



Public
Participation
Network
Sligo



Sligo PPN Housing Thematic Network

Vacant Homes

About This Series

In recent years the issue of housing has become an increasingly critical priority for the Sligo community. Issues around housing have been a constant across PPN community engagement and consultation processes, notably the Community Vision for Wellbeing. Some of the comments raised through this process included;

We need a variety of house types within communities throughout the County to allow for households down-sizing or trading up as needed within the same area and for a variety of income groups.

There should also be sheltered housing provided in community settings.

A variety of schemes need to be introduced to ensure that homes are affordable.

Everyone in Sligo should have a suitable home and the Council should ensure that derelict or abandoned buildings are put back into use to provide a variety of housing options.

Planning should ensure future proofed building design wherever possible to create the opportunity for adaptation as family/ household needs change.

People need to be encouraged to live in small towns and villages, redevelop houses as needed and enabled to develop accommodation alongside small businesses.

In looking at the potential for the Community sector and PPN to use their platform to try and progress these issues, the Sligo PPN Thematic Housing Network was established by Sligo PPN representatives who brought together key stakeholders to discuss and collaborate.

The network decided to develop a series of policy papers addressing key agreed upon housing issues. The papers would be used by PPN representatives at the decision making table, would be presented by Sligo PPN representatives to the relevant government departments and would also be made public for use by the community sector.

These papers were compiled by the Sligo Public Participation Network (PPN) Housing Thematic Network with assistance from Social Justice Ireland, who were commissioned to carry out the research and compile the first drafts.

There are 5 papers in total;

This paper is about **Vacant Homes**.

The other four papers in this series are titled:

Home Heating Costs

Removing Barriers to Housing

Right Sizing

Traveller Accommodation

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Housing Need and Homelessness

Empty houses, vacant properties that could be tenanted are an issue across the country because these are properties that lie idle at the same time as the country is experiencing record numbers of homelessness and constant unmet needs for housing. To situate the need to address vacancy in the county, this first section looks at housing needs and homelessness in Sligo.

Housing Need

Access to adequate housing is a fundamental human right. Without proper shelter it is virtually impossible to participate fully in society, to live a life with dignity, or to protect one's health and personal safety. In its Programme for Government¹, the Government committed to "securing good livelihoods from our land and housing for all".

Ireland has been in the midst of a housing and homelessness crisis for almost a decade. The scale and severity of the economic collapse in 2008 saw Ireland all but abandon capital housing projects, particularly in the areas of social and affordable housing. The replacement of social housing delivery with "social housing solutions" saw an exponential increase in the number of social housing tenant households accommodated in the private rented sector. This, in part, led to increases in rent costs for tenant households and the development of a market in social housing investment, which contributed to driving up house prices generally. Added to that, the mortgage arrears crisis of the mid-2010s, the legacy of which is still being felt today, and has continued to climb. And that's just the official data. There is currently no mechanism for counting the real number of homeless people, the number of households who need additional social housing supports.

The population of Sligo has increased between Census 2016 and 2022. Census 2022 shows a total population for the county of 69,819. This comprises of 34,359 males and 35,460 females and represents an increase of 4,284 since Census 2016 (1,994 males and 2,290 females). The population has grown in the county by 6.5 per cent between 2016 and 2022 but housing stock in the county only increased by 3.7 per cent.

There has been a gradual decrease in the number of owner-occupied homes and an increase in the number of those renting, either in the private market or from the Local Authority with almost 30 per cent of households in the 2016 census renting. In rural Ireland, the percentage is lower at 13 per cent but this is again gradually increasing, from 7.9 per cent in 1991 and 9.4 per cent in 2006.

Table 1 shows the number of households that qualify for social housing supports in the county. The latest figures show 517 households are registered as qualifying. As noted above, this does not reflect the real level of housing need in the county.

¹ <https://assets.gov.ie/130911/fe93e24e-dfe0-40ff-9934-def2b44b7b52.pdf>, accessed February 24, 2023.

Table 1: Number of Households Qualified for Social Housing Support in Sligo, 2013-2021

2013	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
770	801	611	442	501	522	517

Source: Housing Agency, Summary of Social Housing Assessments, various years.

Homelessness

The Government began to publish Monthly homeless figures in January 2016, and since then the number of individuals provided with emergency accommodation has doubled, from 6,189 in April 2016 to 12,259 people in April 2023. The picture is just as stark at a local level, with 21 adults homeless in Sligo in April 2016, compared to 55 adults homeless in 2023. Meanwhile, family homelessness has increased at least seven-fold, from 2 families - 2 adults and 5 children homeless in the region in April 2016, to 14 families, - 19 adults and 38 children homeless in April 2023.

The most recent figures available are for the week of 24th to 30th April 2023. 55 adults are listed as being in receipt of homeless accommodation in Sligo that week. The figures for family homelessness are given on a regional basis - there were 14 families, comprising 19 adults and 38 children, in the North West Region. According to the Local Authority Homeless Performance Reports for Quarter 1 of 2023, there were no rough sleepers registered for that period in the North West Region. The Homelessness Financial Report 2022 records that Sligo County Council recorded paid €423,212 to B&Bs and Hotels for Temporary Emergency Accommodation in 2022, recorded an increase of 375% rising from €89,128 in 2021. A new Homeless Action Plan North-West Region (2023 – 2028) was approved by the three local authorities in the region in March 2023.

Vacancy

Vacant Houses

According to Census 2022, the total housing stock in the county is 33,991 units. 4,021 (11.8 per cent) of these are vacant. The CSO note that “A dwelling being classified as vacant for census purposes does not necessarily imply that it is available for re-use” and that “Holiday homes are not part of the vacant dwellings count”.²

The reasons listed for the vacancies are:

• For Rental:	761	• Owner Deceased:	682
• Abandoned Farmhouse:	627	• Undergoing Renovation:	507
• For Sale:	358	• Now living in Nursing Home/Hospital:	212
• Now living With Relatives:	133	• New Build:	82
• Owner Emigrated:	63		
• Other:	596		

The trend over the last few years is that vacancy is decreasing slowly. Across the country, the vacancy rate recorded in the census stands at less than 8 per cent in 2022, a decrease from over 9 per cent in 2016 and 12 per cent in 2011.³

Vacancy varies across the county. Table 2 shows the percentage of vacant housing stock in each electoral district on Census night 2022.

² <https://www.cso.ie/en/census/census2022/census2022andvacantdwellingsfaq/>, accessed 24 February, 2023.

³ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpr/censusofpopulation2022-preliminaryresults/housing/>, accessed 24 February 2023.

Table 2: % Vacancy by Electoral District, 2022.

Electoral District	% Vacancy
Achonry East	13.1%
Achonry West	19.1%
Aclare	23.0%
Aghanagh	13.3%
Annagh	12.8%
Aughris	12.7%
Ballintogher West	13.2%
Ballymote	15.0%
Ballynakill	12.1%
Ballynashee	10.3%
Ballysadare East	6.2%
Ballysadare West	11.5%
Banada	15.6%
Branchfield / Carrownaskeagh	15.6%
Breencorragh	15.4%
Bricklieve	14.3%
Buncrowey	26.4%
Calry	8.2%
Carney	9.2%
Carrickbanagher	11.8%
Cartron	12.7%
Castleconor East	19.8%
Castleconor West	10.0%
Cliffony North	10.8%
Cliffony South	11.2%
Cloonoghill	22.1%
Colooney	13.6%
Coolaney	10.0%
Coolavin	21.5%
Cuilmore	18.0%
Dromard East	11.2%
Dromard West	22.1%
Dromore	8.6%
Drumcliff East	9.0%
Drumcliff West	8.9%
Drumcolumb	16.2%
Drumfin	11.4%
Drumrat	14.1%
Easky East	13.4%
Easky West 1	3.6%
Glencar	9.6%
Glendarragh	12.1%
Kilfree	14.3%

Kilglass	8.8%
Killadoon	23.1%
Killaraght	15.9%
Kilmacowen	7.3%
Kilmacteige	19.0%
Kilmactranny	16.4%
Kilshalvy	21.4%
Kilturra	12.4%
Knockaree	6.5%
Lakeview	15.5%
Leitrim	10.6%
Lisconny	14.3%
Lissadill East	9.2%
Lissadill North	7.1%
Lissadill West	8.8%
Loughill / Cloonacool	14.8%
Owenmore	15.0%
Rathmacurkey	13.7%
Riverstown	9.6%
Rossinver East	28.0%
Rossinver West	17.0%
Shancough	24.0%
Skreen	21.1%
Sligo East	11.5%
Sligo North	11.6%
Sligo West	10.4%
Streamstown	14.1%
Temple	13.3%
Templeboy North	14.3%
Templeboy South / Mullagheruse	18.7%
Templevanny	22.7%
Tobercurry	13.5%
Toberpatrick East	14.2%
Toberpatrick West	14.1%
Toomour	13.0%

Source: CSO, Census 2022, Vacancy by Electoral Division, Map 4.3.

Sligo County Council has a Vacant Homes Officer in place. The role of the Vacant Homes Officer is to provide “advice and assistance to help bring vacant homes back into use”.⁴ According to Sligo’s Housing Delivery Action Plan 2022-2026, the Vacant Homes Office surveyed approximately 8,000 properties in the Sligo Urban area and has identified a possible 212 properties that are potentially vacant.⁵ This figure is in contrast with the 4,021 listed from the 2022 Census which might suggest that rest of the the vacancy is spread across rural Sligo as well as a reduction in the numbers when establishing vacancy once contact with owners has been made.

Finally, Geodirectory Quarter 2 Report for 2022 lists Sligo has having 8.9 per cent vacancy rate across the county. This gives us a wide range of possible figures, allowing that the CSO data is the most comprehensive on the reasons for vacancy and allows for the development of different approaches depending on those reasons. Sligo County Council will commence a Survey in Q3 2023 to update data of all vacant homes identified on the Geo Directory with a 1km buffer around towns and villages with a population of over 400. This will give a more precise picture. The Croí Cónaithe (Towns) Fund (described below) is also available to encourage property owners to renovate vacant and derelict homes.

Assessing the real level of vacancy is key as is ensuring that the correct level of support is available, depending upon the level of works that need to be completed to bring the properties back into use. Albeit the targets set out on the Housing Delivery Action Plan 2022-2026 are modest - 4 Buy and Renew Schemes and 4 Repair and Lease Schemes across the three municipal districts in those four years.

Vacant Sites

In addition to vacant properties, there are also a number of vacant sites in Sligo, some of which could be used to build residential or mixed-use developments. There are 22 sites listed on the Vacant Sites Register for Sligo which was last updated in April 2022. Ownership seems to be split between corporate or business owners and private individuals. The lowest valuation is €80,000 and the highest is €4,000,000 with an average valuation of just over €970,000. The total value of all 22 listed plots is €21,382,000. The vacant site levy currently charged at 7 per cent would yield €1,496,740.

Dereliction

Dereliction is defined by the Derelict Sites Act, 1990. A derelict site is any land that “detracts, or is likely to detract, to a material degree from the amenity, character or appearance of land in the neighbourhood of the land in question because of structures which are in a ruinous, derelict or dangerous condition, or the neglected, unsightly or objectionable condition of the land or of structures on it, or the presence, deposit or collection of litter, rubbish, debris or waste”. This means that the definition can include a building or ‘structure’ or an empty plot. The Local Authority can force the owners to clean up these derelict sites and in turn can prosecute owners who do who do not comply with served notices served, can purchase the land compulsorily and can carry out necessary work themselves and charge the owners for the cost.

There are 31 derelict sites on the Sligo County Council’s Derelict Site Register, a mixture of rural and town centre locations.⁶ The derelict sites levy amounts to 7% of the market value of the land concerned.

⁴ <https://vacanthomes.ie/>, accessed 24 February 2023.

⁵ https://www.sligococo.ie/housing/PlansandStrategies/SligoCCHousingDeliveryActionPlan2022-2026/21%20JULY%202022%20SLIGO%20HDAP%20_FINAL.pdf, accessed 24 February 2023

⁶ <https://www.sligococo.ie/planning/Enforcement/DerelictSites/>, accessed 24 February 2023.

Voids

The term void is used to describe housing owned and managed by the Local Authority when it is empty, in between social rentals. Sligo County Council returned 419 voids to use between 2014 and 2021 at a cost of €6,486,382.⁷ The most recent Sligo County Council Scrutiny Report⁸ from NOAC (June 2021) gives a figure of 3.83 per cent vacancy rate with a turnaround time of 32.69 weeks which they note is longer than the average of 27.75 weeks. The report notes that the turnaround times and vacancy rates for Local Authority owned properties in Sligo are reducing.

According to Improving the Management of Empty Properties Final Report from Campbell Tickell published in June 2022, “average empty property durations for an Irish local authority are 28 weeks and an English local authority 4 weeks; For an Irish AHB 11 weeks and an English Registered Provider 3 weeks”.⁹ The study makes several recommendations at national and local level and can be accessed in the footnotes.

Maintaining and upskilling ‘in-house’ council maintenance workers would improve the turnaround time on voids. For example, Fingal County Council has a strong record in repair and re-letting of its own housing stock. Fingal manages to maintain a vacancy rate of less than 2 per cent for the social housing stock under its management and aims to “manage resources effectively to ensure the return to use of properties that become vacant in as efficient a manner as possible”.¹⁰

Policy Initiatives – Vacancy

In this section, policy initiatives relating to vacancy are set out for information and discussion.

Sligo 2030’s Socio-Economic Statement sets out seven key headline needs that Sligo should address as part of the new Sligo 2030 plan. Two relate directly to housing and the issue of utilising existing housing stock.

- Housing – addressing the provision of housing and the lack of available private residential developments in Sligo to meet current and future demands.
- Revitalising Sligo’s Town Centres – the regeneration of town centres, improving the public realm and addressing the commercial vacancy rate.

The Socio - Economic Statement’s Housing options are grounded in Housing For All, the Government’s current housing strategy. Also, Sligo’s Housing Delivery Action Plan 2022 – 2026 was approved by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in June 2022. It sets targets for the use of vacant properties as social housing through Buy and Renew Construction and Repair and Lease Schemes. The following are the sections of Housing For All that address vacancy.

Housing For All - Pathway to Addressing Vacancy and Efficient Use of Existing Stock

Section 4 of Housing For All, the current Government housing strategy sets out plans to deal with vacancy across the country under the following headings:

⁷ <https://assets.gov.ie/215421/e5fd47fb-e6f0-4a99-b220-fd29a013a9c3.xlsx>, accessed 24 February 2023.

⁸ <https://noac.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Sligo-Scrutiny-Programme-2.pdf>, accessed 24 February 2023.

⁹ <https://www.campbelltickell.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Improving-the-Management-of-Empty-Properties.pdf>, accessed 24 February 2023.

¹⁰ <https://www.fingal.ie/sites/default/files/2022-12/Vacant%20Homes%20Plan%202022-2026.pdf>, accessed 24 February 2023.

1. Establish and Fund a Town Centres First policy
2. Harness European Regional Development Funding to tackle vacancy
3. Launch a (Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) Programme for Vacant Properties
4. Reform the Fair Deal Scheme
5. Activate State owned Vacant Properties
6. Tackle Unfinished Estates
7. Introduce a new Croí Cónaithe (Towns) Fund
8. Collect Data on Vacancy with a view to introducing a Vacant Property Tax
9. Unlock the Potential to Utilise Heritage Building Stock
10. Extend Planning Exemptions to 2025 to complement Town Centre First objectives
11. Introduce new regulations for Short Term Lettings
12. Drive Efficient Use of Private and Social Housing Stock
13. Expand Existing Schemes to tackle Vacancy – Improve the Buy and Renew element of the Social Housing Programme and Enhance the Repair and Leasing Scheme.

1. Establish and Fund a Town Centres First policy

Housing For All commits to the improvement of Ireland’s towns and villages as “places to meet, live and work”. A Town Centre First approach promotes town centre regeneration and optimises existing housing stock which links with climate action goals. The Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) allow Local Authorities to access funds for regeneration projects. The URDF concentrates on cities and towns whilst the RRDF concentrates on towns with populations of less than 10,000.

2. Harness European Regional Development Funding to tackle vacancy

The Regional Assemblies manage the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) in Ireland and are developing the 2021 - 2027 programme in relation to the next tranche of funding, 8 per cent of which must be dedicated to urban areas with an emphasis on vacancy and dereliction in Irish towns.

After the latest evaluation from the European Commission, the Northern and Western Region is now classified as a “Transition Region”. This means it will have “ a more favourable co-financing rate relative to the other NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland.....projects that are based in the Southern and the Eastern and Midlands Regions will receive 40 per cent in EU co-financing under the ERDF, whereas projects based in the Northern and Western Region - as a transition region - will receive 60 per cent in EU co-financing; highlighting the potential value for money in supporting town centre first projects located in the Northern and Western Region”.¹¹

3. Launch a CPO Programme for Vacant Properties

Local Authorities can use a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) to buy a property. This is a useful tool to deal with derelict or vacant sites, but it is costly. This CPO programme is supported by bridging finance available from the Housing Finance Agency. The programme also commits to establishment by the Housing Agency of a central advisory service to help Local Authorities with this process. It is envisaged that the Vacant Homes Officers will lead this project at county level with the aim of Local Authorities across the country buying up at least 2,500 vacant units across the country and putting them out to the market.

Compulsory Purchase Orders can be utilised if other methods to deal with vacancy or dereliction are unsuitable or unworkable and are generally not used as the first resort.

¹¹ <https://www.nwra.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/regional-vacancy-and-dereliction-analysis-17012022.pdf>, accessed 24 February 2023.

4. Reform the Fair Deal Scheme

Amendments to the Fair Deal scheme will see caps placed on the payment of fees when a nursing home resident's principal private residence is sold and also to exempt rental income from the property when calculating the income of an applicant to the scheme. Figures from the 2020 Local Property Tax across the country show up to 7,800 vacancy exemptions were given due to illness with the caveat that these may not all apply to Fair Deal.

Of the vacancies found in Sligo, according to Census 2022, 212 of those were because the resident was in hospital or a nursing home. These homes could be brought into use wherever possible with the reform of the Fair Deal scheme.

5. Activate State owned Vacant Properties

State owned land that is suitable for housing will be offered to the Land Development Agency as well as, subject to conditions, place sites on to the open market if they are suitable for housing. At the time of writing, the only data shows that in May 2022, Cliffoney Garda Station was being prepared for disposal by auction in 2023.¹²

The Land Development Agency has maps of these state owned vacant properties prepared.¹³ So far, the only properties listed are within Sligo Town and the sites highlighted are listed as all being "subject to Part 9 of the LDA Act, if a planning application is lodged for five or more homes on it." Part 9¹⁴ deals with the requirement in relation to development of dwellings on relevant public land and former relevant public land and has multiple sub clauses which means it is unclear exactly what will happen to this land.

6. Tackle Unfinished Estates

In 2021, Sligo County Council took charge of five estates with a further five expected to be completed in 2022. According to the draft Sligo County Council Budget for 2022, two of these estates would have been previously categorised as unfinished estates. Housing For All acknowledges that the Local Authorities are responsible for the management and administration of any unfinished housing developments in their areas and commits to supporting Local Authorities to minimise the levels of vacancy in these estates.

7. Introduce a new Croí Cónaithe (Towns) Fund

Local Authorities can support home ownership by the provision of serviced sites to allow for single builds as well as the refurbishment of vacant properties in small towns and villages. The target is 2,000 sites for homes by 2025. The Housing For All progress report for Quarter 3, 2022 states that €50m had been allocated to the scheme since launch in July 2022 with 365 applications received under the Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant. Sligo County Council is now accepting applications relating to qualifying vacant properties in cities, towns, villages and importantly, eligible vacant properties in more remote rural areas of Sligo.¹⁵

¹² https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2022-12-08_pq220-08-12-22_en.docx, accessed 24 February 2023.

¹³ <https://lda.ie/register-of-relevant-lands/map>, accessed 24 February 2023.

¹⁴ <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2021/act/26/section/75/enacted/en/html#sec75>, accessed 24 February 2023.

¹⁵ <https://www.sligococo.ie/planning/VacantPropertyRefurbishmentGrantScheme/>, accessed 24 February 2023.

8. Vacant Property Tax

A Vacant Homes Tax (VHT) was introduced in Budget 2023 and has come into force on the signing of the Finance Bill 2022 on the 23rd of November 2022. The stated purpose of this tax is to increase the supply of housing for rent or purchase as opposed to raising revenue. It will apply to residential properties that are occupied for less than 30 days in a 12-month period and is due at three times the basic rate of the Local Property Tax that applies to that property. It will be a self-assessed tax.

9. Unlock the Potential to Utilise Heritage Building Stock

Housing For All states that to resolve the housing crisis, every option available must be examined and utilised. The Historic Towns Initiative is a capital grant scheme, run in conjunction with the Heritage Council aiming towards the heritage-led regeneration of historic towns.

In future the initiative will be adjusted to encourage private owners and/or occupiers to bring vacant floor area in historic buildings back into use and projects that address dereliction and vacancy will be particularly focussed on, subject to going through the planning process as necessary. This will be built upon and more strongly incentivised, with a dedicated stream and an additional €2m in funding in the 2022 scheme. The Vacant Sites Officer may be best placed to identify possible properties.

10. Extend Planning Exemptions to 2025 to complement Town Centre

First objectives

Housing For All commits to the review and extension of regulations that give exemption to certain vacant commercial properties, for example, over the shop spaces from the need to access planning permissions to change the use to residential until 2025. These regulations are designed to bring about the productive use of qualifying vacant commercial buildings as homes, while also facilitating urban renewal and the bringing on stream of increased housing supply. In order to avail of the exemptions, the structure, or part of the structure, which is the subject of the change of use must have been vacant for at least 2 years immediately prior to the commencement of the relevant works, with such works being required to be completed by 31st December 2025. A Department Circular also notes that “in addition to the classes of use that qualified under the 2018 change of use exempted development provisionsthe new regulations extend the provisions to a new Class 12 - Use as a Public House, meaning a premises which has been licensed for the sale and consumption of intoxicating liquor on the premises under the Licensing Acts 1833 to 2018”.¹⁶ The Vacant Sites Officer may be in a position to assist in identifying suitable properties.

According to the Regional Vacancy and Dereliction Analysis from the Northern and Western Regional Assembly (January 2022)¹⁷ Collooney recorded a commercial vacancy rate of 29.9 per cent as of 2020, which was well above the State average of 11.4 per cent and also in 2020, the number of vacant commercial properties amounted to 341 in Sligo Town, 46 in Collooney, 21 in Tubbercurry and 19 in Ballymote”.

Fire and Safety regulations are a large part of the ‘Living Over The Shop’ conversation. Where a building is planned to be sub-divided, resulting in horizontal and/or vertical separation to create multiple units, the works will involve a higher degree of complexity and may have to satisfy additional regulatory requirements, particularly with regard to fire, sound and energy efficiency.

¹⁶ <https://assets.gov.ie/217004/8c17868b-d644-40e9-95eb-ca6215a82784.pdf>, accessed 24 February 2023.

¹⁷ <https://www.nwra.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/regional-vacancy-and-dereliction-analysis-17012022.pdf>, accessed 24 February 2023.

The ‘Bringing Back Homes Manual for the reuse of existing buildings’¹⁸ provides some detail about the complexities involved in returning vacant retail units to the residential market. They set out a ‘Typical Scale of Intervention’, the building regulations that apply, as there is a material change of use to a shop premises. Typical works will include fire separation and sound insulation between shop and dwelling (both walls and floors), the provision of independent services to each unit (including heating, lighting and plumbing), the installation of an integrated fire-alarm system in the building, the possible replacement of windows (except display windows) and that rental Regulations will apply in any case where it is proposed to offer the dwelling for rental.

The finished flat overhead should conform to Fire Safety in Flats (1994).¹⁹ This document sets out the guidelines on how to best implement and manage fire-safety requirements and highlights the importance of maintaining effective escape routes, inspecting and maintaining fire-protection equipment, ensuring that occupants of flats are properly informed about fire safety, preventing fire outbreaks and ensuring security arrangements do not impede escape in the event of fire amongst other considerations.

11. Introduce new regulations for Short Term Lettings

A new short-term letting registration system is currently being developed, requiring Short Term and Holiday Lets to register with Fáilte Ireland with a view to “ensuring that homes are used to best effect in areas of housing need”.²⁰ Figures accessed in February 2023 show 461 Sligo properties listed on Air BnB. ²¹

Whilst this initiative is included in the section of Housing For All that tackles vacancy, the introduction of a short term lets register aims more at increasing the availability of long-term residential accommodation by ensuring a better use of the accommodation that is currently let short term, as opposed to vacant properties as such.

12. Drive Efficient Use of Private and Social Housing Stock

A factor in achieving maximum utilisation of the Local Authorities housing stock is ensuring rightsizing of homes. Under occupation occurs when the household no longer requires the same space as before due to changes in family composition. Housing For All commits to developing a policy on right sizing that will support householders to move to possible smaller homes voluntarily. As the population of the county shifts and changes, so will their housing needs, Between Census 2016 and 2022, Sligo experienced a net migration figure of 2,864 and a natural increase of 1,420. Of the 517 households listed as eligible for social housing supports in Sligo, 45 of them are aged less than 25, 303 are aged between 25 and 49, 143 are aged between 50 and 69 and 26 are aged 70 and above. Sligo County Council owned 2,298 social housing dwellings as of March 2020.²² With waiting lists already long, right sizing will be a challenge unless properly resourced. Despite a date for delivery in Q1, 2022, as yet, no national policy has been published.

¹⁸ <https://assets.gov.ie/80527/cd2e9dcf-fc0e-47f8-8ff8-f1be882a0030.pdf>, accessed 24 February 2023.

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/117475/e9567ecb-8f82-4097-a814-36fa60f4e29f.pdf#page=null>, accessed 24 February 2023.

²⁰ <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/f5707-short-term-tourist-letting-register-to-be-established-through-new-legislation/>, accessed 24 February 2023.

²¹ <http://insideairbnb.com/ireland/>, accessed 24 February 2023.

²² <https://noac.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Sligo-Scrutiny-Programme-2.pdf>, accessed 24 February 2023.

13. Expand Existing Schemes to tackle Vacancy - Improve the Buy and Renew element of the Social Housing Programme and Enhance the Repair and Leasing Scheme

Vacant Housing Repair and Leasing Initiative

The Vacant Housing Repair and Leasing Initiative was introduced as part of the Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness. This initiative aims to increase delivery of social housing by utilising existing housing stock.

An owner of a property that has been vacant for at least a year, that needs repairs to bring it to rental standard can apply once there is deemed to be a need for social housing in the area and that the property would also be suitable as social housing.

Either the Local Authority or an Approved Housing Body (AHB) funds the works, up to a maximum of €60,000, in return for the property being made available for use as social housing for a period of at least 10 years. The costs of these improvements and repairs are then deducted from the rent over the period of the lease. The rent level is agreed with the Local Authority or AHB, the maximum level being 80 per cent of current market rents or 85 per cent for apartments and is reviewed every three to four years. As noted above the Sligo targets are modest, 4 properties across all MDs.

Buy and Renew Scheme

The Buy and Renew Scheme sits alongside the Repair and Leasing Scheme. The aim is to help local authorities and AHBs to turn suitable vacant properties into social housing. As with the Repair and Lease scheme, certain conditions must be met. Funding is provided to the local authority to buy and upgrade the vacant property and add to the social housing stock and applications are being accepted by Sligo County Council. Again, the target in Sligo is 4 properties across the MDs.

Case Studies

The following case studies showcase initiatives that are attempting to deal with vacancy across the country and are included for information and discussion purposes.

Case Study 1 – Mayo County Council Pilot

The highest vacancy rates in the country are along the North West corridor. Mayo County Council, acknowledging the high rates in Mayo, announced in December 2022, a pilot project to turn vacant properties back into homes by identifying vacant and derelict properties and putting owners in touch with possible buyers. The initial target is to facilitate the sale of up to 50 homes to buyers in 2023 with scope then to expand the project nationwide in 2024. The scheme has secured funding from the Housing Finance Agency and will take place on a housing-solutions platform – Homebuyer's Hero which can be accessed here: <https://homebuyershero.com/>.

Note the scheme is still in its infancy.

Case Study 2 – Housing Unlocked

The Irish Architecture Foundation in conjunction with The Housing Agency created Housing Unlocked, an exhibition based on ideas to examine housing potential for Ireland's village and towns. Three projects look at existing use of vacant buildings as well as soon to be vacant such as main street banking premises.

Building Societies

This first project examines the impact on main streets across the country after the announcement in March 2021 by the Bank of Ireland of 103 branch closures (This conversation could be expanded to include the withdrawal of KBC and Ulster Bank from the Irish market).

<https://housingunlocked.ie/projects/building-societies/>

Join the Dots

This project looked at how making lots of small changes added up. They looked at Mountrath in Laois as a template but the ideas can be used in any Irish town and explored 'Living over the shop' models as a way of facilitating Town Centre living, especially in light of the changes made to many people's ability to work from home.

<https://housingunlocked.ie/projects/join-the-dots/>

The Working-Home

This project examined the re-use of vacant and derelict commercial property for residential use.

<https://housingunlocked.ie/projects/the-working-home/>

Case Study 3 – Compulsory Sales Orders

As the costs of using Compulsory Purchase Orders can prohibit their use, Compulsory Sale Orders (CSOs) could be introduced alongside CPOs to compel the sale of vacant and derelict sites. CSOs were proposed by the Scottish Land Commission in their proposal to Government in 2018 and compel the owner of a property or site to sell it at open auction to the highest bidder. This is more cost effective for the Local Authority as it requires administration, rather than full purchase, costs.

Conclusion

Vacancy, according to the data sources, appears to be a bigger issue for the county than dereliction. The data gives no indication about the habitability of these properties. There is a growing understanding that issues of homelessness and climate change intersect with that of having vacant properties lying idle in our towns and cities. There is also a growing understanding that the issue is also not that simple and that the many different reasons for a property to remain unused demands a myriad of policy responses. This paper has been written in reply to the questions posed by the issue for Sligo. It is a living document that should be used as a tool to guide and inform policy discussion.

We welcome feedback and are looking forward to engaging in further dialogue with our communities.

