



4: Pathway to Addressing Vacancy and Efficient Use of Existing Stock

The current context:

Many housing units around the country lie vacant for varying reasons. The reasons for vacancy are often complex. Some properties are left vacant for long periods because the investment required to refurbish them to the requisite standard is either not available to the owner or the costs involved would not be justified.

Local Property Tax returns for 2020 indicate up to 7,800 vacancy exemptions were processed due to illness. It is likely that a significant portion of these exemptions relate to owners availing of the Fair Deal Scheme (which provides financial support to those in long-term nursing home care). However, the scheme currently does not allow a home to be leased. Elsewhere, the latest data shows that 124 housing developments remain on the 'unfinished' list with 57 of those developments unoccupied.

Our older housing stock requires greater energy efficiency, both to contribute to climate action and to provide householders with greater comfort, health protection and lower energy bills. Elsewhere, many properties that could be used as a long-term home are now being used as short-term and holiday lets.

Vacancy and energy inefficiency not only affect housing stock but also the ability of people to live in and give greater vibrancy to our cities, towns and villages.

Key actions in Housing for All:

- Introduce a new Croí Connaithe (Towns) Fund to service sites in regional towns and villages, to attract people to build their own homes and to support the refurbishment of vacant properties, enabling people to live in small towns and villages, in a sustainable way. It will be delivered by local authorities.
- Support local authorities to purchase and resell at least 2,500 vacant properties by 2026. Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) powers will be used where necessary.
- Reform the 'Fair Deal' Scheme to enable applicants rent or sell their property without sanction.
- Implement new regulations requiring short-term and holiday lets to register with Fáilte Ireland.
- Collect data on vacancy in residential property with a view to introducing a new Vacant Property Tax.
- Fully utilise all State-owned vacant properties and sites that are suitable for residential housing.

- Local Authorities will work with the appropriate stakeholders to resolve issues within ‘unfinished estates’ with a view to minimising any vacancy levels, with an initial focus on 65 developments where residents already live.
- Take a targeted approach to multi-unit vacant stock that combines local authority leadership, Urban Regeneration Development Fund (URDF) and Rural Regeneration Development Fund (RRDF) funding, retrofit grants and heritage funding.
- Develop a national policy, including incentives, on rightsizing and guides and incentives for rightsizing.
- Review and extend to 2025 the scheme that exempts certain vacant commercial premises from requiring planning permission for change of use for residential purposes.
- Tackle vacancy in ‘over the shop’ properties and other dwellings through a renewed focus on the Repair and Leasing Scheme, which provides increased funding from €40,000 to €60,000 per unit.
- Government departments and local authorities to work towards local authority housing revenue being ring-fenced for housing management and maintenance.
- Publish the new Town Centre First policy, which seeks to deliver the best outcomes for town centres by aligning policies and targeting available resources. It will include approaches to utilising existing and new financial incentive mechanisms.
- Harness European Regional Development Funding to tackle vacancy and dereliction in towns.
- All Government departments will examine their existing portfolio of properties with a view to placing them on the market if they are not required and may be suitable for conversion to residential accommodation.
- Empower local authorities to offer Commercial Rates-based incentives for the conversion of suitable vacant commercial properties to residential use.
- Local Authorities, Approved Housing Bodies, heritage NGOs, the Heritage Council and the Heritage Division within the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to work in partnership to unlock the potential in our villages, towns and cities to utilise heritage building stock (pre-1940) to help tackle the housing crisis.

The expected outcomes:

- Local Authorities will target acquiring up to 2,500 vacant units by 2026 and present them to the market for sale.
- Changes to the Fair Deal Scheme could release a significant number of properties to the sale and rental markets.
- Local Authorities will have worked towards completing 65 unfinished housing developments containing residents. Through a mixture of the Town Centre First policy, and utilisation of the URDF and RRDF funds, cities, villages and towns should see greater re-use of existing properties and more conducive conditions for building housing developments in towns. This will be in addition to greater regeneration of cities and towns, through the use of a range of legislative and financial tools by local authorities.

- Unlock the potential to utilise heritage building stock to provide housing solutions while reinvigorating urban centres.

These measures, along with others, will help revitalise our cities, towns and villages over the lifetime of 'Housing for All'. They will greatly reduce instances of vacancy and greatly improve the efficient use of existing housing stock.

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