



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

National Vacant Housing Reuse Strategy

2018-2021

Executive Summary

Prepared by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government

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Action No.	TABLE OF VACANCY ACTIONS	TIMELINE	OWNER
1: ESTABLISH ROBUST, ACCURATE, CONSISTENT AND UP-TO-DATE DATA SETS ON VACANCY			
1A	Establishment of a Vacant Homes Unit within the Department and appointment of Vacant Homes Officers in local authorities to drive and co-ordinate actions at a national and local level, including data collection and analysis.	VHU Established August 2017	Planning PMO DHPLG
1B	Establish a vacancy sub-group (under the Department's Housing Data Analytics Group), including representatives of the Department, CSO, local government sector and the Housing Agency and task the Vacancy sub-group with developing a standardised methodology of data collection that is accurate and consistent for utilisation across the local government sector.	Commenced	DHPLG
1C	Conduct a Pilot Survey to ensure methodology development is robust and produces reliable output and consider whether to roll out as a national survey.	Commenced June 2018	DHPLG / LAs
2: BRING FORWARD MEASURES TO ENSURE, TO THE GREATEST DEGREE POSSIBLE, THAT VACANT AND UNDERUSED PRIVATELY OWNED PROPERTIES ARE BROUGHT BACK TO USE			
2A	Gain a better understanding as to the barriers that exist to the reuse of privately owned vacant properties.	Ongoing	DHPLG
2B	Continuously review and evaluate existing schemes to ensure they are effective in bringing homes back to viable use.	Ongoing	DHPLG
2C	Address vacancy in commercial/over the shop properties – reducing where possible regulatory barriers and providing guidance to bring clarity on what regulatory requirements apply to such properties.	Ongoing	Building Standards Section / Planning Section DHPLG
2D	Examine the potential for the greater use of legislative powers available to local authorities to reactivate vacant dwellings.	H2 2020	DHPLG
3: BRING FORWARD MEASURES TO MINIMISE VACANCY ARISING IN SOCIAL HOUSING STOCK			
3A	Review funding mechanisms on an ongoing basis with appropriate adjustments made to ensure that the sector has the capacity to prioritise bringing vacant properties back into use.	H2 2019	DHPLG
3B	Continue working with local authorities to introduce preventative maintenance approach of housing stock.	Ongoing	DHPLG / LAs
3C	Continue to liaise with local authorities with a view to ensuring that Choice Based Letting is implemented as widely as possible across the country.	Ongoing	DHPLG / LAs
3D	Engage with the Housing Agency and the Approved Housing Body (AHB) sector to identify, support and enter agreements with AHBs best suited to playing a significant role in bringing vacant properties back into use.	Ongoing	DHPLG / Housing Agency/ AHBs

4: CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT WITH, AND PROVISION OF SUPPORT TO, KEY STAKEHOLDERS, TO ENSURE SUITABLE VACANT PROPERTIES HELD BY BANKS, FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND INVESTORS ARE ACQUIRED FOR SOCIAL HOUSING USE			
4A	Ensure adequate capital funding is in place for the Housing Agency to purchase and acquire vacant properties. The Housing Agency to continue to engage with banks, financial institutions and investment companies to purchase suitable units, selling ultimately to AHBs to tenant.	Annually	DHPLG / Housing Agency
4B	Ensure suitable portfolios of vacant properties are acquired from financial institutions and investors.	H1 2019	DHPLG / Housing Agency / Financial Institutions
4C	Continued engagement of the Housing Agency with NAMA and other relevant stakeholders to deliver homes to the social housing sector.	H2 2018	DHPLG / Housing Agency/ AHBs
4D	Department to engage further with local authorities and stakeholders, in respect of unfinished housing estates, to explore the range of strategic acquisition options available to local authorities to take up remaining, suitable and required vacant units.	H1 2019	DHPLG / Housing Agency / Financial Institutions / NAMA
5: FOSTER AND DEVELOP CROSS-SECTOR RELATIONSHIPS, COLLABORATING IN PARTNERSHIP TO TACKLE VACANT HOUSING MATTERS			
5A	Draw from the overall National Planning Framework Strategy, having particular regard to its objectives addressing vacancy.	Ongoing	DHPLG / LAs
5B	Development, rollout and monitoring of dedicated Urban Regeneration Scheme.	H2 2018	DHPLG
5C	Consider utilisation of the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund as a mechanism for addressing vacancy in urban areas and support the submission of proposals to the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund with a view to reducing the level of vacancy in rural areas.	H2 2018	DHPLG / LAs / Department of Rural and Community Development
5D	Work in close partnership with other relevant Government Departments on addressing such issues as rural vacancy, examining possible measures to address vacant homes when an owner moves to nursing home care under the Nursing Home Support Scheme and exploration of possible taxation measures and providing additional legislative powers to increase capacity of local authorities to bring vacant properties back to use.	H1 2019	DHPLG / Department of Culture, Heritage and Gaeltacht / LAs / Department of Health

Introduction

At a time of great housing need it is important to increase the supply of housing available both in the private and social context, but we must also look at Ireland's existing housing stock and examine whether we are making efficient and effective use of the stock available. The issue of residential vacancy is one that has been tackled as part of the suite of measures the government is taking to make more housing available and we continue to work on the issue. It has become increasingly apparent that the issue of residential vacancy is more complex than might appear from a simple analysis of headline vacancy numbers and we are aware of the need to understand its intrinsic qualities from geographical, temporal and causal perspectives and put in place policies that respond accordingly.

The Vacant Housing Reuse Strategy 2018-2021 is an overarching strategy which sets out a vision for tackling residential vacancy issues. Many of the key actions to reduce vacancy are well underway since 2016. This strategy includes those actions, their implementation and extension where appropriate. It also sets out the concrete actions we will take in order to meet that vision of returning as many recoverable vacant properties back to viable use as possible, increasing the supply of sustainable housing available, while also revitalising the vibrancy of local communities.

The Reuse Strategy is informed by Project Ireland 2040 and the National Planning Framework (NPF) which sets out a spatial strategy for Ireland in order to accommodate the predicted significant demographic changes in the future, where we expect to see an additional one million people living in Ireland by 2040. Further to National Policy Objective 35 of the NPF, as part of the plan to meet this growth, it is crucial that we reuse existing buildings and reduce vacancy in order to tackle housing supply issues and also to ensure the continued growth and development of our communities in both urban and rural areas.

The Strategy is also informed by the Government's housing policy document *Rebuilding Ireland: An Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness*, which discusses residential vacancy in Pillar Five - Utilise Existing Housing. All measures that can be undertaken to increase the quantum of housing available must be pursued. This Strategy is being published in furtherance of the objectives set under Pillar Five of *Rebuilding Ireland*, where we set a goal of ensuring that existing housing stock is used to the maximum degree possible, learning from the errors of the past where some social housing stock had deteriorated and become

uninhabitable. It builds on significant work already begun in 2016 and 2017 by various stakeholders, including the Housing Agency and local authorities, in order to meet our Pillar Five goals.

In order to achieve our vision, we need to secure robust, accurate, consistent and up-to-date data sets on vacancy to aid the identification of vacant homes and monitor vacancy levels. Obtaining improved data and deeper analysis of that data will provide the strong evidence base required to guide future policy formation.

We must also bring forward measures that will have the greatest effect in bringing vacant homes back to use and tailor these measures to diverse vacant property types, be they vacant properties in our existing social housing stock, privately owned vacant homes, bank and investor owned vacant properties, commercial premises suitable for conversion or 'over the shop' vacant properties. We also need to further develop and strengthen co-ordinated actions within the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and across wider Government policy formation to address vacancy.

The Reuse Strategy envisages participation of a range of stakeholders and Minister Murphy has established a Vacant Homes Unit in the Department to drive and co-ordinate implementation of the actions set out in this Strategy and to advise on vacancy issues at a national level.

Funding has also been provided to local authorities in order to establish a Vacant Homes Office in each local authority area and Vacant Homes Officers will be responsible for driving implementation of the actions identified in the Reuse Strategy at local level. In addition, these officers will assess and monitor vacancy rates and report to central Government. The Vacant Homes Officers within each local authority will also act as a repository for advice to owners of vacant properties regarding approaches, schemes and incentives that will aid bringing vacant homes back to use.

The Five Key Objectives

Objective 1	Establish robust, accurate, consistent and up-to-date data sets on vacancy.
Objective 2	Bring forward measures to ensure, to the greatest degree possible, that vacant and underused privately owned properties are brought back to use
Objective 3	Bring forward measures to minimise vacancy arising in Social Housing Stock.
Objective 4	Continued engagement with and provision of support to key stakeholders to ensure suitable vacant properties held by banks, financial institutions and investors are acquired for social housing use.
Objective 5	Foster and develop cross-sector relationships, collaborating in partnership to tackle vacant housing matters.

Following on from *Rebuilding Ireland: (Pillar Five - Reuse Existing Buildings)*, five key objectives have been identified and the Strategy sets out the main actions that will be taken to achieve these objectives. It is noted that good progress has already been made arising from actions already taken by local authorities in particular to meet the objectives of the *Rebuilding Ireland* Action Plan and this is recognised throughout the Strategy but more needs to be achieved over the next four years in order to fully realise our vision. We will continue to measure against these objectives as we move through the implementation phase.

Objective 1

Establish Robust, Accurate, Consistent and Up-to-Date data sets on Vacancy.

The results from Census 2016 have provided valuable high level data on vacancy and the task now is to begin to build on that data to understand the statistics and to establish the picture underlying the headline figures produced by the Census of 183,312 vacant dwellings. While the vacancy level had dropped from the previous Census in 2011, it continues to be higher than might be expected in a time of housing shortage. Further, it needs to be determined what proportion of those houses are in areas of high demand or indeed are potentially recoverable for use. We must also gain a better understanding of the reasons behind vacancy in order to further inform our policy actions in this area.

The key actions to help achieve this are already well under way. A Vacant Homes Unit has been established within the Department and Vacant Homes Officers are being appointed in local authorities to drive and co-ordinate actions at a national and local level, including data collection and analysis.

A vacancy sub-group (under the Department's Housing Data Analytics Group), including representatives of the Department, CSO, local government sector and the Housing Agency, has been tasked with developing a standardised methodology of data collection that is accurate and consistent for utilisation across the local government sector. The Department is working with local authorities to conduct a Pilot Vacancy Survey to ensure methodology development is robust and produces reliable output and, as part of the long term objectives, the Department will consider whether to roll out a national vacancy survey.

By 2021, these measures will have advanced to a point where we can confidently state vacancy figures for each local authority area and have significantly increased our understanding of the reasons behind vacancy, allowing us to build new policies and amend current measures in the area where needed.

Objective 2

Bring forward measures to ensure, to the greatest degree possible, that vacant and underused privately owned properties are brought back to use.

The Department has brought forward specific measures to address vacancy and to remove any unnecessary barriers to bringing property back into use. Among the key actions to achieve this objective has been gaining a better understanding as to the barriers that currently exist to the reuse of privately owned vacant properties. In addition, we continuously review and evaluate existing schemes, such as the Repair and Lease scheme and the Buy and Renew scheme, to ensure they are effective in bringing homes back to viable use.

In terms of the barriers we are already aware of, it is intended to address vacancy in commercial or 'over the shop' dwellings by reducing regulatory barriers where possible and providing guidance to owners as to what regulatory requirements apply to such properties. We are also examining the potential for greater use of legislative powers available to local authorities, such as compulsory purchase orders, to reactivate vacant dwellings.

Objective 3

Bring forward measures to minimise vacancy arising in Social Housing Stock.

The national social housing stock is owned and maintained by local authorities and Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) and is a key component of Ireland's overall housing infrastructure. In managing this stock, swift turnaround and re-tenanting is crucial, particularly at a time of high social housing need.

We will enable quick turnaround by reviewing the funding mechanisms for same on an ongoing basis, with appropriate adjustments being made to ensure that the sector has the capacity to prioritise bringing vacant social housing back into use. It is important though not to let housing stock reach an uninhabitable condition and we will continue working with local authorities on a preventative maintenance approach to ensure properties are upgraded on an ongoing basis.

Better management of the offers process for social housing will also decrease vacancy and more work will be done on extending the use of 'Choice Based Letting' in order to optimise occupancy rates of social housing stock.

The Department will also engage with the Housing Agency and the Approved Housing Body sector to identify, support and enter into agreements with AHB's best suited to playing a significant role in bringing vacant properties back into use.

Objective 4

Continued engagement with and provision of support to key stakeholders to ensure suitable vacant properties held by banks, financial institutions and investors are acquired for social housing use.

The Housing Agency is already actively engaged with banks, financial institutions and investment companies in relation to identifying available units within their property portfolios, particularly in areas with a demand for social housing, with a view to selling these properties to an Approved Housing Body who will let them to social housing tenants.

The Department will ensure that adequate capital funding is in place for the Housing Agency to acquire vacant properties and the Housing Agency will continue to engage with financial institutions to purchase suitable units for ultimate use as social housing. In addition, the Housing Agency will continue its engagement with NAMA and other relevant stakeholders to deliver homes to the social housing sector.

Unfinished housing estates may also be another source of vacant properties and the Department will engage further with local authorities and stakeholders in respect of these estates to explore the range of strategic acquisition options available to take up remaining suitable units where social housing demand exists.

Objective 5

Foster and develop cross-sector relationships, collaborating in partnership to tackle vacant housing matters.

The National Planning Framework (NPF) is the overarching strategic spatial plan for shaping the future growth and development of the country to 2040 and beyond. In this context, actions under the Reuse Strategy will have regard to the underlying housing priorities expressed in the NPF as they pertain to the reintroduction of the maximum number of vacant homes into the liveable housing stock.

Urban renewal and the regeneration of urban centres will be promoted through the use of funding initiatives such as a dedicated Urban Regeneration Scheme. Further, the €2bn Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) and the €1bn Rural Regeneration Fund, as established under Project Ireland 2040, will also provide funding for new initiatives to tackle vacancy in urban and rural areas. The Funds will reward collaboration in this area and the Department will continue to work with the sponsoring authorities to bring forward innovative and exciting projects which can address residential vacancy.

The Department will continue to work with other Government bodies on vacancy issues, for example with the Department of Rural and Community Development to address issues such as rural vacancy and with the Department of Health to examine possible measure to address vacancy which may arise where an owner moves to a nursing home. Further financial measures to encourage bringing vacant homes back into use, including taxation or incentives, will be examined with the Department of Finance.

Conclusion

The Government, at both central and local level, is determined to address the issue of vacancy. While the levels of vacancy reduced by almost 47,000 housing units (230,000 down to 183,000) in the five years between 2011 and 2016, it is nonetheless imperative that we encourage further reduction in vacancy at a time of severe housing shortage and expected population growth. Harnessing the potential of these vacant properties and bringing a substantial proportion of them back into use as quickly as possible will have benefits both for social and private occupancy and for revitalisation of areas which have been negatively impacted by vacancy.

Given the current homelessness and housing issues, a particular focus needs to be brought to bear on those areas where there is a high demand for housing. We also need to better understand how long term vacancy arises in order to create new, innovative and targeted solutions and to supplement and improve the existing suite of measures to ensure our resources have the greatest impact possible on vacancy.

The Reuse Strategy sets out in detail the key actions summarised above and the timelines for achievement of the objectives and we look forward to reporting on progress as we move forward in partnership with all of the relevant stakeholders towards meeting both *Rebuilding Ireland* and National Planning Framework targets and bringing empty houses back into use as homes.

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