

Addressing Empty Homes: Unlocking Solutions to the Housing and Homeless Crisis - 10 Point Plan

1. Data and Monitoring:

- a. **Vacant Housing Register:** The proposed vacant housing register must be accurately populated and classified on the basis of housing type and readiness for reuse. A real-time database should be established with formal communication and data sharing structures between relevant bodies to ensure the effectiveness of the register in reducing vacancy in private and social housing stock.
- b. **Local Authority Vacant Site, Derelict Site and Dangerous Structures registers** must be maintained and made centrally available in an accessible online format. Data must be transparent, verifiable, up-to-date and subject to regular inspection and monitoring.
- c. **Development of a register of ownership of land and housing** led by Local Authorities to be held centrally by DHPCLG or the Housing Agency.
- d. There are almost 200k households identified as empty and there are numerous reasons cited including probate, property left through death of relatives and investment. Targeted research is needed. We need to identify who the owners are, what the most common reasons for property vacancy are, and what the main barriers are to sale, lease or letting of same. A targeted piece of research should be undertaken by the Housing Agency and the DHPCLG making clear recommendations for urgent implementation in this regard.

2. Housing Agency Vacant Housing Purchase Initiative: The targeted housing return for the 'Housing Agency Vacant Housing Purchase Initiative' should be reviewed on an annual basis and the target revised upwards. This initiative should focus on areas with greatest social housing need.

3. Incentive Schemes: Need for ambitious incentive schemes to encourage property owners to sell, or lease their properties to realise maximum social housing return. Schemes need to include grants to repair and refurbish homes where necessary. Any such schemes need to make it as easy as possible for Approved Housing Bodies (AHB's) to get involved especially those working with people who are homeless.

- a. **Repair and Leasing Scheme:** The scheme should be expanded beyond the targeted return of 3,500 properties, reviewed annually and revised upwards where property owner uptake is high. The current target represents only 1.8% of total vacant properties in the State. The recent announcement of the nationwide rollout of the scheme is welcome. A public awareness campaign should be launched outlining the benefits to owners of vacant properties. Direct communication with owners of vacant properties should also be pursued. AHB's must be supported to engage with the scheme to ensure their expertise can be utilised to ensure the maximum return of vacant properties as soon as possible.
- b. **Buy and Renew Scheme:** Specific targeted housing returns should be stipulated for this scheme and Approved Housing Bodies (AHB's) should be supported to engage with the 'Buy and Renew Scheme' for the delivery of social housing especially in the context of supporting people to move from emergency accommodation to supported tenancies.
- c. **Fair Deal Scheme:** Incentives are needed to encourage the renting or leasing of the family home to those availing of the Fair Deal Scheme. Participants in the Fair Deal scheme should be able to rent out their homes tax-free up to the value of the Rent-A-Room scheme.

4. Compulsory Leasing Orders: Compulsory leasing orders should be used to acquire any shortfall in vacant properties not delivered through the Repair and Leasing Scheme.

5. **Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO's):** CPO's should be used to acquire any shortfall in vacant properties not purchased through the Housing Agency Housing Purchase Initiative.
6. **Compulsory acquisition of development land:** Consideration should be given to the acquisition of development land for the delivery of social and affordable housing. Local Authority vacant site registers should allow for targeted identification of sites in this regard. The recommendations of the 1973 Kenny Report and the 2004 Ninth Progress Report of the All-Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution should be revisited to determine the level of compensation paid to land owners the subject of Compulsory Purchase Orders.
7. **Vacant Property Tax:** A vacant property tax should be introduced for homes empty for more than 12 months. Such a tax could be calculated on the basis of property value or potential rental income and increased the longer a property remains vacant. Revenue raised through the vacant property tax could be redirected to fund further vacancy reduction measures and social housing output.
8. **Planning and Regulatory Environment:** The current planning and regulatory environment needs major overhaul. A simple change of use for example from commercial to residential use can involve three different approvals (planning, fire and disability access), and four statutory appointments, all on different timescales, submission requirements and fees (which may also involve up to three different people). Significant potential housing supply remains locked behind this considerable bureaucracy. The considerable regulatory and planning burdens must be addressed as a matter of urgency with consideration of establishing a one-stop-shop.
9. **Vacant Sites and Derelict Sites:**
 - a. The 3% levy on vacant sites introduced under the Urban Regeneration and Housing Act 2015 is inadequate given rapidly increasing land prices. The vacant site levy presents no real deterrent to those hoarding vacant development land. It should be amended to reduce the number of exemptions available to owners of development land subject to a loan on the property in question. The levy should apply until the site is occupied and be implemented immediately.^[1]
 - b. The 3% levy on derelict sites should be increased to deter further dereliction and to promote the reintroduction of these properties into productive use.
10. **Skills and Capacity:** Given the massive potential vacant, derelict and underused sites present in addressing the current housing shortage it is essential that the necessary resources, finance and personnel, are provided at national and Local Authority level to make an impact quickly. This involves data collection and research; planning, regulatory and technical know-how; public awareness and outreach campaigns to identify, negotiate and liaise with property owners.