it insisted that keys were returned to the council when the tenant departed.<sup>208</sup> The annual report of DLGPH for 1944-45 reported that councils in the 74 provincial towns had 17,270 houses tenanted with only 14 vacant. This level of occupancy seems quite unlikely but is probably reasonably accurate

In the case of Tralee, described above, we do not hear the voices of the applicants but these are recorded in some council archives. In Fermoy in 1934, ten householders in Clancy Street wrote to the council protesting at the delay in allocating them houses in its new scheme at Walker's Hill. They asked

would you kindly instruct your inspector, Mr Bloomer, to visit this area, and see the terrible conditions under which we try to bring up families? John Geo Ryan has a wife and six children in one insanitary and dirty room. Kinsella's case is worse. 9 of various ages being forced to sleep in a single room.<sup>209</sup>

An equally poignant letter from seven residents of Marsh Road in Drogheda to Seán T. O'Kelly, reproduced in Appendix 15, describes their wretched conditions and ask that they be considered for tenancies at the new Platten Road scheme. The letter complains that two small families had already been awarded tenancies. It has been possible to source details on 31 of the successful applicants (which does not include the letter writer) and the average size of these households is just over five. Nineteen of the 31 households (61 per cent) were living in overcrowded conditions.

Overall, 8,082 houses were condemned and demolished in these towns between 1932 and 1945, representing almost one in eight of the housing stock. Most of this occurred between 1934 and 1939 and represents a dramatic intervention on the part of the state into the lives of thousands of households and into built environment of dozens of towns. The evidence from the Kilrush inquiries provides an insight into the clash of perspectives of, on the one hand, the agents of the state and the local authority and, on the other, many of the residents who claimed

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<sup>207</sup> Athy UDC minutes, 30 July 1941.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 20 May 1940.

<sup>209</sup> Housing Supply Schemes and Maintenance, 1899-1950 (CCA, CCCA/UDC/FY, Box 35).

their dwellings were perfectly habitable. The criteria used to determine which dwellings should be condemned were in some senses arbitrary and clearly informed by a narrow sanitary view of human welfare. However, when Mr Hogan, the LGB inspector reviewed the housing in Hector Street, Crofton Street and Pound Street in June 1939, having heard the evidence presented to the inquiry, he found leaky roofs, damp floors, bulging walls and a general air of dilapidation. It is clear the new houses at Pella Road offered much improved material conditions for those who could afford the rents of 4s. per week. But because the slum clearance programme in Kilrush and elsewhere was conceived as a solution to a sanitary problem it was blinkered to the wider welfare issues linked to the poverty of many of those being re-housed. The benevolence dispensed by the state was one defined by the state's own terms.

## Chapter 7

### An Overview

The headline on the front page of the *Irish Press* on 22 August 1939 read 'German Peace Pact with Russia' as Europe braced itself for war. Inside the paper there was extensive coverage of O'Kelly's latest opening of a housing scheme, this time in Drogheda.<sup>1</sup> It would be one of the last of dozens of similar events at which he had presided since taking charge of DLGPH in 1932. In the cabinet reshuffle in September he was appointed Minister for Finance. His speech at Drogheda, where he was made a freeman of the town, contained many of the elements that had informed Fianna Fáil and his own approach to the housing programme over the preceding seven years. He began by making his customary declaration that 'as far as this Government is concerned, nothing will be left undone to see that money is made available to fulfil the duty and Christian obligation of providing decent accommodation for those still living in insanitary conditions'.<sup>2</sup> By 1939 this assertion rang considerably less true than it had four or five years previously when O'Kelly had displayed ingenuity in outmanoeuvring Finance to secure funding for the housing programme. In 1937 he had successfully secured an increased level of housing loan subsidies to address the problem of inflation in building costs. But Finance's resolve was stiffening and at the end of that year an internal memo claimed that 'there is no parallel in any other country to the assistance afforded by the government of the Saorstát in the matter of housing. The Department of Finance strongly maintains that the time has arrived when the burden on the Exchequer should be eased'.<sup>3</sup> O'Kelly's speech, though, soared to a level well above mere consideration of finance. He went on to remark on Oliver Plunkett's links with Drogheda and recalled the forced transportations to Connacht in the mid-seventeenth century. Now, he added, 'an Irish Government ... was reversing the course of history and bringing back to the eastern portion of the country ... many people living in congested areas on the western seaboard'.<sup>4</sup> Finally, Drogheda's location close to the border provided an opportunity to condemn partition as 'a crime against Ireland'. The speech set the provision of housing for the urban working class in the context of Fianna Fáil's wider political programme of land redistribution and, rhetorically at least, reunification of the national territory. Dooley makes

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<sup>1</sup> The opening ceremony is referred to in Chapter 6 in the context of the Corporation's failure to claim the two-thirds loan subsidies from the Department.

<sup>2</sup> *Irish Press*, 22 August 1939.

<sup>3</sup> Housing and Labourers Act 1937 (NAI, FIN S 10341).

<sup>4</sup> *Irish Press*, 22 August 1939.

clear the intensely political nature of the land redistribution programme that was operated through the Land Commission in the 1930s.<sup>5</sup> The Land Act of 1933 completely reset the scale of what might be achieved in terms of land redistribution in much the same way that the 1932 Housing Act opened up the possibility of rehousing those in substandard housing in urban Ireland.<sup>6</sup> Fianna Fáil, as Dooley puts it, ‘was creating a power base in rural communities that was fundamentally based on numerical strength’. The scale of the housing programme in provincial towns in the 1930s, driven by O’Kelly in DLGPH, offered parallel opportunities.

**Figure 7.1**

**Opening of the Platten Road housing scheme in Drogheda by Seán T. O’Kelly, August 1939**



*Source: Irish Press, 22 August 1939*

Table 7.1 provides an overview of the three main phases of public housing provision in 74 provincial towns between 1890 and 1945. The total of 18,548 houses represented just over a quarter of the entire stock of private dwellings in these towns. In 1945 17,270 of these were let to council tenants. The building programme up to 1922 is obviously dwarfed by what was undertaken in the 1930s, but, as has been outlined in Chapter 3, it was still remarkable given the capacity of local authorities, the weak political position of the urban working class, and the resistance on the part of Westminster to countenancing housing subsidies. When viewed in a comparative perspective the programme was even more exceptional in that it constituted a rate

<sup>5</sup> Dooley, *The land for the people*, pp 99-131.

<sup>6</sup> Almost 26,000 households were allocated land between 1933 and 1937 (Dooley, *Land for the people*, p.107).

of public housing provision five times greater than in urban Britain. About 24,000 houses and flats were built by local authorities in Britain prior to 1914, including a small number of rural cottages.<sup>7</sup> The urban population of Britain in 1911 was 28,000,000, giving a rate of less than one house per thousand. With a population of less than 350,000 in this period, councils in Irish provincial towns built about 2,800 houses, giving a rate of 7.5 per thousand.<sup>8</sup> The output was much less remarkable between 1922 and 1932, as the new state grappled with the aftermath of the War of Independence and the Civil War. The Cumann na nGaedheal government was ideologically adverse to the kind of spending that would support a public housing programme and, in any case, viewed public housing as a poor alternative to expanded home ownership. Although it is difficult to be definitive about the precise figures, we can say that most of the houses built in provincial towns under the £1 million scheme and the 1924 and 1925 Housing Acts were sold. The significance of the new building programme under the 1932 Housing Act compared to that which preceded it is readily apparent from Table 7.1, with the vast bulk of the 12,505 houses completed in the seven year period between 1933 and 1940.

**Table 7.1**

**Houses built by municipal authorities in Irish provincial towns, 1890-1945**

Phase	Houses
1890-1922	3,439
1922-1932	2,604
1932-1945	12,505
<u>Total</u>	<u>18,548</u>

*Source: Annual reports of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1929-30, 1944-45*

Coming after the Emergency, the 1946 census provides much valuable information on housing conditions in towns which had not been collected in previous censuses. This information is bundled together in the section entitled 'Social amenities' in the Explanatory Notes to Volume 4, and includes 'information relating to the nature of the occupancy of the dwelling, the amount of rent if the dwelling were rented and also the nature of the water supply and the sanitary facilities'.<sup>9</sup> The collection of this data reflected a new focus on issues of tenure and also on housing conditions that went beyond the simple question of density of occupation and

<sup>7</sup> S. Merrett, *State Housing in Britain* (London, 1979), p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to be definitive about exactly how many houses were built in Irish towns prior to the war as the LGB published the amount of loans advanced rather than the number of house completions on an annual basis.

<sup>9</sup> *Ireland, Census of Population 1946*, Vol. IV, p. viii.

overcrowding. At the same time, though, the volume excludes details on occupancy per room at town level which had been a feature of both the 1926 and 1936 published census returns. Dublin and Dun Laoghaire Boroughs were an exception in 1946 and this, perhaps, reflects thinking at government level that the Dublin housing crisis, as revealed by the report of the Dublin Housing Inquiry in 1943, must now take precedence over the housing question in provincial towns. This may well have been the thinking in 1944-45 when the census was being planned, but any suggestion that the data it collected actually impacted on housing policy can be easily dismissed as the volume on housing in 1946 was not published until 1954!

The data presented in Appendix 16 shows that almost one in four of all private dwellings in Irish provincial towns in 1945 were occupied by tenants of municipal authorities. A further 1,100 houses built by councils had been sold or were being purchased on instalment systems. 16 per cent of the housing stock consisted of council houses built in the decade after 1932. The data in the Appendix also illustrates the very significant variations across towns regarding provision. This ranged from Ballina and Tuam, where 46 per cent of the stock of private dwellings in the mid-1940s were rented from their local authorities, to Listowel (15 per cent) and Ennis (14 per cent). Our detailed examination of individual towns showed that local factors are key to explaining this variation. In Tuam, for example, the Town Commissioners responded, albeit not very adroitly, to the increased demand for housing linked to the new Sugar Beet factory by building two large schemes. In Ballina a council dominated by Fianna Fáil and with Labour support availed of the mutually beneficial influence of cabinet minister, and native of the town, Rutledge. For those towns that were less pro-active, the reason often lay in local institutional weakness with the council's capacity undermined by maladministration. Listowel UDC, as we have seen, was riven by divisions and after the 1934 local elections disowned its own debts. Ennis UDC was dissolved in 1926 following an inquiry held the previous year which found it guilty of 'financial imbecility'.<sup>10</sup> A commissioner was appointed to administer the town and when his term ended in 1929 and elections to the council were scheduled, there were no nominations. In the weeks preceding the 1934 local elections it was reported that 'businessmen and large ratepayers in Ennis are not in favour of an Urban Council'. Subsequently Fianna Fáil (6) and Labour (4) won ten of the twelve seats in the election, one in which no ratepayer or Fine Gael candidate stood, but the council that emerged proved less than competent in acquiring sites for houses or in implementing the provisions of the housing legislation.

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<sup>10</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 30 March 1926.

A further factor influencing the capacity of municipal authorities to build was their size. We would expect larger towns to build more houses and this is evident from Figure 7.2. This charts the size of towns, as measured by the population in private dwellings in 1926, against the number of houses let by their councils. As expected, the correlation between the two is significant ( $r^2 = 0.7833$ ), but there are some interesting deviations from the trendline. Galway, Cobh and Ennis built fewer council houses than might be expected for their size. In the case of Galway, its council promoted grants for private building to a much greater extent than in other large towns. In Galway 582 houses were built with the assistance of grants totalling almost £30,000 between 1932 and 1940, when funding for private house building in towns was phased out. This compared to a total of 419 council houses built under the 1932 Act. Galway was one of the few larger towns where Fianna Fáil, even with the addition of Labour councillors, remained in a minority position through the 1930s. Cumann na nGaedheal TD, Mairtín Mór McDonagh, served as chairman for most of the period between 1927 and 1934, and in the 1934 local elections Fianna Fáil won only 8 of 24 seats. The dominant block of councillors were linked to the chamber of commerce, and, although standing as independents, most were linked to Cumann na nGaedheal/Fine Gael. Through these years in the Dáil Fine Gael TDs consistently argued the case for more generous grants for private house building, and went so far as to suggest that the higher level of activity in council-house building was driving up costs for private builders.<sup>11</sup> Cobh was a town in decline in the 1920s and 1930s with the population falling by 12 per cent between 1926 and 1946. The naval facilities, which had been the backbone of the economy of the town before and during World War I, were gradually scaled back. In the early years of the century the town's housing stock had benefited from the building of about 100 dwellings by the Queenstown Naval Dwellings Co. Ltd.<sup>12</sup> Based on the evidence of the 1926 census Cobh, at 16 per cent, had the lowest proportion of the population living more than two per room of any medium-sized provincial town so, ostensibly, the council was under less pressure to build. The travails of Ennis UDC have been described above. Its dissolution in 1926, and the array of powerful interests that opposed its re-establishment in 1934, point to its

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, *Dail Debates*, 19 July 1934, Vol. 53, No. 14. Richard Mulcahy, who was Fine Gael spokesman on Local Government and Public Health during much of this period, regularly interrogated O'Kelly regarding the funding of both public and private housing. In this debate he was particularly exercised about the low level of private house building in towns and cities compared to the years before 1932 when Cumann na nGaedheal were in power. One possible explanation is that councils building 'better class houses' and availing of the one-third loan subsidy were, to some extent, suppressing demand for loans for private building.

<sup>12</sup> Dictionary of Irish Architects 1720-1940, W.H. Hill, [http://www.dia.ie/works/view/8221/building/CO.+CORK,+COBH,+HOUSES+\(006\)](http://www.dia.ie/works/view/8221/building/CO.+CORK,+COBH,+HOUSES+(006)) [accessed 2 July 2016].

inherent weakness. At the end of 1936 it invited tenders for the building of 157 houses,<sup>13</sup> but only 60 were built over the next nine years. Extensive plans for the demolition of 213 condemned houses were drawn up but, ultimately, only 57 were demolished.

Figure 7.2 shows that Drogheda was one of the more significant 'over achievers' in terms of public housing provision, and many of the reasons have been rehearsed above, including the fact that it was the town's principal landowner. The very substantial building programme in Ballina stands out, as do the extensive schemes built in Tuam built, largely, to accommodate works in the new Sugar Beet factory. The case of Sligo is more difficult to categorise. Sligo Corporation had been singularly inactive for a town of its size in building public housing prior to 1922, with only thirty dwellings constructed. This represented a rate of 3.5 per 1,000, compared to 35.6 per thousand for Longford.<sup>14</sup> The Corporation was politically quite divided after the 1934 local elections with Capt. Jenks, a former member of William Redmond's National League Party, defeated in the contest for mayor by Michael Nevin of Fianna Fáil following a tied vote. Council meetings were regularly interrupted by crowds demanding work and better housing, reflecting a strain of radical politics in the town. In 1936 the mayoralty was shared by Labour and Independent Republican candidates following a tied vote. The *Irish Press* reported that

Hundreds of young men forced their way into the Chamber, packed the passages to such an extent that those inside were virtually imprisoned. The intruders indulged in free abuse of several members, sang lustily the "Marseillaise", "Red Flag", "Old Faithful", and other airs.<sup>15</sup>

Altogether, Sligo Corporation built almost 800 houses between 1932 and 1945 and was one of the few municipal authorities after the outbreak of war, with over 300 houses completed between 1940 and 1945.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Irish Press*, 23 November 1936.

<sup>14</sup> *Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1929-30*, Appendix xxix, pp 216-19.

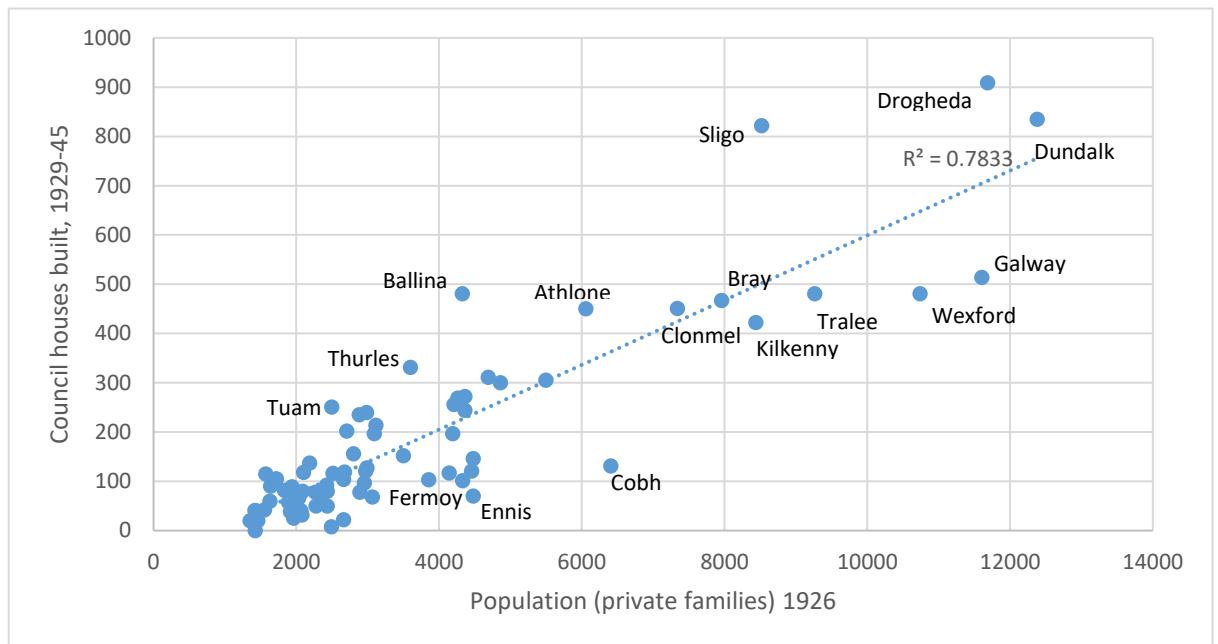
<sup>15</sup> *Irish Press*, 1 July 1936.

<sup>16</sup> *Annual reports of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1940-45*.



Figure 7.2

Size of towns and number of council houses let in the mid-1940s



Source: *Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health 1944-45 and 1926 Census of Population*

A further aspect of the relationship between the size of town and the number of council houses built is the manner in which municipal authorities responded to a growing population, as in the case of Tuam, and the possibility that extensive provision of housing helped curb emigration or actually attracted migrants into towns. The population of Ballina, for example, grew by 24 per cent between 1926 and 1946, during which time the urban council built almost 500 houses. At the same time the numbers gainfully employed in the town grew by just 16 per cent.<sup>17</sup> This could also be the case in Drogheda where the population grew by almost a quarter between 1926 and 1946. In this case, though, as we have seen, demand for housing remained acute and the corporation estimated that a further 700 houses were required at the end of World War II.<sup>18</sup> It

<sup>17</sup> What is particularly significant in Ballina is the increase in the number of children between 1926 and 1946. As per the published census returns in 1926 there were 1,229 children under the age of 12; in 1946 there were 1,897 under the age of 14. This suggests higher levels of family formation, either through reduced out-migration or in-migration of young adults. Either would be facilitated by the availability of improved housing.

<sup>18</sup> Department of Local Government, *Housing: A review of past operations and future requirements (Dublin, 1947)*, Appendix A.

is also worth noting that the number of those ‘gainfully employed’ in the town increased from 5,154 in 1926 to 6,425, or by 24 per cent.<sup>19</sup>

We can obtain another perspective on the performance of municipal authorities in providing public housing in the 1930s by benchmarking the numbers of houses built between 1929 and 1945 against the returns they made as part of the 1929 housing needs survey. 66 of the 74 provincial towns made returns in 1929 and, as discussed in Chapter 4, some councils took the exercise more seriously than others. Figure 7.3 shows some of the ‘over-performing’ and ‘under-performing’ towns in terms of houses built in 1929-45 relative to the 1929 returns. Navan UDC built almost twice as many dwellings as it anticipated were required while, at the other end of the spectrum, Longford UDC built less than half of its anticipated needs. The chart reveals as much about how councils approached the survey as it does about their propensity to build. Navan UDC’s ‘over performance’ relates to the fact it identified a requirement for only 75 houses in 1929 despite the fact that 22 per cent (696 people) of its population lived in conditions of more than two per room in 1926, with 78 households living in overcrowded dwellings of one to three rooms.<sup>20</sup> Enniscorthy UDC also exceeded the housing needs identified in 1929, again, largely due to underestimating the figure in the survey. Only 57 houses were defined as ‘unfit’ in its survey,<sup>21</sup> but during the 1930s 369 were condemned and marked for demolition. The 1932 Housing Act obviously changed perceptions of what was possible in terms of housing without placing a politically unacceptable burden on the rates. In both these towns, as in many others, Fianna Fáil, sometimes in combination with Labour, gained control of the councils at the 1934 local elections. The result was a stronger political coincidence of interests of such councils and Fianna Fáil-led governments through the 1930s, and a stronger likelihood that government housing policy would be viewed positively at the local level. Conversely, the dominance of Fianna Fáil and Labour in municipal authorities after 1934 reduced the influence of the larger ratepayers on the councils, who were either members of Cumann na nGaedheal or were aligned with the party.

Of the six biggest ‘under-performers’, Fianna Fáil/Labour controlled only two – Tralee and Nenagh. Tralee UDC’s response to the 1929 survey appears to have been somewhat perfunctory and was returned as a round figure of 1,000 houses. Monaghan’s ‘under-performance’ was related, at least in part, to its council’s calculation that 240 houses were

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<sup>19</sup> *Census of Population of Ireland 1926*, Vol. 2, Table 7, *Census of Population of Ireland 1946*, Vol. 2, Table 8B.

<sup>20</sup> *Census of Population of Ireland 1926*, Vol. 4, Table 16.

<sup>21</sup> *Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health 1929-30*, Appendix xxvii, pp 209-12.

required in 1929. Half of these were, somewhat optimistically, allocated 'to meet anticipated deficiencies arising from industrial development'.<sup>22</sup> The Council remained solidly Cumann na nGaedheal/ Fine Gael in composition throughout the period and, as discussed in Chapter 6, showed itself highly sensitive to the ratepayers' interests and displayed a marked reluctance to subsidise council rents from the rates.<sup>23</sup> Like Tralee, Carlow UDC's relative 'under-performance' partly reflected the inflated returns it supplied for the 1929 survey. With a population of just under 5,500 living in private households in the town in 1926, its projected requirement for 704 new houses would have involved either rehousing more than half the town's population - or else the council anticipated spectacular growth. In 1926 Carlow ranked ninth of the 74 towns in terms of overcrowding with just over 30 per cent of its population living more than two to a room.<sup>24</sup> Although the council built just over 300 houses between 1929 and 1945 it still had 19 per cent of its population living in overcrowded conditions in 1946.<sup>25</sup> Longford's chronic financial difficulties have been discussed above and resulted in the council being dissolved in 1935.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

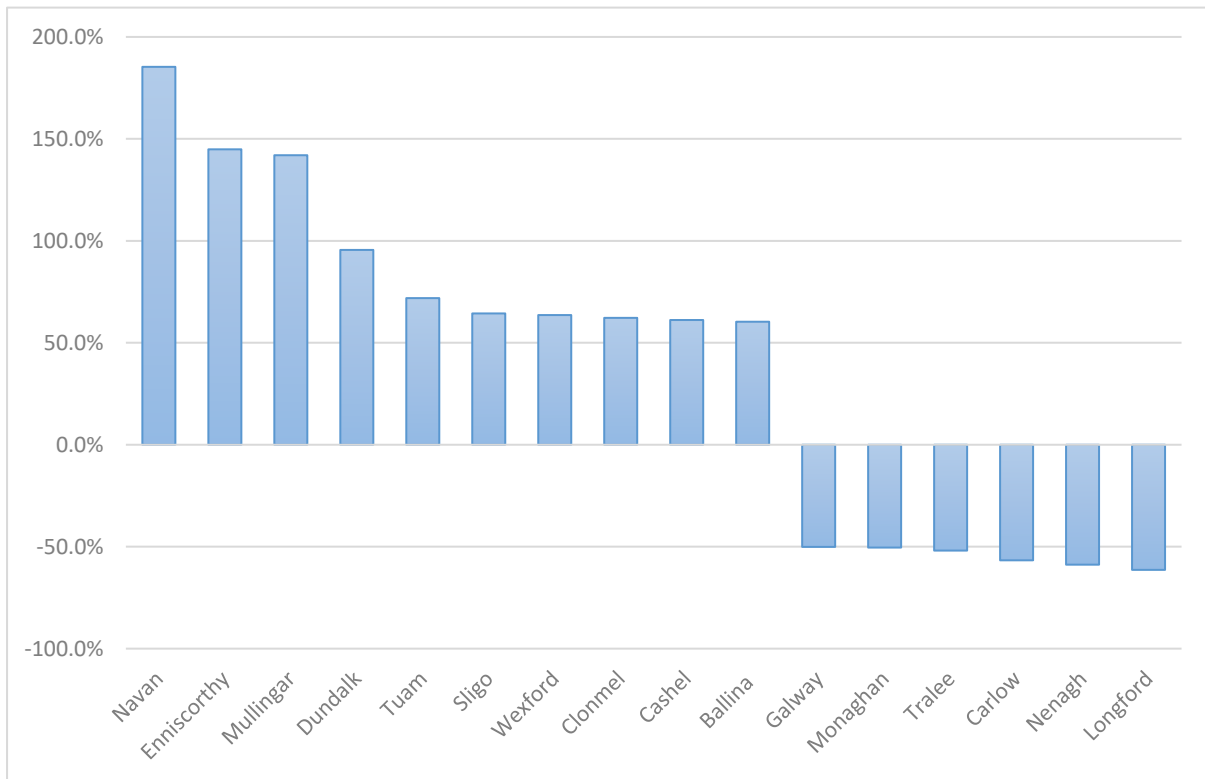
<sup>23</sup> See, for example, *Anglo-Celt*, 24 November 1934 which reported on a discussion at a Monaghan UDC meeting where councillors expressed the view that it was not a 'philanthropic body'.

<sup>24</sup> *Census of Population 1926*, Vol. 4, Table 16.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., Table 21.

**Figure 7.3**

**Performance of some provincial towns in meeting housing needs identified in 1929 survey,  
1929-45**



Source: *Annual reports of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1929-30, 1944-45*

In 1943 the DLGPH instructed local authorities to conduct a housing needs survey, anticipating the end of World War II. The annual report of the Department for 1943-44 indicated a preliminary estimate that ‘not less than 53,000 [new] houses are required to meet the present housing needs’.<sup>26</sup> The following year’s report put the figure at ‘over 60,000’.<sup>27</sup> By this stage building by councils in provincial towns had virtually ground to a halt due to the lack of essential supplies; only 135 houses were built by councils in these towns in the year ending 31 March 1945.<sup>28</sup> The full results of the survey were not published until 1947 but they fed into a White Paper published in 1945 entitled *The Post-War Building Programme*, which aimed to quantify the scale of overall construction required in the post-war years. £41 million of the total of £73 million was notionally allocated to housing.<sup>29</sup> When the geographical breakdown of housing

<sup>26</sup> *Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health 1943-44*, p. 83.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 1944-45, p. 68.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix xxvii.

<sup>29</sup> Department of Industry and Commerce, *The Post-war Building Programme* (Dublin, 1945), p. 4.

needs was published in 1948 it showed a total requirement of 60,848, of which 45,411 related to urban areas. Dublin Co. Borough accounted for 23,346. These figures certainly reflected the progress made in rural areas in the preceding fifteen years and the corresponding lack of progress in Dublin. Regarding provincial towns, the survey identified a total of 12,922 as being required, consisting of 7,533 to replace sub-standard dwellings and the balance of 5,389 to address overcrowding.<sup>30</sup> Figure 7.4 shows the scale of public housing completed between 1932 and 1945 by Dublin Corporation, by the municipal authorities of Cork, Limerick and Waterford and in provincial towns relative to housing needs in the mid-1940s. Overall, it suggests that the 1930s housing programme was more successful in addressing housing needs in provincial towns than in Dublin or other cities. Dublin Corporation built 13,333 dwellings between 1932 and 1945 but the housing needs survey identified over 23,000 as still being required. On the other hand, 12,504 were built in provincial towns and just under 13,000 were required. The target, of course, was more challenging for Dublin Corporation as the population of the city grew by 28 per cent, or over 100,000, between 1926 and 1946 while that of provincial towns increased by just 9 percent, or 28,000.

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<sup>30</sup> Department of Local Government, *Housing: A review of past operations and future requirements* (Dublin, 1948), Appendix A.

**Figure 7.4**

**Houses built by municipal authorities in 1932-45 and housing needs identified in mid-1940s survey**

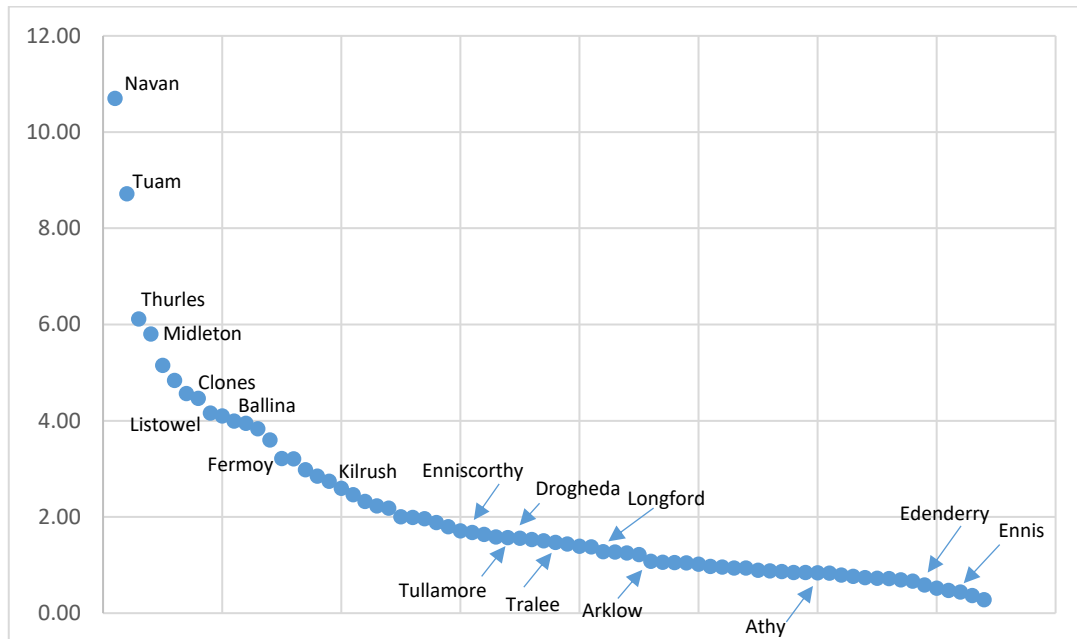


*Source: Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health 1944-45 and Housing: A review of past operations and future requirements (Dublin, 1947).*

Given that, overall, the mid-1940s survey identified a need for about 13,000 new dwellings in provincial towns, the question arises at the individual town level as to how public housing provision in the preceding decades related to housing needs at the end of the period. Across the 74 towns, the ratio of houses built in 1929-45 to houses required in 1945 was 1.43 (i.e. 18,527/12,922). Towns with a ratio of above 1.43 were more proactive than average in addressing the need for housing while those scoring less than 1.43 were less proactive. Figure 7.5 indicates where towns were located on this scale.

Figure 7.5

Ratio of houses built by municipal authorities 1890-1945 to housing needs in mid-1940s



Source: *Annual reports of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1929-30 to 1944-45 and Housing: A review of past operations and future requirements (Dublin, 1947)*

The towns that deviate from the mean score are of particular interest. For example, Tuam's ratio is 8.71 having built 251 houses between 1929 and 1945 and identified only 35 additional houses as being required in 1945. By then 37 per cent of the town's housing stock had been built by the Town Commissioners in the preceding sixteen years. At the other end of the spectrum, Ennis scored just 0.44, having built just 70 houses in 1929-45 but reported 400 as being required at the end of the period. Of course the returns made by councils in the mid-1940s were influenced by a number of factors other than 'housing needs', even if we allow this term to be defined by the data published in the 1946 census. Tuam Town Commissioners' experience of their 1930s building programme was a chastening one. The *Tuam Herald* from 1939 onwards featured regular advertisements published by the Commissioners seeking tenants for houses at Farranabox and Tubberjarlath which had been built to accommodate workers at the Sugar Beet factory. As discussed earlier, these schemes proved highly expensive for the Town Commissioners, as much of the work was seasonal and tenants abandoned their houses once the sugar beet season ended. The result was a rise in rent arrears from £129 in

1937 to almost £800 in 1940, most of which had to be written off.<sup>31</sup> Of the 35 new houses the Town Commissioners identified as being required in 1945, 15 were to address overcrowding. However, the 1946 census shows 352 persons living more than two per room in the town, suggesting a certain reluctance on the part of the Commissioners to acknowledge that shortage of accommodation remained a problem.

The apparent success of Navan UDC in addressing the town's housing question (ratio 10.7), with just 30 houses required according to the 1945 survey, partly reflected its extensive building programme between 1929 and the end of the 1930s. At that point 26 per cent of the town's housing stock had been built by the council since 1929. What is equally significant is Navan's position as an 'early adopter' of public housing, ranking second only to Longford in terms of the contribution of pre-1922 council-built dwellings to the 1940s housing stock.<sup>32</sup>

Listowel's relatively lofty position (ratio 4.16) reflects the council's limited ambitions regarding public housing after 1945, reporting that only 25 new houses were required for working class housing, none of these to replace unfit dwellings. With one in six of the town's population still living in overcrowded conditions in 1946, the survey returns were obviously not a realistic assessment of housing needs. Listowel was administered by a commissioner between 1934 and 1942 who insisted on striking a rate of over 30 shillings in the pound to service the council's water scheme and housing debts. Uncontested elections in 1942 returned councillors determined to take a conservative approach towards spending.

Much remained to be done regarding housing conditions in Arklow (ratio 1.05) where almost half the housing stock in 1901 had consisted of third and fourth class houses and was amongst the poorest of any town in the country. Only 136 houses were demolished under the provisions of the 1932 Housing Act, and the 1945 survey identified a requirement for 272 new houses to replace unfit dwellings. In all three phases of public housing provision outlined in Table 7.1 the council had displayed a marked lethargy in addressing housing conditions. Its failure to apply for urban district status until 1909 reflected a reluctance to adopt a rate and its first substantial housing scheme was not completed until 1916. As described above, the Housing Board and government politicians reprimanded the council prior to the 1934 local elections for failing to avail of the provisions of the 1932 Housing Act. The newly elected council, under Fianna

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<sup>31</sup> *Annual reports of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1936-37*, Appendix xxxvii, pp 224-29; *Annual reports of the Department of Local Government and Public Health 1939-40*, Appendix xxv, pp 164-67.

<sup>32</sup> 100 of the 814 private dwellings in Navan in 1946 consisted of houses built by the council prior to 1922. Longford and Fermoy were the only other medium sized / larger provincial towns whose housing stocks were similarly constituted.



Fáil control, built 60 houses in 1935 but progress was slow and the town's major scheme of 124 houses under the Act was not completed until 1944.

Despite building 909 houses between 1929 and 1945, and providing a total of 1,110 houses in all, Drogheda Corporation reported that a further 725 dwellings for the working classes were required as part of the 1945 survey. This reflected both the chronic state of housing conditions in the town stretching back into the nineteenth century, and the town's growing population. Between 1926 and 1946 it rose by over 4,000 or by 24 per cent. When considering the 1929 housing survey, the Corporation undertook to demolish 'old insanitary dwellings' as the new houses were provided.<sup>33</sup> Throughout the 1920s Corporation documents refer to hundreds of 'insanitary hovels' in the town with one report putting the number at 900.<sup>34</sup> But, unique amongst provincial towns as discussed in Chapter 6, the Corporation did not declare any Clearance Areas under the housing legislation and failed to apply for the two-thirds loan subsidies available for the rehousing of those displaced from houses it demolished. Effectively Drogheda Corporation implemented a 'slum clearance' programme independently of the DLGPH and without its direct supervision. The result was that only 381 houses were actually demolished between 1932 and 1945 and, according to the 1945 survey, 500 new dwellings were still required to replace 'unfit housing'.

Perhaps the most notable failure of a municipal authority to avail of the provisions of the Housing Acts to build public housing was Ennis, which in the 1945 survey reported a requirement for 400 working class dwellings, having only built 174 in the preceding fifty years. By coincidence when completing the housing needs survey in 1929, the commissioner administering the town, the council having been dissolved in 1926, calculated that 400 new houses were required. Although the post-1934 council, dominated by Fianna Fáil and Labour, initiated the building of 60 'slum clearance' shortly after the local elections, subsequent plans to build a further 157 houses were shelved. A housing inquiry held in May 1936 connected with this scheme heard that 'many people were living in hovels that were not fit for dogs. In the winter time the River Fergus flowed into adjoining lanes and flooded these hovels, with the result that it was not unusual to see boats being used to bring provisions to these marooned people'.<sup>35</sup> In 1938 the DLGPH refused Ennis UDC's application for a loan of just under £50,000

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<sup>33</sup> Drogheda Corporation minutes, 1 October 1929.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Louth County Archives, DBC/HSG/001/030/001 which includes the report that 'At present there are in Drogheda 906 houses with a poor law valuation ranging from 2s. to £2 and a further 253 with valuations from £2 5s. to £2 15s. Practically all of these houses must be considered as insanitary dwellings.'

<sup>35</sup> *Irish Press*, 16 May 1936.

to fund the 157 house scheme and O’Kelly reported to the Dáil that ‘borrowing for a further housing scheme must be withheld owing to the unsatisfactory financial position of the council. No evidence has ... been submitted to me that steps have been taken by the council to improve the position.’<sup>36</sup> O’Kelly’s comments relate to the consistent unwillingness of the council to set a rate to adequately finance its business. In 1938 the Town Clerk advised that the council set a rate of 36s. 6d. in the pound but they insisted on a lower rate of 26s. 6d.<sup>37</sup> The dispute rumbled on into the 1940s when Ruttledge informed the council that no more borrowing would be sanctioned until an adequate rate was struck.<sup>38</sup> The result of this dispute was that the council effectively reneged on progressing the 157 house scheme it had planned. Interestingly, the council had been quite active in drawing down loans under the Small Dwellings Acquisitions Act, which involved local authorities borrowing funds from the Board of Works or from commercial banks to provide cheap mortgages to those wishing to buy the dwellings they occupied or to build. McManus indicates that the funding of mortgages under this Act represented a significant drain on the resources of Dublin Corporation, while being aligned with government policy to promote home ownership.<sup>39</sup> The commissioner administering Ennis prior to 1934 drew down a loan of £10,000 in 1933 and a further £15,000 was drawn down by the council in 1935 and 1936.<sup>40</sup> The council also provided grants of over £4,500 pounds to 87 private individuals building houses, mostly between 1933 and 1936.<sup>41</sup> Ennis, then, was one of the few towns in the 1930s where more public money was invested in private housing than in public housing. The result is manifest in that according to the 1946 census 18 per cent of the town’s population still lived in one- or two-roomed dwellings, a rate second only to Tralee amongst all 74 provincial towns.

At the end of Chapter 3 the provision of public housing in the 15 case-study towns between 1890 and 1922 was correlated with the extent of third and fourth class housing in these towns in 1901. A view of the state as benevolently responding to social need would suggest that municipal authorities in the towns with the poorest housing would, proportionately speaking, have built the most houses. Figure 3.5 showed an entirely random relationship between the two variables. Whatever impelled individual municipal authorities to build public housing, it clearly was not simply the poverty of the housing stock in their towns. We cannot test this relationship

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<sup>36</sup> *Dáil debates*, 3 February 1938, Vol. 70, No.2.

<sup>37</sup> *Irish Press*, 2 May 1938.

<sup>38</sup> *Irish Independent*, 17 June 1940.

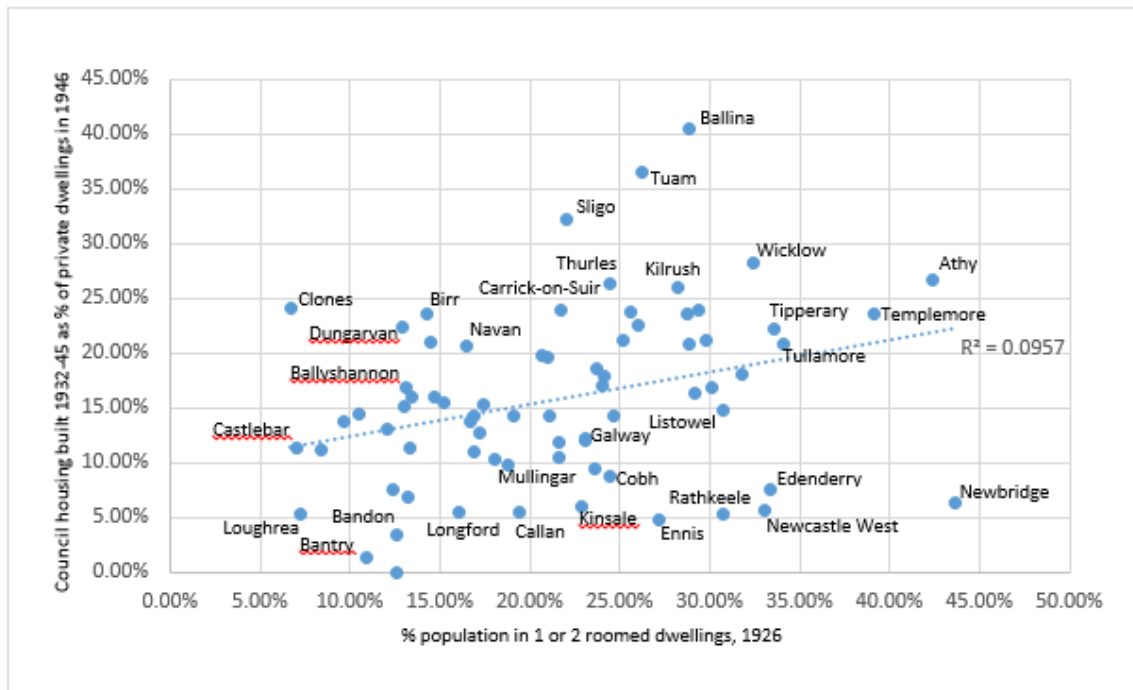
<sup>39</sup> McManus, *Dublin 1901-1940*, pp 122-23.

<sup>40</sup> NAI, Dpt/Environment, Co. Clare, Urban Housing, 1926-63, Box 20.

<sup>41</sup> *Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1935-36*, Appendix xliii, p. 354, Appendix xliv, p. 355; *Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1944-45*, Appendix xxxii, p. 217.

for the period 1932 to 1945 by using housing classes which last featured in the census of 1911. Instead, based on our investigation of housing conditions throughout the period, the proportion of the population living in one or two rooms appears to be a good proxy for poor housing. The analysis of 13,000 household returns from the 1901 census, on which Table 2.4 is based, shows that in the poor suburbs, back streets and lanes of the case-study towns, average dwelling size was generally two or less. Appendix 17 presents this data for parts of three of the case-study towns – Athy, Navan and Kilrush and confirms that these streets and lanes also displayed high levels of overcrowding.

**Figure 7.6**  
**Population in 1 and 2 room dwellings in 1926 and council built housing 1932-45**



Source: *Annual report of DLGPH 1944-45; Census of Population of Ireland 1946, Vol. 4; Census of Population of Ireland 1926, Vol.4*

Figure 7.6 is an attempt to assess whether municipal authorities with the poorest housing in 1926 were most proactive in the provision of housing in the period 1932-45. If that were the case then we would expect a high level of correlation between the two variables in the chart. However, this is clearly not the case, with the chart showing a fairly random distribution and an  $r^2$  value of just 0.095. As with earlier charts, Figure 7.4 confirms that there were ‘under-performers’ and ‘over-performers’. Ballina, Tuam and Sligo, all with over 20 per cent of their

populations living in one- or two-roomed dwellings in 1926, were active builders and by 1945 over 30 per cent of their housing stocks consisted of council houses built in the preceding sixteen years. It also confirms Ennis and Longford as 'under-performers'. 27 percent of Ennis's population in 1926 lived in one- or two-roomed dwellings, yet recently built council housing constituted less than 5 per cent of its housing stock in 1945. What is also noteworthy is that many of the 'under-performers' were smaller towns and administered by Town Commissioners. This was the case for some of the towns with the poorest housing such as Newbridge, Edenderry and Newcastle West. Although Town Commissioners could avail of housing loans from the LLF, as we have seen in the case of Tuam, the fact that they were not sanitary authorities and depended on the cooperation of county councils to provide sanitary infrastructure, greatly hampered their capacity. The contrast between Mullingar, administered by Town Commissioners, and Navan is revealing as the former, with a somewhat higher proportion of poorer housing in 1926, built 50 per cent less houses than the latter although Mullingar was the larger town. Overall, the chart confirms there is no simple explanation why some towns were more proactive than others in responding to the provisions of the 1932 Housing Act.

Between 1929 and 1945 just under 14,000 houses were built by municipal authorities in 73 of the 74 provincial towns.<sup>42</sup> Between 1932 and 1945 12,504 houses were built and 8,082 were demolished. This activity had a significant impact on the housing stock as is apparent when we compare data from the 1926 and 1946 census as shown in Figure 7.6.<sup>43</sup> This data for the largest 19 provincial towns with populations of over 5,000 shows that the number of four-roomed houses almost doubled, from 7,148 to 13,377. This reflected the building of 8,200 council houses in these towns, at least 80 per cent of which were four-roomed.<sup>44</sup> Across all 74 towns the numbers living in one- and two-roomed dwellings fell from 22.2 per cent in 1926 to 10.3 per cent in 1946. Another perspective on the housing stock occupied by the working class is to consider one- to four-room dwellings in isolation. In Chapter 2 we saw that in 1901 just under 50 per cent of all dwellings of one to four rooms in 49 provincial towns consisted of one

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<sup>42</sup> Roscommon Town Commissioners was the sole exception. It built twenty cottages in 1910-11.

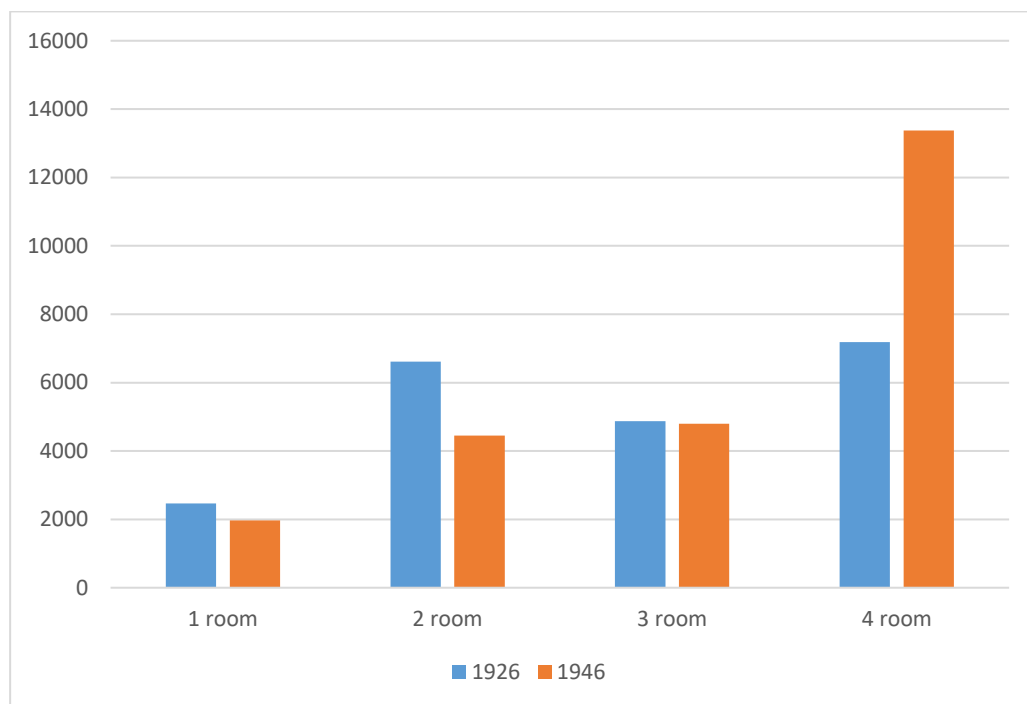
<sup>43</sup> Although the 1946 census collected a wealth of information relating to tenure, sanitation and rents, Volume 4, the report on housing, provides fewer tables on urban centres other than the main cities, compared to the 1936 census. For example, the numbers on one, two, three and four roomed dwellings are only published for towns with populations over 5,000 (Table 20), whereas this data is published for all towns in 1926 and 1936. In reporting on the number of persons living in different sized dwellings, the 1946 census aggregates the numbers in three and four roomed dwellings which makes useful comparisons with 1926 impossible.

<sup>44</sup> This figure is based on data from the annual reports of the DLGPH which published the overall number of houses built by number of rooms by local authorities each year. The data includes Dublin Co. Borough which built about 2,000 two and three roomed flats in these years (see Brady, *Dublin, 1910-1940*, p. 213). Apart from 1934, the vast majority of houses built in provincial towns were four roomed.

or two rooms (see Figure 2.3). Just over a quarter were four roomed. By 1946 the composition of this type of housing had changed completely with 26 per cent consisting of one or two rooms and 54 percent consisting of four rooms.

**Figure 7.7**

**Change in number of 1 – 4 room dwellings in large provincial towns, 1926-1946<sup>45</sup>**



Source: *Census of Population 1926 and 1946*

**Table 7.2**

**Percentage breakdown of 1 to 4 roomed dwellings in provincial towns, 1901-46**

	1 room (%)	2 room (%)	3 room (%)	4 room (%)
1901	12.9	36.3	25.3	25.5
1926	11.7	31.3	23.1	34.0
1946	8.0	18.1	19.5	54.4
1901 (northern towns)	5.1	18.7	28.7	47.5

Source: *Ireland, census of population 1946, Vol. IV; Census of Ireland, 1901, Pt I, Vol. I-IV*

<sup>45</sup> Data is for nineteen provincial towns with a population greater than 5,000.

At this point the character of working class housing in provincial towns in the Free State, in terms of size of dwellings, was approaching that of the six northern counties that were to constitute Northern Ireland forty-five years earlier in 1901.

The impact of public housing provision is also evident in the declining numbers living more than two to a room as shown for the 15 case-study towns in Table 7.3. The data shows that variations of levels of public housing provision had a direct impact on the extent to which housing conditions improved in the first half of the century. In towns such as Drogheda, Navan and Kilrush, where more than one in three lived in what was defined as overcrowded conditions in 1901, very significant progress was made, coinciding with a high level of council house building. The progress was particularly marked in Drogheda, given that the population of the town grew by over 20 per cent in these years. Ballina's progress is also impressive as it grew by more than a third; we know that its rate of council house building was the highest of any provincial town. Although Longford was one of the first provincial towns to avail of the provisions of the Housing of the Working Classes Act by building 60 houses in the mid-1890s, the UDC's poor financial management in the late 1920s and early 1930s, including a failure to strike an adequate rate, saw it build just 68 houses post-1932. A comparison with Navan is revealing. The towns were of similar size and in 1901 Longford had the superior housing stock as evidenced by Table 2.4. By 1945 Navan UDC had built 321 council houses compared to Longford's 216. In terms of overcrowding and the proportion of the population living in small one- and two-roomed dwellings, housing conditions were now inferior in Longford. In 1945 the UDC's housing survey calculated that 178 new dwellings were required to house the town's working class compared to just 30 in Navan.<sup>46</sup> The pattern of provision of public housing in Tralee was the obverse of that in Longford. Although the more than 600 houses built after 1932 meant it ranked in the top twenty in terms of rates of provision, its pre-1922 output, at just 88 houses, was one of the lowest of any of the larger provincial towns.

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<sup>46</sup> Department of Local Government, *Housing: A review of past operations and future requirements* (Dublin, 1948).

**Table 7.3****Changing levels of overcrowding (more than two persons per room) in the case-study towns, 1901-46**

Town	1901 Total Pop	1946 Total Pop	Pop change	% Population in 1-2 room dwellings	1901 % >2 per room	1946 % >2 per room	% change > 2 per room
Edenderry*	1611	2996	86.0%	9.6%	46.7%	20.3%	-26.4%
Drogheda	12760	15715	23.2%	14.5%	38.0%	19.3%	-18.7%
Navan	3839	4102	6.9%	4.2%	36.4%	10.6%	-25.7%
Athy	3599	3639	1.1%	14.2%	35.9%	19.0%	-16.8%
Tullamore*	4639	5897	27.1%	13.6%	35.8%	21.9%	-14.0%
Kilrush	4179	3351	-19.8%	4.2%	33.4%	15.6%	-17.8%
Arklow	4944	4915	-0.6%	2.6%	32.8%	9.5%	-23.3%
Tralee*	9867	9990	1.2%	18.5%	32.5%	21.0%	-11.5%
Listowel	3605	3311	-8.2%	9.6%	31.8%	16.5%	-15.3%
Tuam	2896	3868	33.6%	2.1%	24.4%	11.8%	-12.6%
Fermoy	6126	4213	-31.2%	10.6%	24.3%	9.5%	-14.7%
Ballina	4505	6045	34.2%	3.6%	24.3%	12.6%	-11.7%
Enniscorthy	5458	6020	10.3%	5.0%	22.0%	16.0%	-6.0%
Longford	3747	4020	7.3%	11.1%	17.7%	16.8%	-0.9%
Clones	2068	2092	1.2%	1.5%	6.5%	8.1%	1.6%

Source: 1901 census Building Return Form; 1946 Census of Population, Volume 4.

\* These towns underwent boundary changes between 1901 and 1946.

The 1946 census was the first census to collect data on what it called 'social amenities' as outlined above. This included information on water supply and sanitary facilities. We have no comparative data from earlier censuses, but we know that by this time all council houses in towns were supplied with running water for the exclusive use of each dwelling and the vast majority had water-based toilets. Overall, there was a wide range across the 74 provincial towns of the proportion of dwellings with exclusive use of a piped water supply. This ranged from 74.0 percent in Ballina, 72.2 percent in Drogheda to 29.0 in Edenderry and just 27.9 percent in Kinsale. Towns with high proportions of council houses tended to have higher proportion of dwellings with exclusive supplies of piped water, but there were other factors at play. For example, of the 20 least well-served towns, 12 were administered by Town Commissioners. This highlights the anomalous position of towns with this form of administration as, although they could raise loans to build houses, they were not sanitary authorities and did not have responsibility for their water and sewerage systems. It suggests that the circumstances that saw acute water shortages and completely inadequate sewerage in Tuam, discussed in Chapter 3, was replicated in many of the other towns administered by Town Commissioners.

Because we have data on the total number of council houses built in each provincial town from the annual report of DLGPH for 1944-45, we can make a reasonable estimate as to the number of non-council dwellings with exclusive piped water supply.<sup>47</sup> The data for a selection of towns shown in Table 7.4 emphasises the gap in standards between council and non-council housing when it is borne in mind that virtually 100 per cent of council housing had exclusive access to use of a piped water supply. In many towns existing water schemes had been extended in the 1930s to meet the needs of new council estates, often at the edge of towns, but there was much less investment in extending the network to areas of older housing.

**Table 7.4**

**Percentage of dwellings with exclusive use piped water supply in selected towns, 1946**

	All dwellings	Non-council built dwellings
Tuam	68.0%	41.0%
Athy	59.4%	37.1%
Enniscorthy	60.1%	38.8%
Kilrush	61.1%	42.3%
Longford	61.5%	47.5%
Edenderry	29.0%	17.7%

*Source: Census of Population of Ireland, Vol. 4, Table 29*

### **Comparative perspectives**

Setting what has been outlined above in the wider context of housing developments in Northern Ireland, Britain and Western Europe helps to underline the significance, and to some extent the uniqueness, of public housing provision in provincial Irish towns up to 1945. Lack of data makes comparisons somewhat difficult as there was no British census between 1931 and 1951 and the manner in which housing related data in the Northern Ireland census was reported diverges from that in Free State census. Of course the impact of World War II had a devastating effect on housing conditions across much of Europe and on the capacity of states to address their huge

<sup>47</sup> The proportion of private dwellings with exclusive piped water supply is calculated by

- a) subtracting the number of council houses (DLGPH report) from the total number of dwellings (1946 census) to obtain the total of non-council dwellings (A)
- b) subtract the number of council houses from the total number of dwellings with exclusive piped water supply. Because virtually all council houses had a piped supply this gives us the number non-council dwellings with an exclusive piped water supply (B)
- c) divide B by A



housing deficits, calculated at over 14 million units by a 1949 report.<sup>48</sup> The Free State's almost complete insulation from wartime destruction renders comparisons relating to housing conditions and state policy somewhat redundant.

Censuses were conducted in Northern Ireland in 1926, 1937 and 1951 and data on housing conditions were published in the form of rooms occupied and density of room occupation. Results relating to numbers living more than two to a room are charted in Figure 7.8, which shows that the numbers living in these conditions in provincial towns in the Free State fell from 22.2 per cent in 1926 to 13.5 per cent in 1946. The equivalent fall in Northern Ireland was from 12.8 per cent to 7.7 per cent in 1951. It is worth noting that Northern Ireland towns grew much more substantially than those in the Free State at this time. The population of 29 provincial towns in Northern Ireland grew from 160,224 to 216,519, or by 35 per cent, between 1926 and 1951 while the equivalent increase in the Free State was from 277,259 to 313,476 between 1926 and 1946, or by just 13 per cent.<sup>49</sup> The growth in Northern provincial towns was particularly marked in the Belfast region, with towns such as Lisburn (+43 per cent), Lurgan (+29 per cent), Banbridge (+26 per cent) and Bangor (+55 per cent) witnessing particularly strong increases. The demand for housing in these and other towns in Northern Ireland was met, not by local authorities, but by speculative builders. Between 1926 and 1936 an impressive 32,146 houses were completed by private builders. Local authorities, on the other hand, built only 2,166 units.<sup>50</sup> Brian Barton points out that government policy was concentrated on supporting private builders constructing small, inexpensive working class housing, but supported by low levels of subsidy. Although a Northern Ireland Housing Act was passed in 1931 that mirrored some of the provisions of the Greenwood Act in the UK and the 1931 and 1932 Acts in the Free State regarding slum clearance, no government subsidy was offered to local authorities and, unsurprisingly, the Act had little effect.<sup>51</sup> John O'Brien quotes the Ministry of Home Affairs as admitting that

While the subsidy given under the Housing Acts had been successful in getting houses built for people able to pay economic rent, the problem of providing accommodation for the poorer classes, mostly residing in houses more or less unfit for habitation, remained.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Harloe, *The People's Home?*, p. 256.

<sup>49</sup> This data is taken from the relevant census reports for 1926 (Free State and Northern Ireland), 1946 (Free State) and 1951 (Northern Ireland).

<sup>50</sup> Brian Barton, 'Northern Ireland, 1925-39' in J.R. Hill (ed.) *A New History of Ireland, Vol VII, Ireland 1921-84*, pp 207-08.

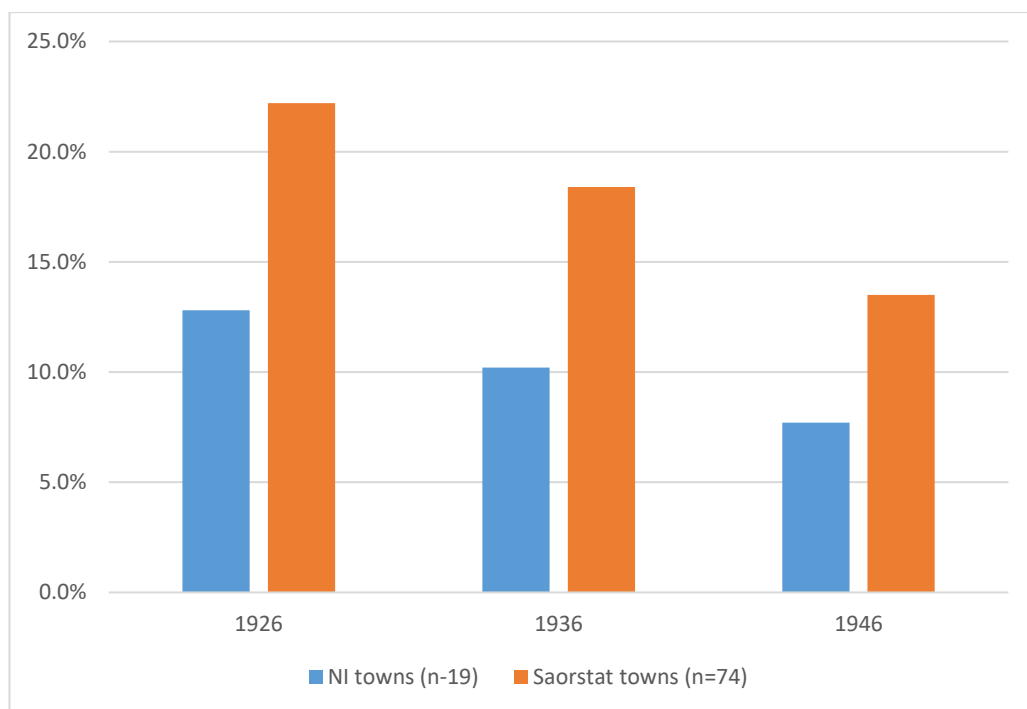
<sup>51</sup> John O'Brien, *Discrimination in Northern Ireland 1920-39: Myth or Reality?* (Cambridge, 2010), p.49.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.50.

Government housing policy north and south was moving in different directions, certainly during the 1930s, and while housing conditions had certainly been far superior in Northern towns in the early decades of the century, the gap had narrowed by the 1940s, primarily as a result of the more interventionist role of the Free State government. Towns like Newry and Strabane had made little or no progress regarding overcrowded conditions in the 25 years after 1926. 19 per cent of Newry's population lived more than two to a room in 1926, and by 1951 this had only declined to 14.1 per cent. In the case of Strabane, the proportion actually increased from 14.4 per cent to 17.7 per cent.

**Figure 7.8**

**Proportion of the population in private families living more than two to a room in provincial towns in the Free State and Northern Ireland, 1926-46<sup>53</sup>**



*Source: Census of Population of Ireland, Vol. 4, Table 21; Census of Population of Northern Ireland 1951, County reports*

Wider comparisons with developments in Britain are more difficult to assess quantitatively with no census taken between 1931 and 1951. Goodwin's work on public housing provision in England and Wales shows wide regional variations. Overall, local authorities built 30 houses per

<sup>53</sup> The Northern Ireland data refers to 1951 as no census was taken in 1946.

1,000 population between 1919 and 1940.<sup>54</sup> At the county level this ranged from 14.3 per 1,000 in Surrey, 14.8 per 1,000 in Middlesex to 42.5 per 1,000 in Northumberland and 40.1 per 1,000 in Durham.<sup>55</sup> Towns and cities in these north eastern counties, as we have seen, had the highest rates of overcrowding in England. Ryder shows that the highest rates of council house building in these areas took place in the 1930s under the provisions of the Housing Acts of 1930 and 1935. Table 7.3 shows that some towns in County Durham, such as Chester-le-Street and Houghton, had rates of council housing provision similar to the highest rates for towns in the Free State. He links this to the higher rates of subsidy available under these Acts for slum clearance and the growing domination of local government by the Labour party.<sup>56</sup> Labour was particularly dominant in the Tyneside area where the level of local authority house building was highest. Ryder also observes that the financial position of individual councils was also crucial in determining whether central government gave approval for housing schemes. Industrial unrest in 1926 undermined the finances of many coal mining towns as rent arrears grew.<sup>57</sup> This mirrors the Irish experience where councils in towns such as Ennis and Longford failed to manage their finances (largely through striking an inadequate rate) and under-performed in terms of housing provision. The most striking fact, however, is that given the very different economic and political contexts, council housing provision in many Irish provincial towns between the wars surpassed or equalled that of most County Durham towns. Councils in 23 Irish towns built more than 50 houses per 1,000, a rate surpassed by 11 towns in Durham. John H. Jennings identifies Yorkshire West Riding as one of the other regions with high levels of council building between 1919 and 1939.<sup>58</sup> Here, three town councils built more than 50 houses per thousand population – Wakefield, Rotherham and York. In this region housing conditions were superior to those in the northeast and in most towns houses built under the Addison and Wheatley Acts in the 1920s outnumbered those built as slum clearance schemes in the 1930s.<sup>59</sup> Again, this highlights the very high rates of council house building in Irish towns in the seven years after the passing of the 1932 Housing Act.

As outlined in Chapter 2, housing conditions in Scottish cities and towns at the beginning of the twentieth century were the poorest of any region in the British Isles. Local authority housing made virtually no impact on conditions before World War I with just one percent of

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<sup>54</sup> Goodwin, 'Council housing, the social democratic state and the locality', p. 290-92.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* This data includes houses built in rural districts.

<sup>56</sup> Ryder, 'Council house building in County Durham, 1900-39', pp 46-51.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51

<sup>58</sup> John H. Jennings, 'Geographical implications of the municipal housing programme in England and Wales 1919-39' in *Urban Studies* 8, no. 2 (June 1971), pp 121-38.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

families living in council houses in 1913.<sup>60</sup> Between 1919 and 1941 just over 240,000 houses were built by local authorities, giving a rate of 50 per 1,000 population.<sup>61</sup> Comparisons between the housing programmes in Ireland and Scotland between the wars are of particular interest. A particular point of contrast is the size of dwellings provided. A number of factors lay behind the historically small size of Scottish dwellings, including the 'feu' system which tended to inflate land prices. 53 percent of dwellings in Scotland in 1911 were one or two roomed.<sup>62</sup> When local authorities in Scotland came to build houses after World War I they opted for smaller dwellings than were built by Irish councils. Smyth and Robertson's study of council housing provision in Stirling between the wars shows that half of this new housing stock consisted by two and three roomed flats and houses.<sup>63</sup> In 1936 Stirling's MOH was complaining that overcrowding was 'becoming almost as common in the housing schemes as in the slums'.<sup>64</sup> In contrast, over 80 percent of houses built by councils in Irish provincial towns between 1932 and 1945 were four roomed.<sup>65</sup>

The second distinctive development in Scotland was an institutional one with the establishment in 1937 of the Scottish Special Housing Association (SSHA). The agency was established in recognition of the continuing poor standard of Scottish housing and the scale of deprivation linked to the 1930s recession in heavy industry. It also reflected a new emphasis on regional development and the SSHA was given responsibility to address both poor housing and high unemployment within 'Special Areas'.<sup>66</sup> Although the war intervened before the agency could really begin to deliver on its remit, the fact that it remained in existence until 1989 underlines its central role in delivering on Scottish housing policy. As an institution it stands in some contrast to the Irish Housing Board which, until it was disbanded in 1944, remained a minor adjunct to the Department of Local Government and Public Health.

Finally, the public housing programmes in Scotland and in Irish provincial towns, particularly in the 1930s, were unique in one respect – the extent to which they almost

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<sup>60</sup> *Royal Commission on the Housing of the Industrial population of Scotland Rural and Urban, Report*, [CD. 8731], 1917, p. 387.

<sup>61</sup> Richard Rodger and Hunain Al-Qaddo, 'The Scottish Special Housing Association and the implementation of housing policy, 1937-87' in Richard Rodger (ed), *Scottish Housing in the Twentieth Century* (Leicester, 1989), p. 185.

<sup>62</sup> *Census of Scotland 1911, Volume II* [cd 6896] H.C., 1913, p. 568.

<sup>63</sup> James Smyth and Douglas Robertson, 'Local elites and social control: building council houses in Stirling between the wars' in *Urban History*, 40, no.2 (May 2013), pp 336-54.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 351.

<sup>65</sup> 12 percent of all local authority houses built in the Free State between 1933 and 1945 had fewer than four rooms – see *Annual Report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health 1944-45*, Appendix xxxi, p. 216.

<sup>66</sup> Rodger and Al-Qaddo, 'The Scottish Special Housing Association', pp 184-94.

completely dominated housing construction, to the exclusion of the private sector. Table 7.3 shows that in most of the Scottish towns for which this data is available over 80 percent of houses built between 1929 and 1939 were built by local authorities. The overall figure for Scotland for the years 1919 to 1941 was 70 percent, compared to 28 percent in England and Wales. This issue was discussed in Chapter 5 where it was pointed out that 85 percent of the houses built in provincial towns with any form of state assistance were built by municipal authorities with just 15 percent built by private persons or public utility societies. Of course some private building took place without any state assistance as larger houses did not qualify for grants under any of the Housing Acts. But data from Gibney's *Drogheda Survey* shows a low level of private building of any kind, with only one scheme of 26 houses completed in the 1930s. In some towns such as Ennis (59.2 percent), Galway (58.1 percent) and Castlebar (38.9 percent) private building (availing of state grants) represented a substantial proportion of the houses built in 1932-47, but these were very much the exception and the average across all 74 towns was 16 percent.

**Table 7.5**

**Houses built by municipal authorities per 1,000 population in Britain and the Free State, 1922-45<sup>67</sup>**

	Houses per thousand	Council housing as % of total house-building
Irish provincial towns (n=74)	42.1	
Dublin Co. Borough	45.2	
Ballina	81.2	
Kilrush	73.4	
Drogheda	62.5	
Navan	53.9	
Yorkshire West Riding		
Wakefield	78.4	
Rotherham	57.4	
Doncaster	45.2	
County Durham		
Seaham	79.2	77.4
Chester-le-Street	73.9	52.3
Houghton	69.6	71.8
Billingham	62.8	31.4
Hetton	61.8	79.0
Wickham	61.7	49.0
Scotland <sup>68</sup>		
Abroath	31.4	76.4
Stirling	73.3	93.5
Dumfries and Maxwelltown	35.9	65.3
Rutherglen	39.1	85.7
Kilmarnock	59.6	85.2

Source: *A review of past operations and future requirements (Dublin, 1947)*, *Census of population 1946*, Jennings, 'Geographical implications of the municipal housing programme in England and Wales', p. 132, Ryder 'Council house building in County Durham', pp 48-49 and *Report on the Distribution of New Houses in Scotland*, Cmd. 6552, 1943-44, p. 43.

<sup>67</sup> There are slightly different timeframes involved for the Irish and English data. The Irish data refers to houses built between 1922 and 1947. The English data refers to houses built under the Chamberlain and Wheatley Acts and the 1930s Acts dealing with slum clearance which effectively covers the period 1923 to 1939.

<sup>68</sup> The Scottish data relates to the years 1929-39.

In England and Wales private house building predominated, in most years during the 1930s representing 80 percent of all new dwellings.<sup>69</sup> Over a third of this private sector housing consisted of relatively cheap, working class dwellings that were nevertheless sold to owner occupiers. A combination of low interest rates, relatively cheap building costs and a falling cost of living made home ownership a realistic proposition for the first time for working class households in steady employment.<sup>70</sup> The contrast with patterns of new working class housing in the Free State in the 1930s is stark. In Chapter 5 we saw that the capacity of regional building contractors was often stretched by the scale of the housing programmes being undertaken by many municipal authorities with only two or three companies tendering for many schemes. In England the vast majority of private building was carried out without any state subsidies whereas in the Free State, even with subsidies, demand for new private dwellings was low in most towns. At least some of this reflected a simple lack of well paid regular employment. O'Gráda shows that Irish wages in the 1930s compared quite well with those in Britain.<sup>71</sup> But census returns show that in 1936 in most provincial towns well over 20 percent of the male workforce consisted of unskilled labourers and this does not take into account known high levels of underemployment and unemployment.<sup>72</sup> The economically underdeveloped state of Irish towns meant that the demand for new housing could not be met by the private sector where economic rents, even for cheap housing, were beyond the means of up to a third of the population who lived in poor housing conditions. The economics of home ownership rendered that prospect even more remote. Figure 7.9 shows the striking extent to which the rental sector dominated housing tenure in Irish provincial towns in the mid-1940s with only 30 percent of households defined as owner occupiers. This fell as low as 16 percent in Drogheda, 18 percent in Athy and 19 percent in Fermoy. This is despite the fact that stated government policy, especially in the 1920s, favoured private ownership and under Fianna Fail in the 1930s there can be no doubting the DLGPH's enthusiasm for allocating grants for private building. Two-thirds

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<sup>69</sup> Arthur Peter Becker, 'Housing in England and Wales during the Business Depression of the 1930s' in *The Economic History Review*, New Series, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1951), p. 322.

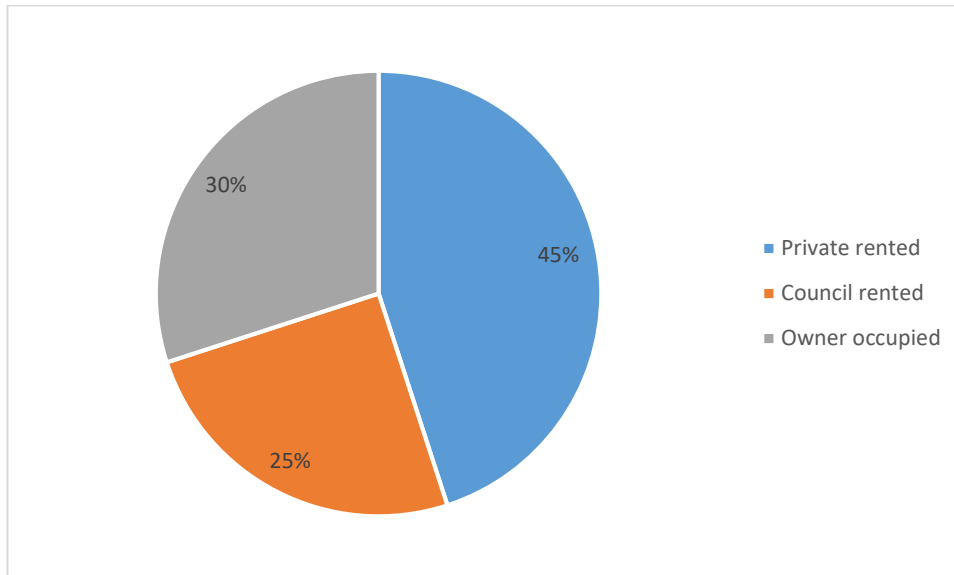
<sup>70</sup> See Peter Kemp, 'The transformation of the urban housing market in Britain, c1885-1939', (PhD thesis, Sussex, 1984); also, Colin Pooley, 'Patterns on the ground: urban form, residential structure and the social construction of space' in Daunton, *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, pp 446-47.

<sup>71</sup> O'Gráda, *Ireland, A New Economic History*, p. 436-37.

<sup>72</sup> For example, of the 1597 gainfully employed males in Enniscorthy in 1936, 362 (22.7 percent) were classified as 'Unskilled Workers'. A further 97 (6.0 percent) were 'Building Labourers' or 'Navvies'. See Ireland, *Census of Population 1936*, Vol. 2, Table 8A.

of these grants, though, were allocated to rural areas<sup>73</sup> and, as discussed in Chapter 5 (see Figure 5.1), new housing in provincial towns was dominated by municipal housing.

**Figure 7.8**  
**Breakdown of housing tenure in Irish provincial towns, 1946**



*Source: Census of population 1946, Volume 4*

While these contrast between developments in housing in the Free State, on the one hand, and Northern Ireland and Britain on the other, point up some unique features of public housing provision in Irish provincial towns, widening the perspective to encompass Europe emphasises the potential of entirely different approaches. In the Introduction a brief overview of the evolution of housing systems in a number of north and west European countries was outlined. A common characteristic of the history of state intervention in the housing systems of Sweden, Denmark, the Low Countries, France and Germany was that it channelled its support via a dense configuration of non-profit institutions, including housing trusts, cooperatives, municipally owned housing companies and public utility societies. These institutions emerged to serve the needs of disparate groups so that, unlike in Britain and Ireland, the non-profit sector was not as closely or as exclusively associated with housing the poor. On the other hand, writing in 1938, the English housing consultant Elizabeth Denby described the result of post- World War I housing policies in Europe as ‘everywhere ... a glut of medium priced dwellings, but the shortage

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<sup>73</sup> In *The Buffer State* (p. 224), Daly remarks that ‘grants for private housing proved extremely popular with the public and they presumably brought major political dividends’. She describes O’Kelly’s consistent (and quite successful) efforts to foil Finance’s attempts to cap or abolish such grants much as he did in relation to public housing subsidies.



of low-cost houses, and particularly ones for poor families with many children, is still acute'.<sup>74</sup> The reality is that in countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark and France the great bulk of working class housing, particularly in the 1930s, was built by the private sector. Housing associations in the Netherlands and cooperatives in Denmark prior to World War II mostly built houses that were beyond the reach of poorer households and in France state policy overwhelmingly favoured home ownership. However, in these and other western European countries legal frameworks and civil society institutions were in place at the end of the 1930s that provided the framework for the mass provision of social housing after 1945. Housing policy in the Free State followed a different path with subsidies scattered across public and private sectors but with urban slum clearance a significant strand after 1932. It appears reasonable to define the thrust of the 1931 and 1932 Housing Acts relating to public housing as 'residual' in that the most generous subsidies were available to rehouse those displaced from condemned dwellings. However, given the scale of the operation, the fact that up to a quarter of the houses built were for 'general needs' and the obvious desire on the part of local councillors to extend the scope of local housing programmes beyond slum clearance, the term 'residual' appears inadequate. This interpretation is rendered all the more valid by the relatively marginal impact of public / social housing across most of Europe until after World War II.

### **'Keynes Comes to Kinnegad'**

1945 marks a natural break in the history of public housing in Ireland. The year also marked a new beginning as government departments attempted to put in place the outline of a plan to address the infrastructural deficit arising from several years of almost complete inactivity in the construction industry. Lee suggests the Fianna Fáil government was characterised by a lack of direction in these years, concluding that 'the legitimate criticism can be made of its performance between 1945 and 1947 is not that it failed to cope with the short-term difficulties, which might have baffled any government, but that it had no vision of the future'.<sup>75</sup> This view has some legitimacy although, regarding a public housing programme, there were some significant issues not entirely within the government's control.

The first was the lack of supplies, with acute shortages of timber, steel and concrete.<sup>76</sup> The second was the very significant increase in costs with the DLGPH calculating that concrete

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<sup>74</sup> Elizabeth Denby, *Europe Rehoused* (reprint, with intro. by E. Darling, Oxford, 2015, of orig. ed. London, 1938), p. 272.

<sup>75</sup> Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985*, p. 298.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326.

had increase in price by 135 per cent compared to pre-war levels, roofing and ironwork by 122 per cent and carpentry by 245 per cent.<sup>77</sup> Thirdly, local authorities were reluctant to invite tenders for housing without clarification regarding the level of subsidies available. Some blame can be attached to government here. In 1945 the Minister for Local Government and Public Health, Seán McEntee, indicated that the question of increased subsidies was being considered but it was not until the establishment of the Transitional Development Fund (TDF) in the Finance Act of 1946, that the prospect of those subsidies materialised. A further issue, again reflecting lack of direction on the part of the government, was the conflicting signals sent by the different departments. The 1945 white paper published by the Department of Industry and Commerce projected a remarkably hands-off view of the state's role, declaring that

it must be remembered that the control that the Government can exercise over building activity is mostly a negative control. The government can prohibit the erection of buildings; it cannot cause buildings to be erected – unless, of course, it becomes itself the builder.<sup>78</sup>

This final qualification implies a role for the state as builder of last resort. This view is confirmed later in the paper where it is recommended that 'a certain preference should be given to the claims of private enterprise which is more likely to get going quickly after the war than a Government Department or Local Authority'.<sup>79</sup> In April 1946, on the other hand, the secretary of the DLGPH, on behalf of the Minister, complained to Finance that of the meagre total of 1,248 houses under construction, only 200 were outside Dublin. 'This position', he added 'is altogether unsatisfactory having regard to the existing housing needs of the working classes, urban and rural, which are estimated at 60,000 houses'.<sup>80</sup>

The announcement that £5 million would be allocated to the TDF from Marshall Aid, part of which might be allocated for housing subsidies, was not welcomed by Finance who believed that 'politicians would squander the money on unproductive and inflationary expenditure'.<sup>81</sup> Ongoing disputes between Finance and DLGPH were also a feature of this period with Finance resisting the proposal to allocate a subsidy of £250 per house for new council houses. McElligott, still setting the tone in Finance, wrote to DLGPH expressing his concern at the new subsidy saying that although it had been introduced as a short-term measure 'it is to be feared that your Department's aim may fail to be realised and that once the subsidy level has

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<sup>77</sup> The Post-War Building Programme (NAI, Dpt/Environment, Housing, 1919-60, Box 200).

<sup>78</sup> Department of Industry and Commerce, *Post-war Building Programme*, p. 7.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>80</sup> The Post-War Building Programme (NAI, Dpt/Environment, Housing, 1919-60, Box 200).

<sup>81</sup> Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985*, p. 303.

been named any reduction may be difficult, if not impossible'.<sup>82</sup> McElligott's fears were well founded as levels of subsidy increased still further in the following years, particularly under the new Inter-Party government elected in early 1948. By the time of the election only £130,000 from the TDF had been allocated to local authorities outside Dublin and the relative failure of the government to deliver on post-war construction fed into the public perception that the government lack energy and direction. The phrase 'Keynes comes to Kinnegad' is attributed to the economist and civil servant, Patrick Lynch, in describing a new-found belief in public investment and demand management attributed to the new government elected in 1948. Between 1947-48 and 1950-51 the state's capital programme increased from less than £8 million to £24.6 million and expenditure on the housing programme from less than £1 million to £11 million.<sup>83</sup> By 1951 3,252 houses had been built by municipal authorities in provincial towns out of the total of 12,922 identified as being required in the survey finally published in 1948 marking a new phase in the story of Irish public housing.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> The Post-War Building Programme (NAI, Dpt/Environment, Housing, 1919-60, Box 200).

<sup>83</sup> Daly, *Buffer State*, p. 324.

<sup>84</sup> *Annual report of the Department of Local Government, 1950-51*, Appendix xx, pp 112-15.

## Conclusion

During the brief Austrian civil war of February 1934, Vienna's huge public housing schemes were occupied by the *Schutzbund*, the paramilitary wing of the Social Democratic Party, and quickly came under attack from the *Heimwehr*, a right wing militia favouring Italian-style fascism and supportive of the ruling Christian Social Party. The schemes such as those at Karl-Marx-Hof and Sandeleitenhof with their plazas, cinemas, libraries and crèches were symbols and strongholds of the social democratic project that shaped 'Red Vienna' between 1919 and 1934. As the Austrian army entered the fray on the side of the *Heimwehr* and light artillery fire was directed at Karl-Marx-Hof, home to several thousand civilians, the *Schutzbund* surrendered and the experiment that was 'Red Vienna' came to a brutal end. No such drama occurred at St. Muirdeach's Terrace in Ballina, completed in 1916, or Parnell Park in Navan, completed in 1938. And yet, these and several hundred housing schemes built by municipal authorities across Ireland between 1890 and 1945 were also expressions of a complex interaction of economic, political and social forces that saw the state involve itself in housing its citizens. It is clear that there was no 'Red Ballina' or 'Red Navan'; those who promoted public housing in Irish towns were no socialist visionaries in the mode of Vienna's Social Democrats nor, in general, were they responding to organised working class agitation on the issue of housing. Different, but related, political imperatives resulted in high rates of public housing provision in these towns. At one level it is relevant to note that following the passing of the Clancy Act in 1908 John Redmond declared that the IPP 'will in future, as in the past, endeavour to fulfil for Ireland in the fullest sense the functions of a Labour Party, believing that we are the Labour Party as far as Ireland is concerned'.<sup>1</sup> The housing programme in provincial towns in the 1930s was promoted by a Fianna Fáil party keen to broaden its support base amongst the urban working class and de Valera, on occasion, was moved to don the mantle of labour.<sup>2</sup> The housing policies of neither party, though, were linked to the concerns of the trade union movement or informed by social democratic politics, factors which lay behind Red Vienna and the growth of social housing in a number of western European countries after World War I. To understand why Irish towns had such high rates of public housing

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<sup>1</sup> *Freemans Journal*, 15 February 1909.

<sup>2</sup> Dunphy, *The Making of Fianna Fáil Power*, p. 197, quotes a speech by de Valera in the Dáil in April 1932 where he claims Labour had failed to recognise the significance of James Connolly's which he asserted meant 'that to secure national freedom was the first step in order to get the workers of Ireland the living they were entitled to in their own country'.

by 1945 and to understand patterns of provision we have been obliged to widen the search. A review of that search can be constructed around four main themes.

### **Public housing, politics and the state**

In attempting to summarise Ireland's uniquely high rate of public housing provision before World War I, Fraser suggests 'that the issue was less and less to do with the reality of working class demands and more and more to do with its function as an instrument of political ideology'.<sup>3</sup> This perspective can be usefully applied across the entire timeframe under consideration in this study. The broad parameters within which the early phase of public housing occurred in Ireland are well rehearsed in the literature and, as outlined in Chapter 3, largely conform to this view. The essential context was the dynamic between the IPP's strategies to further the cause of Home Rule and the government in Westminster's desire to maintain constitutional stability. In terms of housing, the Labourers Acts represented the most the obvious achievement of the IPP in demonstrating its political legitimacy. The Clancy Act of 1908 was the urban equivalent, although Redmond's claim that at its passing 'the great question of the Housing of the Working Classes [is] practically settled' owed more to political rhetoric than reality. By 1915 about six percent of the population of provincial towns was living in houses built by municipal authorities and state subsidy had been firmly established as a cornerstone of the system.<sup>4</sup> Both the deliberations on urban housing during the course of the Irish Convention in 1917-18 and the provisions of the Housing Act of 1919 reflected the prominence that the urban housing question had achieved and its place in the British government's strategy to quell unrest and undermine Sinn Féin's politically dominant position. The views of Ian Macpherson, the new Chief Secretary for Ireland, as communicated to the Chancellor of the Exchequer in January 1919 are pertinent-

The situation in Ireland at the present time can hardly be exaggerated. Discontent is seething... . While we must maintain law and order at all costs, we must at the same time meet the just demands of large public bodies like the Association of Municipal Authorities in Ireland who are clamouring for the fulfilment – long overdue – of a promise that a Scheme of Housing should be introduced and carried through.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Fraser, *John Bull's Other Homes*, p. 299.

<sup>4</sup> This is based on the assumption that the 3,439 council houses accommodated a population of 17,000. The total population of those living in private families in provincial towns in 1926 was 277,259.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Fraser, *John Bull's Other Homes*, p. 189.

His reference to the AMAI might suggest that representatives of municipal authorities were at the forefront of an uprising, demanding decent working class housing. The reality, however, was rather less dramatic. The majority of municipal councillors and those active in the AMAI had been elected before the war on a Home Rule ticket and much of their concern centred on the question of the scale of housing subsidies that could be wrestled from the Treasury. As early as 1913 it was clear that the fixed sum of £6,000 per annum available in loan subsidies under the provisions of the Clancy Act was inadequate given the scale of the housing programmes undertaken and the volume of loans drawn down since 1910.<sup>6</sup> The minutes of executive committee meetings of the IAMA, formed in 1912, are replete with aspirational statements regarding housing and repeated calls on the IPP to lobby for further state aid.<sup>7</sup> The over-riding concern was to avoid 'an excessive burden on the rate'.<sup>8</sup> The 1919 Housing Act passed in August represented the government's attempt to isolate advanced nationalists and encourage the political class as represented by the IAMI to promote engagement with the LGB and avail of the provisions of the Act. Although the level of subsidies offered in the Act were widely condemned as inadequate, many urban councils submitted quite ambitious housing plans. However, those plans had to be abandoned as part of the price the new Sinn Féin dominated town councils paid for pledging their allegiance to the Dáil after the local elections of early 1920. The need for housing had been trumped by the demands of political separatism.

Cosgrave's surprise announcement in March 1922 of £1 million in state funding for housing reflected the political traction that the housing question had achieved within local government. But, again, there is a sense that housing policy was being used to serve different purposes than the mere housing of the working classes. The £1 million scheme had a symbolic significance in that it marked a concrete response to the continuing demands of municipal authorities for state support. Here was the new government underlining its legitimacy at a time when that legitimacy was highly contested. The scheme would bring temporary employment to towns across the country but have a marginal effect on the tens of thousands who continued to live in poor conditions.

Our exploration of Fianna Fáil's 1930s housing programme in provincial towns showed it had a material impact on housing conditions, but it too can be seen as part of a wider programme of nation building and establishing political legitimacy. O'Kelly's speeches at the

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew Potter, 'The First Decade of an Irish Local Government Association: the Association Of Municipal Authorities of Ireland, 1912-1922' in *The International Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, Vol. 7, 1-2 (2011), p. 93.

<sup>7</sup> Association of Municipal Authorities of Ireland Minute Book, (Cork City Archives, IE CCCA/AMAI/M).

<sup>8</sup> Minutes of executive committee meeting of AMAI, 22 April 1913 (Cork City Archives, IE CCCA/AMAI/M).

opening of new schemes repeatedly set the housing programme in the context of a national regeneration and a reclaiming of national sovereignty. His speech in Drogheda in August 1939 referred to the government 'reversing the course of history, three hundred years after the Cromwellian plantations'.<sup>9</sup> Dáil speeches at the time of the passing of the 1932 Act referred to the slums as 'a stain on our national honour' and the high profile *Irish Press* housing campaign in 1936 promoted its portrayal of the slums as a 'national shame' that such conditions should exist in a Christian country. O'Kelly's own religious beliefs and Catholic social teaching also fed into how the housing programme was conceived with notions of the Christian home being the cradle for a moral life. Others viewed the demolition of the slums and the provision of public housing as part of a programme for producing new citizens who could share the value system of the new state. In discussing the British state and developments in the nineteenth century, Patrick Joyce's description of state building as 'a conscious pursuit' and 'linked to the idea of civilisation and the perfectibility of the individual' sets this aspect of the state's 1930s building programme in the wider context of state formation and state action.<sup>10</sup>

Fianna Fáil's promotion of public housing can also be viewed as part of its strategy to build its political legitimacy and electoral support in urban Ireland. The party's identification with the promotion of public housing in provincial towns is evident from the analysis in Chapter 7 of the factors determining which municipal authorities were proactive and which were not. The policy was also consistent with its industrial policy involving support for native manufacturers in a drive for national self-sufficiency. Daly suggests that up to 40,000 industrial jobs were created in the years 1932-36.<sup>11</sup> Many enterprises were small scale and provided employment in provincial towns. Political scientists such as Dunphy and Sinnott argue that Fianna Fáil successfully transcended its original appeal beyond its small farmer base in the early 1930s, pointing out that it won 43 per cent of the vote in Dublin and Dun Laoghaire in the 1933 general election.<sup>12</sup> The party's success in appealing to the working class in provincial towns was reflected in its performance in the 1934 local elections, winning 392 out of 1,123 seats in Urban Council and Town Commissioners and, in combination with Labour, gaining control in many municipal authorities.<sup>13</sup> By the time of the next local elections in 1942 circumstances had changed significantly with war time inflation, rationing and strict wage controls. The results

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<sup>9</sup> *Irish Press*, 22 August 1939.

<sup>10</sup> Joyce, *The State of Freedom*, p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> Mary E. Daly, *Industrial Development and Irish National Identity, 1922-39* (Syracuse, 1992), p. 78.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313; Richard Sinnott, 'Interpretation of the Irish Party System' in *European Journal of Political Research*, 12 (1984), pp 289-307.

<sup>13</sup> *Irish Press*, 2 July 1934.

showed a dramatic swing away from Fianna Fáil towards independent and Labour candidates. But in the interim its overwhelming victory in the 1938 general election, winning over 50 per cent of the vote, was partly the result of attracting urban working class voters and the basis for the party's enduring support in urban Ireland, at least until its recent difficulties, had been laid.<sup>14</sup>

Overall, the history of public housing in Ireland, and, indeed, the state's involvement in housing, between 1890 and 1945 is best understood as part of a story of the quest for political legitimacy and hegemony on the part of different actors. It is clear that neither the IPP in the 1890s-1900s, Cumann na nGaedheal in the 1920s or Fianna Fáil in the 1930s belonged within the social democratic tradition or were directly responding to working class demands for better housing. However, given the manner in which the housing question was promoted as part of the IPP's agenda and the extent to which it came to occupy the concerns of local authorities, all those seeking political leadership in the new state were challenged to address it.

This, of course, is far removed from the notion of a benevolent state reacting to poor social conditions. In assessing Skocpol's concept of state autonomy in relation to the evolution of welfare policy in Ireland in the years 1922-52, Cousins concludes that 'states and bureaucracies are ultimately constrained by social interests in formulating and implementing policy'.<sup>15</sup> He argues that although her approach 'provides a complex and convincing analysis of the way in which politics and polities interrelate' we have to incorporate class interests to arrive at an understanding of policy formation and implementation.<sup>16</sup> As an example he puts forward the Cumann na nGaedheal government's failure to win broad-based support for its policies through the 1920s and leading up to the 1932 general election. In contrast, Fianna Fáil's strategy of building support across a range of social classes, from small farmers to business interests, was based on a mix of populist policies with a broad appeal. Its housing policy fitted perfectly within that strategy. Manufacturing industry and construction were supported by the provisions in the Housing Acts requiring building materials to be of Irish manufacture where possible and the housing programme involved an injection of £10 million in state loans and grants to local authorities, private individuals and public utility societies.<sup>17</sup> The programme of public housing in Irish provincial towns was an element in that strategy as it helped to secure the party's political base amongst the working class in towns such as Drogheda, Navan, Tuam and Ballina. The significant increase in public spending on housing can be seen as a challenge to the notion of

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<sup>14</sup> Dunphy, *The Making of Fianna Fáil Power*, p. 210.

<sup>15</sup> Cousins, *The Birth of Social Welfare in Ireland*, p. 201.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>17</sup> *Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health 1944-45, Appendix xxxi.*



state autonomy as embodied in the persistence of the fiscally conservative values expounded by senior officials in the Department of Finance.

### **The local state**

The local state was the medium through which national state policy on public housing was implemented and is, therefore, a central theme in this study. Byrne and Damer's assertion regarding early public housing in Britain that 'the politics of the local state were to be the politics of housing' may place too much emphasis on local politics, but any attempt to explain variations in public housing provision in Irish provincial towns ultimately has to explore how town councils operated as institutions and as a space contested by local interests.<sup>18</sup>

Before turning to that theme, it is worth noting that the business of building and managing public housing was an important part of the story of urban local government in the period between 1890 and World War II. Those municipal authorities that built public housing were changed by the very fact that they were obliged to expand their capacities, both in terms of administration and funding. In the 1890s, as public bodies, they had low levels of funding, few professional staff and little experience in managing capital projects. Figure 3.3 shows that subsequent to the passing of the Clancy Act borrowing by municipal authorities in provincial towns was entirely dominated by housing loans with 74 percent of all loans in the three years 1912-14 allocated to housing. This was at a time when many towns had only the most basic public water and sewerage systems. What is most notable, then, is not the relatively low impact of public housing on housing conditions in Irish towns prior to 1922 but the fact that, in the circumstances, the provision of public housing came to feature so prominently in the activities of so many municipal authorities. Across the country 59 towns built houses and in 25 of these more than 50 houses were constructed. When the AMAI was formed in 1912 the meetings of its executive committee were dominated by the housing question and it was one that continued to feature prominently in succeeding years.<sup>19</sup> In the 1930s the councils in those towns such as Ballina and Tuam that engaged in very extensive house building negotiated the purchase of multiple sites, evaluated dozens of tenders, attempted – sometimes unsuccessfully – to coordinate new housing schemes with the provision of other infrastructure such as water and sewerage and end up managing large schemes where a proportion of their tenants were unable

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Goodwin, 'Council housing, the social democratic state and the locality', p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> Association of Municipal Authorities of Ireland Minute Book, (Cork City Archives, IE CCCA/AMAI/M).

to pay their rents. By 1945 Ballina UDC had drawn down housing loans totalling over £166,000 when the town's rateable valuation was just £15,000.<sup>20</sup>

This scale of activity placed significant stress on the capacity of councils to plan, build and manage their housing stocks. That capacity in part was related to the competence of some of the key staff including the town clerk and well as staff such as surveyors and engineers employed by the council. The repeated incidents of town clerks, rate and rent collectors in trouble, whether because of incompetence in carrying out their duties or of suspicions of varying degrees of corruption, points to weak systems of accountability and management. Some of these personnel failures were linked to the quite obvious nepotism that operated in the appointments to these positions that were usually decided by a vote of councillors at meetings that invariably attracted full attendances. The establishment of the Local Appointments Commission in 1926, whereby professional and technical staff of local authorities were appointed through competitive examination, was part of a centralisation process that culminated in the County Management Act of 1940. Potter's list of local authorities dissolved since 1922 reveals the remarkable fact that 22 of the 74 provincial towns were subject to this process between 1922 and 1945.<sup>21</sup> He describes this as the 'setting aside' of the 'democratic mandate' but on the evidence of the state of affairs in Kilrush, Longford and Listowel described in this study, the Department of Local Government and Public Health had little choice but to initiate proceedings for their dissolution.<sup>22</sup> Evidence regarding actual corruption on the part of councillors is difficult to unearth, although Richard Hilliard appears to be a reliable commentator when making his remarks on the awarding of contracts and the operation of the rating system in the early decades of the twentieth century in Killarney.<sup>23</sup> What is more obvious is the desire on the part of councillors to promote the interests of local contractors and builders when tenders for infrastructural projects and housing were being considered. While it is not clear if this reflected irregular relationships between councillors and those tendering, it certainly reflected an intense localism. Local contractors were more likely to employ local labour and the awarding of a contract to a local business reflected credit on the council.

The change in regime from the LGB to the Department of Local Government and Public Health was marked by a more vigorous oversight in this area and a narrowing of the latitude

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<sup>20</sup> *Annual report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1944-45*, Appendix xxviii; *Census of Population 1946, Volume 5*.

<sup>21</sup> Potter, *Municipal Revolution*, pp 444-45.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 294.

<sup>23</sup> IE TCD MS 9828 - Scrapbook containing newspaper cuttings, photographs, documents, letters, programmes etc., assembled by Richard M. Hilliard, page Y – discussed in Chapter 3.

afforded to councils. This reflected a regularly expressed distrust of local government on the part of Cumann na nGaedheal in the 1920s and an increased centralisation promoted by Fianna Fáil in the 1930s, culminating in the County Management Act of 1940. On the other hand, regarding housing, it is difficult to ignore, for example, the very uneven implementation by municipal authorities of government policy in the 1930s. Councils in towns like Longford and Ennis, for a variety of reasons, failed to respond to O’Kelly’s ‘fiery cross’ and between them had over 450 houses deemed unfit for habitation by the mid-1940s.<sup>24</sup> Whether similarly uneven patterns of activity characterised the post-war housing programme, with the County Management system firmly in place, remains to be determined.

### **Housing and social class**

The highly variable levels of public housing provision in provincial towns by 1945 provides insights into the exercise of local class interests and how they were mediated through the political system. These interests lay behind both the willingness and the capacity of councils to build. Lack of capacity was often the result of an unwillingness to strike an adequate rate which, in turn, reflected the balance of political power on councils and, ultimately, local social relations. This was combined with varying levels of enthusiasm regarding public housing provision, also shaped by political and class interests. Exploring this issue contributes to a slim literature on how class interest found expression in Irish towns in this period.

The two groups most obviously threatened by proposals to provide public housing were landlords and substantial ratepayers, the former because new housing of a reasonable standard was likely to reduce demand for their properties and the latter because it became clear from an early stage that the provision of public housing invariably involved subsidy from the rates. When some of the earliest schemes were proposed in Longford, Athy and Fermoy, both groups lobbied their councillors to have them blocked and in doing so articulated their class interests. Some councillors, of course, required little lobbying as they were themselves landlords and substantial ratepayers. Others navigated a course between competing interests. On one side weighed the prospect of votes from the newly enfranchised working class and the admonishments of Medical Officers of Health and, occasionally, LGB inspectors. On the other stood those opposed to higher rates and those with a vested interest in maintaining existing property relations in the town. The observation made at a Town Tenants meeting in Athy in 1909 that ‘the erection of houses for the labouring classes would create a healthy competition with the landlords, and make them

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<sup>24</sup> *Housing: A review of past operations and future requirements* (Dublin, 1947).

build and keep houses so that people can live in them' neatly encapsulated the threat posed to urban landlords by the prospect of competition. Many councils encountered significant difficulty in acquiring sites as the relocation of working class households to 'diminutive reduced standard cottages' threatened a redrawing of the social geography of towns and was perceived as posing a threat to property values.<sup>25</sup> Patterns of pre-World War I housing provision in many towns reflected the outcome of the contest between these competing positions. As part of that contest, the lead-in to the urban council elections of 1899 witnessed the potential of the question of working class housing to challenge the 'shopocracy' and its stranglehold on municipal authorities. Some housing schemes were planned on the basis of the electoral threat posed by labour representatives. But, ultimately, the result of the elections, and the subsequent co-option of those working class candidates who were elected to the cause of political unity in the name of Home Rule, exposed the weakness of the labour position.

State housing policy in the 1920s was unambiguously shaped by an ideological commitment to home ownership on the part of the Cumann na nGaedheal government and Daly correctly concludes that 'state aid for housing had largely gone to owner occupied farmers and speculative builders, with nothing for those in the worst housing conditions'.<sup>26</sup> In provincial towns this commitment was manifest in the Department of Local Government and Public Health's insistence that houses built as part of the £1 million scheme and those built under the provisions of the 1924 and 1925 Housing Acts be sold. This involved the capture of relatively generous subsidies, especially in relation to the £1 million scheme, by better off households, some of whom were not even town residents. Councils in towns such as Tralee and Tuam availed of these schemes with some enthusiasm while effectively ignoring the quarter of their populations living in one and two-roomed dwellings.

The 1932 Housing Act, particularly its provisions relating to slum clearance, was the first housing legislation to pose significant challenges to established interests in provincial towns, especially large ratepayers and landlords of slum property. The implementation of the Act tended to sharpen the divide between Fianna Fáil / Labour councillors, on the one hand, and Cumann na nGaedheal / Fine Gael councillors on the other. While the two-thirds loan subsidy available to re-house those in condemned dwellings was considerably more generous than any previous provisions, it was still insufficient to bridge the gap between the economic rent of new houses and the rent that many of those being re-housed could afford. Councils were faced with

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<sup>25</sup> This is the phrase used by the Representative Church Body in relation to a proposed scheme in Navan in 1929. The circumstances are discussed in Chapter 5.

<sup>26</sup> Daly, *Buffer State*, p. 148.

the dilemma of setting rents at a level that could attract those being displaced from houses marked for demolition. This could only be done by approving subsidies from the rates, a step resisted by those most closely aligned with ratepayer interests. On the question of the lack of compensation for landlords whose condemned properties were marked for demolition, this was a group with fewer public political allies. They are also something of a hidden class in the history of Irish towns in the first half of the twentieth century where property relations have received much less scrutiny than that of their rural hinterlands.

### **The sanitary approach and general provision**

The earliest housing legislation, from the Torren's Artisans' and Labourers' Dwelling Act of 1868, through to the Cross Act of 1875 and the Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890, was informed by a mid-Victorian set of ideas that linked behaviour to environmental conditions. Provisions in these Acts sought to address the problem of the slums as the embodiment of the threat to the social order. It is significant, though, that Part III of the 1890 Act went beyond this formulation and gave municipal authorities scope to build to meet general housing needs, subject to those being housed being members of the working class. The vast majority of the 3,500 houses built in Irish towns between 1890 and 1922 were built under the provisions of Part III and the definition of 'working class' was quite flexible and varied from town to town, from labourers to teachers and town clerks. This pattern of provision occurred despite the fact that the 'sanitary agenda', promoted by both the LGB and local Medical Officers for Health, was ostensibly a factor in persuading municipal authorities to involve themselves in housing. So, while much of the discourse around the pre-1922 public housing programme reflected the sanitary agenda, its implementation in provincial towns addressed general housing provision. Councils chose to believe that a 'trickle up' mechanism would operate and see those in the poorest housing conditions move to dwellings vacated by those offered new council houses. Rather than housing policy being used as a tool to 'reform' slum dwellers, as envisaged by the sanitarians, councils sought 'respectable' tenants in regular employment who were likely to be dependable in paying their rents.

Housing policy under Cumann na nGaedheal made no pretence of directly addressing the problems of those in the poorest conditions. This was unambiguously general housing provision geared towards providing an economic stimulus and promoting home ownership. The 1932 Act, as relating to public housing in towns, building on the 1931 Act drawn up by Cumann na nGaedheal, realigned policy to slum clearance. The manner in which clearance areas were

defined and individual houses classified as unfit for human habitation as detailed in the files relating to Kilrush in the 1930s represented a classic illustration of the sanitary approach. The precise measurement of rooms, ceiling heights and windows as criteria to determine whether a dwelling was habitable reflected an exclusively technical approach. Pronouncements by experts such as County Medical Officers, engineers and sanitary officers represent the exercise of technical power as described by Carroll when exploring the exercise of state power.<sup>27</sup> The fact that in many respects the 1931 and 1932 Housing Acts mirrored the provisions of the Greenwood Act of 1930 in England and Wales emphasises the high level of continuity in how the state bureaucracy conceived of its role. Carroll claims that ‘once independence was achieved for three-quarters of the country, science and engineering was excluded from the nation’s imagination of itself’.<sup>28</sup> Fianna Fáil’s vision of rolling back three hundred years of history and undoing the Cromwellian conquest did not extend to rethinking the precepts of the sanitary approach, with its origins in Edwin Chadwick’s faith in environmentalism. It is also possible to recognise Patrick Joyce’s notion of state employees as ‘authors of the state’ playing out as doctors, engineers and housing inspectors interacted with citizens in public enquiries linked to slum clearances.<sup>29</sup> When Mrs Corbett in Hector Street in Kilrush complained that ‘of course the Government wants a terrible lot of light’, in response to the Medical Officer of Health’s statement that the house lacked sufficient light,<sup>30</sup> she was articulating or ‘authoring’ a view of the state that chimes with Joyce’s suggestion that ‘produced and reproduced in this way the state was returned to those in authority in new and often critical forms’.<sup>31</sup>

The evidence from the Kilrush inquiries suggests a fundamental cultural clash between the body of expertise presented and the lived experience of the residents of Hector Street and Pella Road it was supposed to serve. The outcome of that clash involved the demolition of dwellings irrespective of the views and wishes of their residents and brought state power beyond the doorsteps of its citizens. Consistent with a sanitary view of housing, welfare was defined in terms of living space, light and fresh air. And while data was collected on household incomes, it seems to have played only a marginal role in decisions as to who was obliged to move.

The growing rental arrears in towns such as Tralee and Ballina, and the apparent distress of those households in new council houses dependent on unemployment and home assistance,

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<sup>27</sup> Carroll, *Science, Culture and Modern State Formation*, pp 113-42.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>29</sup> Joyce, *The State of Freedom*, p. 44.

<sup>30</sup> Kilrush UD, Clearance of unhealthy areas (NAI, ENV/2013/94/987).

<sup>31</sup> Joyce, *The State of Freedom*, p. 44.

point to the limited vision that informed the housing programme. Going back to the mid-nineteenth century, the sanitary approach was essentially a conservative one, based on technical and engineering solutions to what were essentially problems of poverty and deprivation. Viewed in a wider context, the conservative nature of Fianna Fáil's urban housing policy in the 1930s is apparent when set alongside developments in Britain. Here the retreat from general housing provision by the state by the National government in 1933 marked a defeat for the Labour Party's policy of promoting general housing under the provisions of the Wheatley Act alongside slum clearance under the Greenwood Act. In England and Wales in the 1930s two million houses were built of which 644,000 were built by the state sector.<sup>32</sup> Goodwin makes an important point about the key role of social forces in explaining local variations in how the public housing programme was implemented in England. Despite the change in government policy in 1933 and the abolition of subsidies for general housing provision in the 1935 Housing Act, Sheffield Council continued to build suburban houses where other municipal authorities almost exclusively built lower quality city-centre flats.<sup>33</sup> This policy was driven by the Labour Party's control of the council and a long history of working class radicalism in the city. Goodwin refers to Sheffield as one of the so-called 'Red Islands' or cities that remained under Labour control for decades and had sufficient autonomy to implement policies that diverged to some extent from policies being pursued at the state level.<sup>34</sup> His work highlights the absence of an equivalent social democratic powerbase at state level in Ireland or in municipal councils that might have promoted a broader vision of the role of public housing than that pursued by Fianna Fáil. Some movement towards the wider provision of general needs housing was evident towards the end of Fianna Fáil's term in government. In 1947 proposals for 'reserved housing' were approved that were designed to meet the needs of young married couples. Marriage certificates were required and husbands had to produce evidence of being in steady employment.<sup>35</sup> A version of the proposals was included in the Inter-Party government's Housing Act of 1948 which presaged a resumption of public housing approaching that of the mid-1930s. In this phase assessment of housing needs was broadened beyond an exclusive focus on the physical condition of dwellings and began to include the shortage of accommodation.

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<sup>32</sup> Goodwin, 'Council housing, the social democratic state and the locality', p. 93.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 166-67.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145. Sheffield, of course, is an entirely different sized town/city compared to the towns that are the subject of this study. However, it is difficult to conceive of the level of autonomy evident in Sheffield being exercised in Irish cities in these years given the tightening grip of central government over local authorities.

<sup>35</sup> Daly, *Buffer State*, p. 343.

In assessing the character of the 1930s housing programme it is important to appreciate the scale of the housing problem in many Irish towns at the beginning of the 1930s. Almost one in seven private dwellings across the 74 towns were condemned and ordered to be demolished between 1932 and 1945.<sup>36</sup> In towns with growing industrial populations and poor housing such as Drogheda, Arklow, Tuam and Navan the distinction between slum clearance and general provision was not clear. Applications for new council houses exceeded the numbers available and council minutes for several towns indicate an unmet demand for 'better class' houses which councillors were keen to satisfy.

Photographs in the *Irish Press* in the years after 1932 of the opening of new council housing schemes feature councillors, clergy and local worthies assembled to witness a new start in the lives of families moving into their new homes. These photographs are snapshots in a longer narrative that would see hovels with leaky roofs, damp walls, buckets of night soil, vermin and gloom in the back lanes and impoverished suburbs of Irish towns consigned to history. This is part of the narrative, as are the deeply embedded class relations in these towns, the paternalism of bureaucrats and officials, the strategizing and idealism of national and local politicians, the foregoing of food to pay the rent and the hope a new home brings.

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<sup>36</sup> Based on data published in the 1944-45 *Annual Report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health*, 9,683 dwellings were condemned and marked for demolition in provincial towns. The total number of private dwellings recorded in the 1926 census in these towns was 67,506.



## Appendices

### Appendix 1

#### The 74 provincial towns

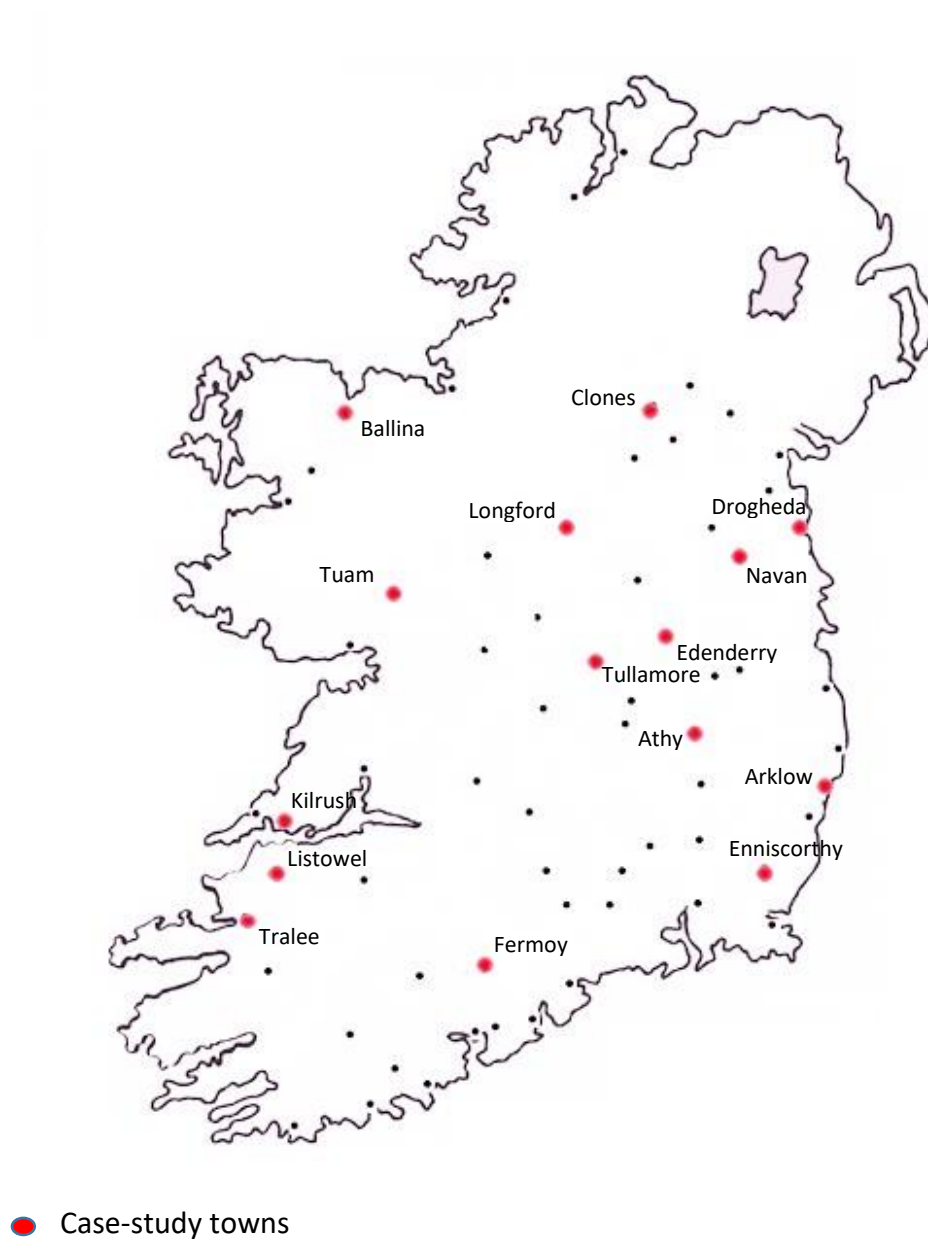
Town	1926 population	Town	1926 population
Carlow	7163	Kinsale	2747
Bagenalstown	1821	Midleton	2732
Athy*	3460	Bantry	2685
Naas	3442	Skibbereen	2627
Newbridge	2249	Macroom	2413
Kilkenny	10046	Tralee*	10533
Callan	1500	Killarney	5328
Portlaoise	3374	Listowel*	2917
Mountmellick	2279	Newcastle West	2797
Longford*	3685	Rathkeale	1550
Dundalk	13996	Clonmel	9056
Drogheda*	12716	Tipperary	5555
Ardee	1729	Thurles	4815
Navan*	3652	Carrick-on-Suir	4657
Kells	2196	Nenagh	4524
Tullamore*	4930	Cashel	2953
Birr	3402	Templemore	2233
Edenderry*	2092	Dungarvan	5207
Athlone	7540	Galway	14227
Mullingar	5293	Ballinasloe	5245
Wexford	11879	Tuam*	3293
Enniscorthy*	5543	Loughrea	2805
New Ross	5011	Ballina*	4873
Gorey	2296	Castlebar	4266
Bray	8637	Westport	3488
Arklow*	4535	Boyle	2323
Wicklow	3025	Roscommon	1830
Ennis	5518	Sligo	11437
Kilrush*	3345	Cavan	3060
Kilkee	1682	Cootehill	1532
Cobh	7077	Buncrana	2309
Youghal	5339	Letterkenny	2308
Mallow	4562	Ballyshannon	2112
Fermoy*	4510	Monaghan	4636
Passage West	3019	Clones*	2365
Bandon	2830	Carrickmacross	1995
Clonakilty	2770	Castleblayney	1550

Source: *Saorstát Éireann, census of population 1926, vol. 1*

\* Case-study towns

## Appendix 2

### Location of 74 provincial and case-study towns



### Appendix 3

#### Thatched cabins in Drogheda

#### North Road, Drogheda in 1933



Source: James Garry, *Drogheda's Streets and Lanes* (Drogheda, 1996)

#### Magdalene Street, Drogheda in the early twentieth century



Source: Postcards Ireland, [www.postcardsireland.com](http://www.postcardsireland.com) [accessed 13May 2016]

## Appendix 4

### Net migration from Irish Provincial Towns, 1926-36

	1926 population	1936 population	Natural Increase 1926-36	Net Migration
Arklow	4535	4680	260	-115
Athlone	7540	7257	890	-1173
Athy	3460	3628	313	-145
Birr	3402	3297	29	-134
Carlow	7163	7649	509	-23
An Uaimh	3652	4123	334	137
Kells	2196	2304	109	-1
Enniscorthy	5543	5873	703	-373
Longford	3684	3807	604	-481
Naas	3442	3290	236	-388
New Ross	5011	5056	200	-155
Tullamore	4930	5135	669	-464
Wicklow	3025	3183	234	-76
Carrick-on-Suir	4657	4840	499	-316
Cashel	2953	3028	646	-571
Clonakilty	2770	2961	351	-160
Clonmel	9056	9391	557	-222
Cobh	7077	6178	137	-1036
Dungarvan	5207	5361	521	-367
Ennis	5518	5897	339	40
Fermoy	4510	4123	86	-473
Killarney	5328	5609	440	-159
Kilrush	3345	3426	319	-238
Kinsale	2747	2422	3	-328
listowel	2917	3098	256	-75
Macroom	2413	2382	29	-60
Mallow	4562	4948	207	179
Middleton	2732	2711	76	-97
Nenagh	4524	4902	396	-18
Passage West	3019	2648	40	-411
Skibbereen	2627	2541	-31	-55
Templeore	2233	1981	161	-413
Thurles	4815	5648	520	313
Tipperary	5555	5384	453	-624
Youghal	5339	5131	181	-389
Ballina	4873	5728	607	248
Ballinasloe	5245	5834	390	199
Castlebar	4266	4826	390	170
Westport	3488	3409	210	-289
Carrickmacross	1995	2095	71	29
Castleblaney	1550	1725	114	61
Cavan	3060	3393	303	30
Clones	2365	2235	213	-343
Cootehill	1532	1593	197	-136
Letterkenny	2308	2649	214	127
Monaghan	4636	4780	299	-155
Total	186805	192159	14284	-8930

*Source: Saorstát Éireann, census of population 1926, Vol. I; Ireland, census of population 1936, Vol. I; Registrar General Annual Reports, 1926-36*

## Appendix 5

### Public housing in provincial towns up to 1922

Town	Status	Total to May 1906	Houses as per Dublin Housing Inquiry	Total to 1922 as per DLGPH reports	1911 Population	Houses built per 1000 population (1911)
Longford	UDC	60	60	106	3760	28.2
Navan	UDC	20	84	100	3934	25.4
Letterkenny	UDC	5	55	55	2194	25.1
Callan	TC	0	16	45	1987	22.6
Arklow	UDC	0	12	112	5042	22.2
Buncranna	UDC	0	0	38	1848	20.6
Bray	UDC	54	155	155	7691	20.2
Kilkenny	Corp	84	140	187	10514	17.8
Midleton	UDC	41	41	56	3182	17.6
Ennis	UDC	20	96	96	5472	17.5
Tullamore	UDC	12	47	85	4926	17.3
Enniscorthy	UDC	20	70	90	5495	16.4
Fermoy	UDC	24	52	112	6863	16.3
Thurles	UDC	56	56	74	4549	16.3
Tipperary	UDC	17	22	106	6645	16.0
Kells	UDC	26	38	38	2395	15.9
Naas	UDC	30	40	60	3842	15.6
Dundalk	UDC	83	83	201	13128	15.3
Carlow	UDC	27	43	97	6619	14.7
Cavan	UDC	0	43	40	2961	13.5
Galway	Corp	7	94	169	13255	12.7
Carrickmacross	UDC	0	0	25	2064	12.1
New Ross	UDC	20	46	66	5547	11.9
Cashel	UDC	14	20	33	2813	11.7
Wexford	Corp	78	117	134	11531	11.6
Mountmellick	TC	0	0	27	2341	11.5
Drogheda	Corp	42	116	128	12501	10.2
Tuam	TC	0	0	30	2980	10.1
Killarney	UDC	23	41	55	5796	9.5
Ballina	UDC	0	0	44	4662	9.4
Skibbereen	UDC	11	11	28	3021	9.3
Nenagh	UDC	14	18	44	4776	9.2
Dungarvan	UDC	19	45	45	4977	9.0
Athlone	UDC	0	66	66	7472	8.8
Ballinasloe	UDC	0	32	45	5169	8.7
Bandon	TC	0	27	27	3122	8.6

Town	Status	Total to May 1906	Houses as per Dublin Housing Inquiry	Total to 1922 as per DLGPH reports	1911 Population	Houses built per 1000 population (1911)
Tralee	UDC	26	88	88	10300	8.5
Mullingar	TC	26	45	45	5539	8.1
Newcastle West	TC	0	21	21	2585	8.1
Portlaoise	TC	0	26	26	3270	8.0
Clonmel	Corp	45	45	78	10209	7.6
Castlebar	UDC	0	25	25	3698	6.8
Monaghan	UDC	0	0	28	4272	6.6
Birr	UDC	0	26	26	4047	6.4
Mallow	UDC	16	28	28	4452	6.3
Athy	UDC	0	22	22	3535	6.2
Cobh	UDC	0	0	50	8209	6.1
Newbridge	TC	20	20	20	3400	5.9
Kinsale	UDC	20	23	23	4020	5.7
Wicklow	UDC	18	18	18	3243	5.6
Roscommon	TC	0	10	10	1858	5.4
Boyle	TC	14	14	14	2691	5.2
Cootehill	TC	0	0	8	1550	5.2
Ballyshannon	TC	12	12	10	2170	4.6
Youghal	UDC	0	9	20	5648	3.5
Clonakilty	UDC	0	5	10	2961	3.4
Bantry	TC	0	10	10	3159	3.2
Westport	UDC	0	10	10	3674	2.7
Sligo	Corp	20	30	30	11163	2.7
Bagenalstown	TC	0	0	0	1873	0.0
Ardee	TC	0	0	0	1773	0.0
Edenderry	TC	0	0	0	2208	0.0
Gorey	TC	0	0	0	2339	0.0
Kilrush	UDC	0	0	0	3666	0.0
Kilkee	TC	0	0	0	1688	0.0
Passage West	TC	0	0	0	1780	0.0
Macroom	UDC	0	0	0	2717	0.0
Listowel	UDC	0	0	0	3409	0.0
Rathkeale	TC	0	0	0	1705	0.0
Carrick-on-Suir	UDC	0	0	0	5235	0.0
Templemore	UDC	0	0	0	1791	0.0
Loughrea	TC	0	0	0	2388	0.0
Clones	UDC	0	0	0	2401	0.0
Castleblayney	UDC	0	0	0	1692	0.0

*Source: Housing of the Working Class Acts: A Return showing Particulars as to the action of Local Authorities in Ireland under the Acts, 1906, [Cd 337] H.C. 1906, xcvi; Report of the Departmental Committee into the Housing Conditions of the Working Classes in the City of Dublin, 1914 [Cd. 7273]; Annual report of the DLGPH, 1929-30; Census of Ireland 1911*

## Appendix 6

### Specifications for houses under 1922 Act (square feet)

Class	Desc	Living room	Scullery	Parlour					Total
					1	2	3	4	
A	2 bed	180	80		160	120			460
B	2 bed	160	80	110	160	120			550
C	3 bed	180	80		160	120			540
D	3 bed	160	80	110	160	120	80		630
E	4 bed	180	80		160	120	80	80	620
F	4 bed	160	80	110	160	120	80	80	710

Source: Circular March 1922 Miscellaneous, (LCA, DBC/HSG/001/001/001)

## Appendix 7

### Houses built by municipal authorities in the 15 case-study towns under the 1932 Housing Act, 1932-45

Town	1932-33	1933-34	1934-35	1935-36	1936-37	1937-38	1938-39	1939-40	1940-41	1941-42	1942-43	1943-44	1944-45	Total
Arklow				60				88				124		272
Athy		93		45	36		25							199
Ballina		47	116	118		20	154				16			471
Clones				118										118
Drogheda	56	128	90	104	160	18	22	150	32	6				766
Edenderry		32	6											38
Enniscorthy		46	14	10	82		4	107						263
Fermoy		41			62		103							206
Kilrush	24	22	32			64	20	46						208
Listowel			104											104
Longford	24		10		12						22			68
Navan	12	25	14	36	7	8	66							168
Tralee	30		183			68	130	130	70					611
Tuam					120	40	62	22						244
Tullamore		52	4	26	50	70								202
<b>Total</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>486</b>	<b>573</b>	<b>517</b>	<b>529</b>	<b>288</b>	<b>586</b>	<b>543</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3938</b>

*Source: Annual reports of the Department of Local Government and Public Health 1932-45*



## Appendix 8

### Fianna Fáil election poster for the 1932 general election

**FIANNA FAIL**  
**PREPARED PROGRAMME**  
and the approximate number of workers that will get  
employment when in full productivity.

---

**Building**      -      -

Houses, Hospitals, Churches, Schools, Colleges, Halls, Mills, Factories, Workshops, Warehouses, Stores, etc.,	20,000
Employment in Industries, Factories and Workshops,	25,000
Road, Rail Construction & Re-construction,	10,000
Land Cultivation, Reclamation and Rural Electricification	10,000
Tourist Resort Development & Hotel Employment	10,000
Shipbuilding, Harbour Development and Fishery Expansion	8,000
Additional employment in farms to provide food for above workers	15,000
Increased Commercial Staffs	10,000

An approximate **100,000** extra workers with an average of  
£5 a week or **£500,000** ( $\frac{1}{2}$  million) in circulation weekly.

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**VOTE FIANNA FAIL** to enable the Party to put above  
vast prepared Schemes into operation.

**Every Vote cast against Fianna Fail makes  
it impossible to achieve this.**

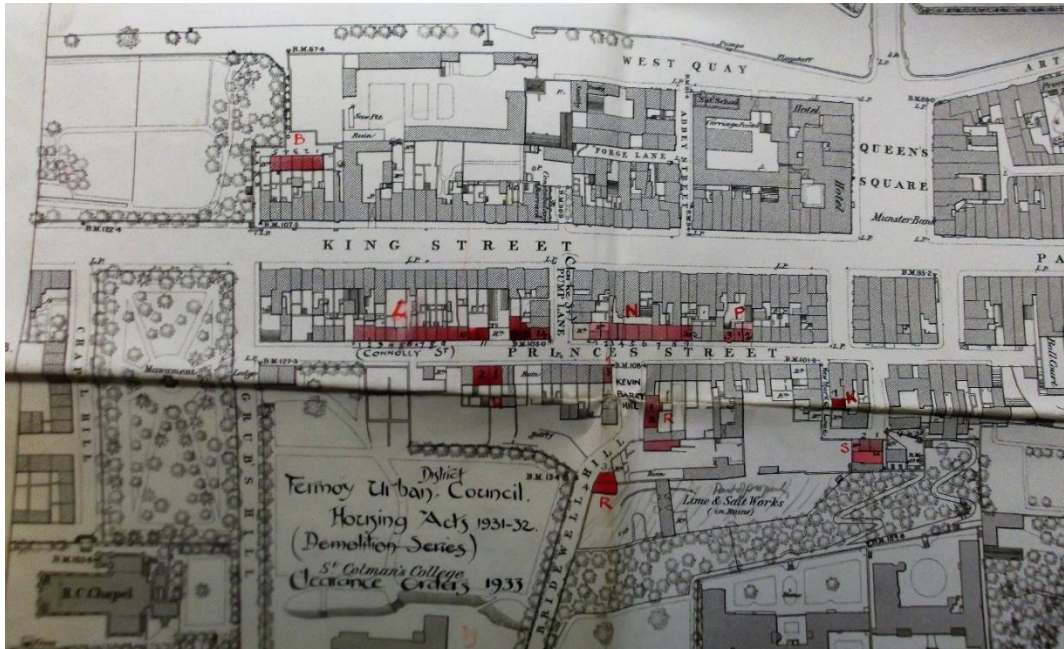
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Issued by the Fianna Fail Election Committee on behalf  
of the Candidates; printed by Leahy & Co. Carrick-on-Suir.

Source: Located in minutes of Arklow UDC (Wicklow County Archives)

## Appendix 9

### Detail from a map of Fermoy UDC Clearance Order, 1933



Source: NAI, ENV/2014/16/1701

## Appendix 10

### Data relating to households in Kilrush Clearance Order No. 3, 1939

No	Persons	Area (sq feet)	Rooms	Employment	Income (shillings per week)	Condition of house
1	1	213	1	carpenter	20	small and very dilapidated
2	11	325	3	casual worker	20	roof and wall unsound
3	3			pensioner	30	no objection
4	8	289	2	casual worker	20	very bad condition
5	8	280	3	pensioner	25	floor and joinery in very bad condition
6	7	341	3	casual worker	14	roof of house is bad; back wall defective
7	8	320	3	casual worker	14	excluded by inspector
8	1			house duties	10	no objection
9	7	263	2	casual worker	14	unfit for human habitation
10	1			house duties	15	no objection
11						vacant - no objection
12	1			casual worker	14	no objection
13	1	228	3	casual worker	16	very dilapidated
14	7	392	3	van driver	25	roof in wretched condition; walls damp
15						vacant - no objection
16	5	283	2	casual worker	30	excluded by inspector
17	2	173	1	house duties	10	very bad condition
18	4			pensioner	10	excluded by inspector
19	1			pensioner	10	no objection
20						vacant - no objection
21	12			casual worker	20	no objection
22	6			general worker	40	no objection
23	4	204	3	house duties	15	wretched condition; very bad roof and walls
24	4	304	3	house duties	15	roof in bad condition; generally dilapidated
25	2	238	3	pensioner	10	unfit for human habitation
26	2	192	3	dressmaker	20	roof unsound; joinery rotten
27	1	151	2	pensioner	10	roof unsound; floor level low; walls damp
28	2	334	4	pensioner	10	roof unsound; floor level low; walls damp
No	Persons	Area (sq feet)	Rooms	Employment	Income (shillings per week)	Condition of house

No	Persons	Area (sq feet)	Rooms	Employment	Income (shillings per week)	Condition of house
29	1	388	3	mill hand	40	very dilapidated
30	2			house duties	10	no objection
31	2	215	1	house duties	15	ceiling low; roof old; back wall damp
32	2	251	1	casual worker	30	roof leaky; floor bad; ceiling of sacks
33	2	316	3	pensioner	30	bad rood; generally dilapidated
34	2	357	3	casual worker	20	bad condition
35	1			casual worker	15	no objection
36	5			casual worker	14	no objection
37	4			casual worker	15	no objection
38	3			carter	40	no objection
39	3			pensioner	10	no objection
40	5			lorry driver	40	no objection
41	1			mill hand	48	no objection
42	3			pensioner	10	no objection
43	4	431	3	pensioner	20	beyond repair but not to put in force
44	3	375	2	pensioner	10	ground damp; lighting and ventilation poor
45	1			pensioner	10	no objection
46	5			mill hand	50	no objection
47	5			casual worker	10	no objection
48	4	482	4	casual worker	10	Galvanised iron floor, low ceiling, overcrowded
49	1	255	1	house duties	10	unfit for human habitation
50	2			mill hand	40	no objection
51	2	406	2	pensioner	10	doors, floors and windows required; not worth expenditure
52	6			pensioner	10	no objection
53	2	488	2	mill hand	40	very bad condition
54	5			pensioner	10	no objection
55	2			pensioner	10	no objection
56	2	487	2	boatman	20	excluded by inspector
57	2			railway employee	40	no objection

Source: Kilrush UD, Clearance Order 1939, No. 3 (NAI, ENV/2013/94/1051)

## Appendix 11

### Data relating to a subset of households in Kilrush Clearance Area No. 2, 1935

No	Persons	Area (sq feet)	Employment	Income (shillings per week)
1	4	367	Labourer	12.5
2	6	272	Labourer	12.5
6	5	497	Labourer	16
7	3	462	Labourer	20
8	6	382	Labourer	36
10	1	476	House duties	10
12	6	576	Labourer	20
15	3	440	Labourer	6
21	1	372	Pensioner	30
22	2	604	Pensioner	10
25	2	272	Labourer	20
26	1	252	Pensioner	10
27	4	169	House duties	12.5
28	1	124	Labourer	6
29	4	206	Labourer	6
30	1	195	House duties	10
31	2	287	Labourer	11.5
34	5	555	Labourer	10
36	6	546	Merchant	30
37	9	248	Labourer	20
42	2	290	Labourer	12
43	8	373	Labourer	45
45	8	450	Labourer	12.5
46	1	260	Pensioner	35

*Kilrush UD, Pound St Clearance Order 1936 (ENV/2013/94/1050)*

## Appendix 12

### Letter from Thomas and Mary Egan to Eamonn de Valera regarding Clearance Order

Pound St

Kilrush

Sept 10<sup>th</sup> 1940

Dear Mr De Valera,

Forgive me for writing to you of my trouble, but you are my last hope, so I am going to appeal to you now, for what help you can give me.

I am an old woman of 74 years, my husband is 76. And we are alone in the world now. My last son, a member of State army got shot when home on duty some 18 years ago. And neither sympathy nor compensation did I get through his death.

Now, through our County Council, my little home is to be taken from me, that I have lost my life savings on. It has two bedrooms and a large kitchen, a new corrugated iron roof and cement front. Six months ago they ordered me to remove the attic which I did and cope-ceiled every bit of it with timber. I also built a new gable and put two new windows in it. In all there are six windows in the house at the recent cost of £60.

When all that had been done no one came to see it. But they brought me to court and got an order for me to be put out within 28 days. There are 10 houses left standing an my house is better than any of them, still I and my poor old man have to go while those younger people are left their homes.

We have only our old age pension. Its little enough in our own home and why should they put the like of us under heavy rent?

Our years of this life can be so long more, and all we ask is to be left where we are happy and comfortable for the little time that is left us.

Dear Mr de Valera, you are in power, and you can help us. And God will reward you. You have already the prayers of the widows and orphans and you are the poor man's friend, so have pity on us, we beg of you and that God may bless you for it is the prayer of a poor old couple,

Thomas and Mary Egan.

*Source: Kilrush UD, Clearance of unhealthy areas (NAI, ENV/2013/94/987).*

### Appendix 13

#### Data relating to households applying to Drogheda Corporation for housing at Platten Road and St Joseph's Terrace, 1935

Name	Address	Rooms	No in Family	Income per week (shillings)
Bernard Connolly	Bachelors Lane	2	7	21.5
Hugh Armour	Balmarino Lodge	3	2	65
William Connor	Barrack Street	2	3	11.5
Philip Fay	Bolton Sq	2	3	55
Joseph McGuinness	do	5	5	55
Edward Tierney	do	2	4	52.5
Edward McQuaile	Bolton Street	1	3	30
James Byrne	Boyne Place	3	7	40
Bernard Grogan	Congress Ave		3	
Peter Rooney	Crifty	4	6	45
Edward Clarke	Dale St	1	5	35
William Sheridan	Donore Rd	2	3	35
James Kerr	Dundalk	1	2	40
James McGowan	Dyer St	1	6	50
Terry O'Neill	do	1	3	80
Patrick White	do	1	4	49
Nicholas Murphy	Fair Street	1	4	50
Patrick Milne	Freeschool Lane	2	4	50
James Keegan	Georges St	1	2	60
John Kenny	do	2	8	15
John Leech	do	1	3	40
John Lynch	do	1	4	50
Bernard Farrell	Gravel Walk	2	5	13.5
Valentine Cullen	Greenbatter	2	7	44
Patrick Maguire	Green Lanes	1	3	50
Mrs McCormack	Hand St	1	7	42
Joseph Finn	do	1	3	33
Edward McConnon	Hardmans Garden	1	2	50
james Coyle	do		4	18
John McCarty	do	3	5	40
Joseph Carolan	Hill of Rath	3	8	60
Patrick Mullane	Johns Gate	1	5	37.5
Patrick Loughran	do	1	7	29
Charles Kemball	John St	1	4	65
Patrick Bannon	do	1	4	40
Peter McElearney	King St	1	3	55
Thomas McNamara	Laytown	3	2	58
William Henry	Magdalene St	2	11	132
Henry mallon	do	3	8	20

Name	Address	Rooms	No in Family	Income per week (shillings)
Joseph Bradley	do	1	5	36
John Healy	do	2	6	27
Francis Kelly	do	3	8	65
Thomas Sweeney	Murphy's Court	1	5	37
Patrick Murphy	Malahide	6	5	136.5
Mrs McKevitt	Marsh Rd	1	2	20
Michael McDonnell	do	2	2	
Thomas Pentony	Mell		1	49
Mrs Elizabeth Reynolds	do	2	5	62.5
Joseph Reynolds	do	2	9	59
Joseph Vaughey	do	3	6	48
Patrick Clarke	do	1	6	30
John Bird	do	2	6	33
Michael Hodgins	do	1	4	36
Charles Murphy	do	2	7	50
Ellen Loughran	do		6	14
Elizabeth Finnerty	do	2	4	26
Arthur Evers	do	1	6	20
Alex Brunker	do	1	4	22
Mrs Melia	do	2	7	59
Laurence Collins	do	3	6	58.5
John Donoghue	do	1	5	25
John Murray	do		3	27
Patrick Corcoran	do	2	6	40
David Smith	do	2	6	65
Mrs Murtagh	Singleton Cottages	1	2	65
Patrick Moroney	do	1	2	93
Mrs Johnston	do	3	5	
James Matthews	Loughboy	2	7	28
Joseph Martin	do	2	4	48
James Govers	do	2	8	83
Michael Shortt	do		1	20
Patrick McConnon	do	2	6	52.6
James Carroll	do	2	5	13.5
Williqam Wall	do	1	6	53
Patrick Moore	do	2	7	15
Michael McQuillan	do	2	6	74
Michael Collins	do	3	6	74
Mary Pentony	do	1	1	30
John Farrell	do	2	2	
John McGinn	do	1	4	58
Mrs Corcoran	do	2	4	49
Mrs McKeon	do	2	10	30



Name	Address	Rooms	No in Family	Income per week (shillings)
James McCarthy	do	2	6	14.5
Mrs Rose Byrne	do	2	9	45
Thomas Meehan	do	3	10	70
Christopher Mullen	do	2	6	30
James Leslie	do	1	5	30
James Connolly	do	2	6	65
Mrs D. Lynch	Millmount Sq	1	2	65
Thomas Gavin	do	1	2	55
John farrell	Mill Lane	2	5	13.5
Agnes Reilly	do	2	5	28
John Rogers	Mill Row	2	9	50
Patrick Finglas	do	1	5	49
Margaret McDonnell	North Rd	3	4	60
Mrs Manning	do	3	9	60
Bridget Smith	do	1	2	14.5
Edward O'Boyle	do	3	4	42
Thomas Hughes	do	2	6	80
Frank Martin	Palace Row	3	2	45
Margaret Finnegan	Patrick St	2	4	40
Joseph Plunkett	do	1	5	22.5
Mrs E Clarke	do	2	8	78.5
mary McAuley	Warren Court	1	3	17.5
Daniel McAuley	Sandy Row	1	5	18
Edward Sweeney	do	1	3	12
Francis Smith	do	1	4	18.5
John Gaffney	Platten Rd	1	4	35
Laurence Devine	do	2	9	40
John P Farrelly	Queensboro	3	5	50
John Rafferty	Rathmullen	4	4	122.5
Joseph McGovern	Rope Walk	2	5	80
Bernard farrell	do	2	5	82.5
Mrs O'Neill	Sandyford tce	1	6	34
Patrick Jackson	Scarlet St	1	2	25
Thomas Lynch	Sheephouse		2	25
Patrick Kelly	do	2	2	80
James Kimmins	Simcox Lane	1	4	45
Patrick Sherry	Stockwell St	1	2	12
Edward Finegan	do	1	2	44
Patrick Floody	do	1	4	74
John Gaffney	do	1	2	21.5
F.J. McGrillen	Termonfeckin	2	3	70
Alfred Monk	St Mary's Cottages	3	3	70
John Rooney	Twenties	1	4	49.5

Name	Address	Rooms	No in Family	Income per week (shillings)
Andrew Ormiston	Townley Hall	4	6	
Thomas Kevitt	Trinity Gardens		3	11.5
Daniel Burns	do	2	4	60
Michael Caffrey	do		2	50
Nicholas Kelly	do	1	3	50
Michael McEntee	do	1	2	25
Mrs McEvoy	Trinity St	3	4	100
John Carr	do	1	2	30
Joseph Carolan	Tullyallen	4	8	60
Christopher Buckley	West Gate	3	9	93
Mary Thornton	Williaqm St	1	6	35
Thomas Donnellon	do	5	3	60
Patrick Lane	Windmill rd	1	3	70
Hugh Hackett	do	1	4	80
Bridget Smith	Barrack Street	2	2	13.5
James McAleer	do	1	5	72
James Martin	do	2	4	53
Elizabeth King	do	1	8	68
Edward Quaile	Bolton St	1	4	48
Owen Farrell	Blackbut Lane	2	7	31
William Murphy	Cherrymount	1	5	13.5
Patrick Murray	do	2	6	58
Richard Conway	Curry's Hill	3	6	77.5
Thomas Leonard	Coolagh St	1	5	49
Patrick Rooney	do	3	5	48
Joseph Fitzgerald	do	2	4	50
Patrick McGovern	do	2	3	50
James Kimmins	do	2	5	30
Patrick Corr	do	1	3	11.5
Thomas Healy	do	1	6	13.5
Christopher Nulty	do	1	2	49
Christopher Reynolds	do	1	2	63
Thomas Birch	do	1	3	25
Thomas Kelly	Chord Road	3	5	40
Joseph Leonard	do	1	3	74
Peter Lynch	Colpe Cross	1	2	62
Eugene Smith	Congress Ave	1	2	58
Daniel Black	do	1	3	42
Mrs Maria Nelis	do	1	3	60
Bernard Smith	do	1	3	50
Thomas Plunkett	Cromwells Mount	1	2	48
John Rooney	Dale	1	4	30
John Cunningham	do	2	5	46

Name	Address	Rooms	No in Family	Income per week (shillings)
Michael Finnegan	do	2	4	55
Thomas Jein	do	1	8	45
Thomas Smith	do	1	4	47
Francis Connor	do	1	4	56
Edward Clarke	do	1	5	40
Edward McLoughlin	do	1	5	50
Peter McCabe	do	2	9	22
Peter Floody	do	2	6	40
John Murdoch	do	1	2	68
Thomas Fleming	Duleeek St	3	7	76
Thomas Reynolds	do	2	6	50
James Tiernan	do	2	8	57
Andrew McConville	do	3	3	30
Christopher Rourke	do	2	4	42
Christopher Kelly	do	2	3	14
Thomas Murphy	do	2	5	
Joseph McCromack	do	3	3	63
Julia Rooney	do	1	4	65
Nicholas Farrell	do	1	4	102
Patrick Maguire	do	1	2	99
Peter Kierans	do	1	5	55
William McGinn	do	2	5	42
Thomas Rooney	Dyer St	1	4	30
John Traynor	Dublin	1	7	25
Alfred McGinn	Fair St	1	3	75
Rose O'Leary	do	2	6	80
Nicholas Murphy	do	1	5	50
Thomas Connor	Freeschool Lane	3	5	70
Mrs Martin	do	2	7	62
Edward C. Finegan	do	2	2	44
Michael Benton	do	2	3	56
John Stafford	Francis St	1	3	50
Michael Burke	Glen View	1	4	55
Thomas Weldon	Gravel Walk	3	5	68
Thomas Carlon	Hand St	1	2	75
Joseph McGuirk	Hardmans Gardens	1	2	35
Michael Milne	Hinchleys Lane	2	6	60
Kathleen Plunkett	do	2	4	57
Patrick Flood	do	2	5	45
William Martin	do	4	8	73
Terry O'Neill	do	2	4	80
Owen Moore	Johns Gate	2	11	47
Patrick Nulty	do	1	7	67

Name	Address	Rooms	No in Family	Income per week (shillings)
James Clarke	John St	1	8	53
D. McLeer	do	1	5	47
Thomas Bagnall	do	2	3	42
Cedric E Joyce	do	3	5	50
John O'Brien	King St	1	3	63
Peter McElearney	do	1	3	55
Laurence Higgins	Laburnum Sq	1	5	
John McCormack	Mount St Oliver	3	11	60
Patrick Matthews	do	2	4	83
Albery E Woods	do	1	4	82
James A King	Marsh Road	1	3	40
Peter Finegan	do	2	3	75
John Byrne	do	1	5	8
Patrick Coyle	do	2	4	106
Thomas McGrane	do	1	3	75
Denis Reynolds	do	2	4	35
Mrs M Clarke	do	2	8	80
Thomas Mullen	do	3	6	50
Joseph Taaffe	do	5	2	43.5
Patrick Dennis	do	6	4	35
James mcCourt	do	2	6	100
Francis Connor	do	1	4	45
John Farrell	do	1	5	55
Patrick McCaugherty	do	1	7	57
Patrick Murray	do	1	5	50
Michael McDonnell	do	1	2	40
Timothy Quinlisk	do	2	3	35
Joseph Murray	Mary Street	2	5	29.5
Andrew Ormistown	do	1	6	36
Matthew Woods	do	1	3	40
Edward Butler	do	3	5	86
Patrick Stewart	do	1	3	51.5
John Carolan	do	1	2	50
James Lynch	do	4	6	52
George Kavanagh	do	1	3	40
matthew Davis	do	1	3	51.5
Joseph Vaughey	Mell	2	7	50
Hugh Bailey	do	1	4	55
Dominick McKinney	Millmount Sq	1	5	45
Thomas Gavin	do	1	2	55
D Lynch	do	1	3	65
Michael Leech	do	1	3	
Paul Woods	do	1	2	50

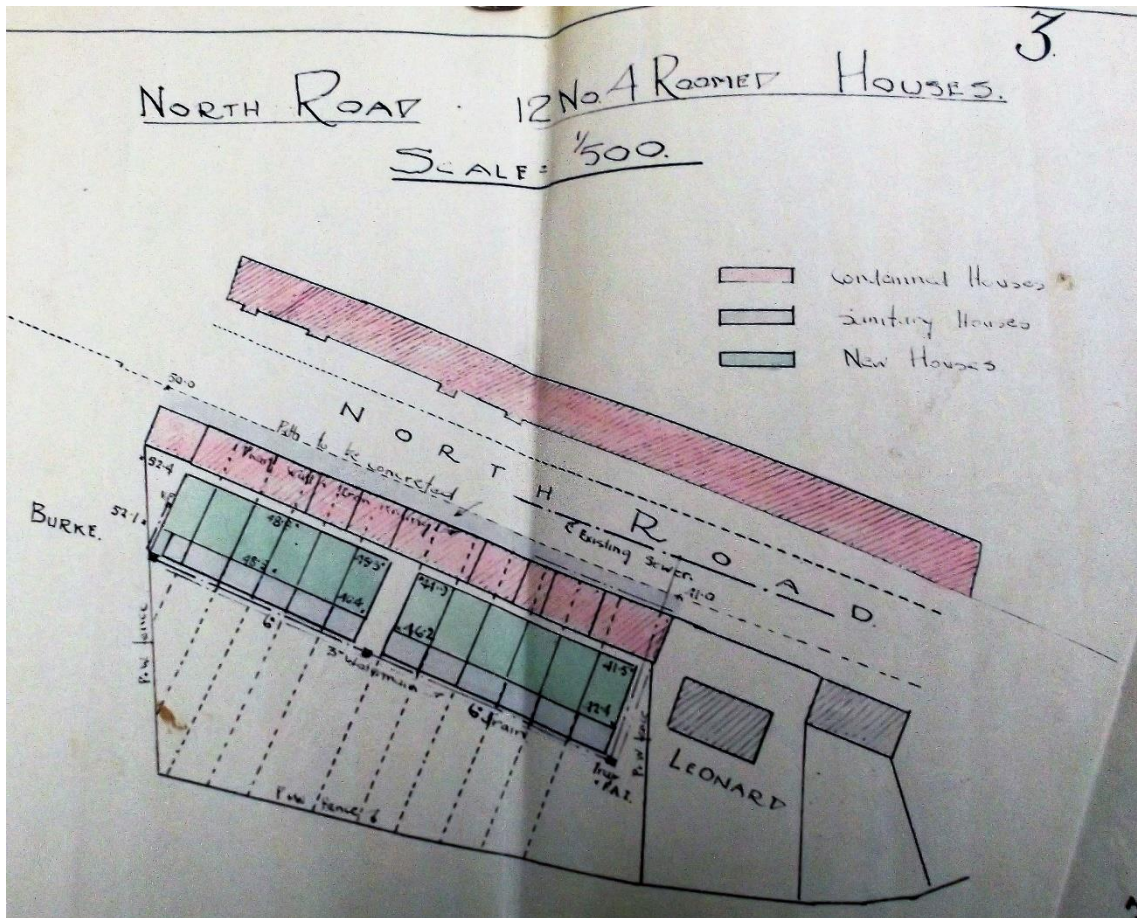
Name	Address	Rooms	No in Family	Income per week (shillings)
Patrick Harrison	do	1	2	50
Mrs M Marley	do	5	4	45
Michael Clarke	Nuns Walk	2	4	53
Patrick Clarke	Newfoundwell rd	1	3	45
John Brodigan	Newtown		2	60
Mrs P Campbell	Old Hill	1	3	48
Michael Sarsfield	Do	2	8	80
William Kierans	Do	1	7	80
james McEneaney	Platten rd	2	1	60
Mrs M.A. Rath	Do	2	6	27
John Brannigan	Do	1	5	14.5
William Kelly	Do	2	7	60
Frank Cassidy	Platten	2	2	20
Mrs K Carolan	Platten Rd	2	8	70
John Cluskey	Do	2	5	40
Mrs Sheridan	Do	3	5	60
Daniel Burns	Do	1	4	60
Daniel Black	Do	1	3	47
Daniel Caffrey	Do	1	3	60
John Gregory	Do	2	5	50.5
Matthew Flynn	Do	2	3	45
Eugene Smith	Do	1	3	40
Michael Marley	Priests Lane	1	2	70
James Moran	Pitcher Lane		5	55
Matthew Thornton	Peter Street	1	4	11.5
John Breen	Do	2	2	70
Thomas J. Leech	Do	1	3	25
Mrs M Connor	Do	2	11	78
Mrs Rooney	Do	1	4	21
John P Farrelly	Queensboro	3	5	50
Richard Dowd	Rathmullen	1	2	22
Michael Moore	Scarlet St	1	3	50
Patrick Farrell	Do	1	4	78
William Brennan	Do	1	5	65
Michael Everitt	Ship St	2	6	112
Patrick Woods	Do	2	5	67.5
Patrick McDonnell	Do	2	7	31.5
Thomas Plunkett	Sunnyside Cottages	1	3	48
James Clarke	Do	1	3	50
David A Holly	Trinity Gardens	3	3	60
Mrs K Noonan	Do	4	3	55
Patrick Pentony	Do	4	2	80
John Carolan	Termonfeckin	2	3	52

Name	Address	Rooms	No in Family	Income per week (shillings)
Mrs Rose Lynch	Watery Hill	1	3	32
Thomas Plunkett	Do	1	3	50
Peter Brady	Do	1	4	50
Patrick bannon	Do	2	4	40
Patrick J Mullane	William St	2	5	30
Thomas Brady	Do	1	4	50
Peter Cooney	Do	4	4	51

**Source:** *Erection of 34 houses at Mell Street, 40 at Bredin Street, Hand Street and Platten Road, Drogheda (LCA, DBC/HSG/001/005/001)*

Appendix 14

Plans for 12 'workmen's dwellings at North Road, Drogheda, 1937



Source: North road (12 houses) (LCA/DBC/HSG/001/033/)

## Appendix 15

### Letter from residents of Dale Street and The Dale, Drogheda to Drogheda Corporation seeking tenancies of new houses at Platten Road.

Letter from John Farrell, The Dale, Marsh Road to the Minister for Local Government

6 November 1935

Re: New Houses

Sir,

I am writing this letter to you with a view to you taking up the matter of the distribution of new houses built by the Drogheda Corporation for people living in bad and condemned houses.

I am a married man with a wife and three children living in a room 14 feet square – we sleep, eat and perform our ablutions inside that same square.

Just think of the young lives that are supposed to grow up healthy and strong to be a help to the county in the years to come and yet for the want of accommodation have to be reared in a 14 foot square with the water coming through the walls. One dry lavatory between 3 families – nearest drinking water 100 yards and a brook full of water 4” deep running in front of my house. Yet a woman with one child living in a good house and her husband living in the army can get a new house. Another woman who up to the present has been living on the Curragh with her husband and no children can get another new house. This letter is written in connection with the 40 new houses which were given out by the housing committee of Drogheda on Monday night 4-11-1935

Sir, I am asking that an immediate enquiry be made as to the letting of these 40 houses as I am writing this letter on behalf of every inhabitant living in the same hell as I am. I will stand by any statement I have made in this letter – I will see also that this news will be published in the local papers only it will be properly stated.

Signed by 7 residents of Dale Street and The Dale, Marsh Road.

*Source: Correspondence regarding the erection of 40 (4 roomed) houses at Platten Road, Drogheda (LCA, DBC/HSG/001/009/009)*



## Appendix 16

### Scale of council housing provision in provincial towns, 1922-45

Town	Number of council houses up to 1922	Houses completed to 31 March 1945 under 1932 Act	Post 1932 houses / All private dwellings 1946	Sold outright	Sold on instalment	Council houses let 1945	Council houses let (1945) / Private houses 1946
Carlow	97	265	18.1%			414	28%
Bagenalstown		90	20.8%			90	21%
Athy	22	199	26.6%			265	35%
Naas	60	127	16.8%			187	25%
Newbridge	20	40	6.4%	20		74	15%
Kilkenny	187	411	19.8%			644	31%
Callan	45	20	5.4%		45	20	18%
Portlaoise	26	152	23.8%			187	29%
Mountmellick	27	82	17.0%			113	23%
Longford	106	44	5.4%			215	27%
Dundalk	201	769	19.6%	27	109	958	28%
Drogheda	128	766	23.5%	13	10	1079	34%
Ardee		75	17.8%	10	18	91	29%
Navan	100	168	20.6%	10		311	39%
Kells	38	71	14.2%			131	26%
Tullamore	85	224	20.8%	8		372	35%
Birr	26	177	23.5%			223	30%
Edenderry		38	7.5%			70	14%
Athlone	66	378	22.6%	14		532	33%
Mullingar	45	108	9.7%	5		215	20%
Wexford	134	421	16.0%	30	40	594	25%
Enniscorthy	90	263	22.4%	1		408	35%
New Ross	66	123	11.2%			219	20%
Gorey		80	13.8%			80	14%
Bray	155	391	16.4%	21	242	393	28%
Arklow	112	272	23.9%			391	34%
Wicklow	18	192	28.2%	18		198	32%
Ennis	96	60	4.8%	8		166	14%
Kilrush		196	26.0%	6	39	201	33%
Kilkee		42	10.2%			42	10%
Cobh	50	128	8.7%	3	15	178	13%
Youghal	20	101	9.5%			129	12%
Mallow	28	183	15.5%			235	20%
Fermoy	112	103	10.5%			225	23%
Passage West		70	11.3%	4		99	17%
Bandon	27	22	3.4%			57	9%

Town	Number of council houses up to 1922	Houses completed to 31 March 1945 under 1932 Act	Post 1932 houses / All private dwellings 1946	Sold outright	Sold on instalment	Council houses let 1945	Council houses let (1945) / Private houses 1946
Clonakilty	10	40	6.8%			66	11%
Kinsale	23	34	6.0%			77	14%
Midleton	56	45	7.5%			116	19%
Bantry	10	8	1.3%			18	3%
Skibbereen	28	80	13.1%			113	19%
Macroom		78	14.3%	11	3	78	17%
Tralee	88	451	21.1%	41	21	537	28%
Killarney	55	123	12.0%	72	60	97	22%
Listowel		104	14.8%			104	15%
Newcastle West	21	32	5.7%			58	10%
Rathkeale		20	5.3%			20	5%
Clonmel	78	368	18.6%	19	30	547	30%
Tipperary	106	270	22.1%	3	6	444	37%
Thurles	74	288	26.4%	20	5	400	39%
Carrick-on-Suir		244	23.9%			254	26%
Nenagh	44	111	11.0%			191	19%
Cashel	33	114	21.1%			174	32%
Templemore		99	23.6%			109	26%
Dungarvan	45	225	21.0%	1		316	30%
Galway	169	419	12.1%	20	1	710	21%
Ballinasloe	45	101	14.2%			174	24%
Tuam	30	244	36.5%	37		268	46%
Loughrea		25	5.3%			25	5%
Ballina	44	471	40.4%	4	15	516	46%
Castlebar	25	116	15.3%	14	2	134	20%
Westport	10	97	13.7%	2		105	15%
Boyle	14	58	11.9%				15%
Roscommon	10		0.0%		10		3%
Sligo	30	735	32.1%	6	6	864	38%
Cavan	40	92	15.1%			142	23%
Cootehill	8	40	12.7%	1		62	20%
Buncrana	38	58	11.2%			96	19%
Letterkenny	55	66	16.0%			129	29%
Ballyshannon	10	80	16.8%			92	19%
Monaghan	28	99	14.5%			167	24%
Clones		118	24.0%		1	124	25%
Carrickmacross	25	59	14.2%	5		92	23%
Castleblayney		41	11.4%			45	12%
Total	3439	12504	16%	454	678	17270	23%

## Appendix 17

### Average dwelling size and levels of overcrowding in three case-study towns in 1901

Town	Street	Houses	Total rooms	Persons > 2 per room	Average dwelling size (rooms)
<b>Athy</b>					
	Back Lane	6	8	63%	1.3
	Butlers Lane	11	32	14%	2.9
	Carr's Court	2	4	100%	2.0
	Chapel Lane	9	18	62%	2.0
	Garden Lane	10	20	31%	2.0
	Garter Lane	1	2	0%	2.0
	Janeville Place	10	18	17%	1.8
	Kelly's Lane	14	21	63%	1.5
	Kyles Row	2	4	0%	2.0
	Matthews Lane	3	3	82%	1.0
	Meetinghouse Lane	33	50	72%	1.5
	Mounthawkins	14	25	64%	1.8
	New Row	10	20	82%	2.0
	Porters Row	1	2	0%	2.0
	Rathsteward	22	37	78%	1.7
	Barrack Lane	2	4	67%	2.0
	Canal Lane	15	30	69%	2.0
	Canal Side	18	42	47%	2.3
	Convent Lane	16	42	66%	2.6
	Drydocks	8	14	100%	1.8
	Higginsons Lane	17	36	15%	2.1
	James Place	13	40	47%	3.1
	Keatings Lane	11	20	54%	1.8
	Nelson Street	9	27	24%	3.0
	New Gardens	8	14	32%	1.8
	Plewman's Row	22	54	32%	2.5
	Shrewleen Lane	17	34	63%	2.0
	Tan Yard Lane	1	2	0%	2.0
	Tay Lane	14	20	37%	1.4
<b>Navan</b>					
	Barrack Lane	14	81	38%	3.5
	Brewshill	54	259	56%	2.4
	Infirmery Hill	17	79	43%	2.2
	Keappocks Lane	8	35	77%	1.3
	Limekiln Street	19	73	56%	2.2
	Metges Lane	5	30	90%	2.0
	Newbridge	7	32	44%	3.0
	Newlane	27	109	46%	2.8

<b>Town</b>	<b>Street</b>	<b>Houses</b>	<b>Total rooms</b>	<b>Persons &gt; 2 per room</b>	<b>Average dwelling size (rooms)</b>
<b>Navan</b>					
	O'Rafferty's Lane	4	12	0%	1.8
	Old Cornmarket	21	99	59%	2.6
	Sandymount	34	165	62%	2.1
	Townparks (Pt. of)	25	98	63%	1.6
<b>Kilrush</b>					
	Ball Ally Lane	10	17	80%	1.7
	Barrell's Ally	6	10	50%	1.7
	Bow Lane	1	2	0%	2.0
	Crofton Street	11	29	62%	2.6
	Ennis Road	19	54	66%	2.8
	Grace Street	29	82	47%	2.8
	Hector Street	30	45	85%	1.5
	Malthouse Lane	18	41	62%	2.3
	Market Square	26	198	0%	7.6
	Merchants Quay	17	62	60%	3.6
	Moore Street	103	582	8%	5.7
	Pella Road	7	15	58%	2.1
	Pound Street	67	115	67%	1.7
	Russells Lane	10	14	86%	1.4
	The Crag	10	11	89%	1.1
	The Glen	49	101	59%	2.1

Source: 1901 census, Household Return and Building Return Forms.

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### Bibliographical note

#### Irish Newspaper Archive

In the course of this research extensive use was made of both national and provincial newspapers. Most of these were accessed via the Irish Newspaper Archive at [www.irishnewsarchive.com](http://www.irishnewsarchive.com). This digital database of Irish newspaper offers some significant advantages over the very time-consuming method of either reading the physical papers or accessing them on microfilm. The first is the ability to search the database for particular words and phrases, within specified date ranges and specifying either a single newspaper or a range of newspapers. This facility requires some practice to ensure a manageable number of pages are returned. For example, a search for the words *Ballina housing* in the *Western People* in the years from 1932 to 1945 returns over 7,000 items. The second advantage is the ability to save search results in the form of either pages from a newspaper or individual stories as PDF files which can be stored and/or printed. The 'browse' feature allows newspapers to be read on screen in the traditional manner.

The current geographical coverage of the newspapers in the database is quite uneven. There are fourteen newspapers covering County Kerry while the southeast is almost entirely lacking in coverage. Some newspapers in the database have significant gaps in the years which they cover. For example, editions of the *Tuam Herald* for the years 1924 to 1937 are missing from the database.

#### Records of the Department of Local Government and Public Health in the National Archives

These archives are in the process of being catalogued. National Archives staff facilitated access to part of the uncatalogued collection in 2013-14. Items referenced from this part of the collection are in the following format:

Dpt/Environment, label, Box No. for example Dpt/Environment, Housing, 1919-60, Box 200

Items catalogued as of August 2016 are referenced as follows:

Item name, ENV/year catalogued/area code/item number

For example:

Kilrush UD, Pound St Clearance Order 1936, ENV/2013/94/1050

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