



Comhairle Cathrach & Contae Phort Láirge
Waterford City & County Council

Waterford City and County Council

Vacant Homes Action Plan 2017

1. Introduction

The high demand for residential properties on the property market, slow rate of new build and deepening housing crisis across Ireland, requires alternative approach to solve these problems. Census 2016 recorded that nationally more than 12% of residential properties were vacant and this has given rise to a perception that there are potentially thousands of vacant properties which could be utilized for social or private housing.

In September 2017 the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Mr Eoghan Murphy TD, announced a number of actions being taken by his Department and local authorities to quickly progress the delivery of vacant homes back into use including a requirement for local authorities to develop vacant homes action plans.

This **Vacant Homes Action Plan for Waterford City and County Council** has been developed based on the Census 2016 data for Waterford city and county, GeoDirectory data and the findings from the in-house vacant house survey in Waterford City and County. The main objective of this Action Plan is to deliver “new” housing units, both social and private, from the existing property stock thereby reducing the rate of vacancy and improving the streetscapes of our city, towns and villages. It is intended that Waterford City and County Council will utilise a range of initiatives and legislative powers in the implementation of the Plan.

2. Vacancy levels in Waterford

The rates of the vacancy within Waterford City and County Council vary depending on the data source. Based on Census 2016 data, the number of vacant residential units in Waterford was 5,194 or 13.6 % of the total residential units in the city and county. However figures presented by GeoDirectory for vacant residential units in Waterford city and county for Q2 2017 are significantly lower than the Census data with just 1,518 recorded vacant units. This variation can be explained by comparing the different methodologies used for the two data systems.

CSO Census 2016 – Vacant Classification Methodology

In identifying vacant dwellings, Census enumerators were instructed to look for signs that the dwelling was not occupied e.g. no furniture, no cars outside, junk mail accumulating, overgrown garden etc., and to find out from the neighbours whether it was vacant or not. Enumerators were also required to visit a dwelling on at least three occasions before they could classify a dwelling as vacant.

GeoDirectory – Vacant Classification Methodology

GeoDirectory is a database established by An Post and Ordnance Survey Ireland to identify the address and location of every residential and commercial property in the State. The GeoDirectory

methodology provides that an address is classified as vacant if it is either, a) vacant and ready to be inhabited, or b) vacant and requires a small amount of repair/cosmetic work to make it habitable.

According to the GeoDirectory, CSO vacant figures include some properties classified as vacant that would not meet their standard classifications. For example some figures in the following CSO categories may not be included in GeoDirectory; For Sale, Deceased, Nursing Home, Renovation, Hospital, and Other. GeoDirectory data is based on information gathered from 3,500 An Post delivery staff and their mail redirection service - the data is gathered through a network of regional surveyors who on average visit an area and consult local staff 2 to 3 times a year

Waterford City and County Council survey

In view of the significant differences between the Census and Geo-Directory data on vacant housing and having regard to the Council's own local knowledge, it was decided to conduct a survey locally to determine which, if any, of the two data sets could best be used to inform the Council's approach to vacant houses. In August 2017, over the course of a week, Waterford City and County Council housing staff carried out a survey on every housing unit in 17 small areas to verify level of vacancy in urban, rural and semi urban areas (Fig 1). In total, 2,039 properties were surveyed and this indicated 241 properties were vacant. When compared to the other two data systems Area by Area, the Council's survey recorded vacancy levels that largely were lower than the Census and higher than the GeoDirectory data (there were a small number of exceptions to this however). The main conclusion we have reached is that neither Census nor Geodirectory can be fully relied on by the Council for the implementation of this Action Plan. However, GeoDirectory does have one significant feature that the published data from the Census does not have; the data it provides under licence can identify the precise address and geographical locations of the individual units it has recorded as vacant whereas the Census data does not disclose individual addresses or locations. In relation to the 17 Small Areas that we have surveyed, we are confident that our data is accurate as the principle objective of our survey was to verify occupancy or vacancy with secondary objectives to make an assessment of the each unit's condition and to determine why and for how long the units are vacant.

Small_Area	Small_Area_Type	Small_Area_Name	CSO % Vacant	Geo Directory % Vacant 16	Geo Directory % Vacant 17	WCCC % Vacant
227081005	Rural	An Rinn	11%	6%	6%	4.2%
227071002	Rural	Mothel	12%	6%	5%	6.4%
227021002	Rural	Castlerichard	19%	9%	10%	7.8%
227058003	Semi Urban	Kilmacthomas	14%	2%	2%	5.0%
227067002	Semi Urban	Lismore Rural	13%	2%	1%	6.5%
227090007	Urban	Tramore	6%	2%	2%	2.1%
228030009	Urban	Park	13%	2%	2%	1.7%
227090032	Urban	Tramore	32%	6%	6%	11.3%
227032001	Urban	Dungarvan No. 1 Urban	8%	4%	4%	7.1%
228024002	Urban	Morrisson's Avenue East	29%	3%	0%	11.9%
228030006	Urban	Park	3%	0%	0%	4.8%

228033001	Urban	Shortcourse	14%	2%	3%	6.9%
228035001	Urban	The Glen	23%	3%	3%	14.4%
227032002	Urban	Dungarvan No. 1 Urban	19%	5%	5%	15.2%
228035004	Urban	The Glen	50%	2%	2%	29.1%
227017002	Rural	Cappoquin	34%	20%	26%	26.3%
227017003	Rural	Cappoquin	20%	24%	19%	21.9%
Combined averages			18.8%	5.7%	5.5%	10.7%

Fig 1. WCCC Vacant House Survey, 17 Small Areas, August 2017.

3. Aims and Objectives of the Action Plan

Our aims and objectives of our Action Plan for Vacant Houses are to:

- maximise the potential for the reuse of empty homes for social and private housing;
- provide sources of good quality affordable housing;
- ensure that awareness of the issue of empty homes is raised amongst the public and to give the public opportunities to bring vacancy issues to the Council's attention
- help improve the existing streetscape of our city, towns and villages
- promote the availability of funding, schemes and other services through targeted information sharing and publicity
- reduce the pressure on the future development of greenfield sites and protect the environment
- help to reduce the level of localised anti-social behaviour that can often occur in long-term vacant housing
- ensure programmes meet a range of housing needs, whilst providing a choice of accommodation

4. Actions

A dedicated Vacant Homes Team has been established and Vacant Homes Officers assigned to certain areas. The Vacant Homes Team will identify and record vacant residential units and will assess the options available to bring those units back into occupancy. The Team will also provide advice, assistance and information to owners of vacant homes for bringing them back into use and offer advice and information on housing related issues to tenants, landlords, owner occupiers and members of the public. The Team will interact with relevant Council Departments to gain information, advice and expertise.

We will develop and maintain a Vacant Homes Database using, where applicable, the Census 2016 and GeoDirectory data and, subject to resources, additional Council surveys at a local level. Additional input to the Database will be generated from the "VacantHomes.ie" database (developed

and administered by Mayo County Council for the local authority sector). VacantHomes.ie is a website which enables members of the public to report vacant residential units online and this information is subsequently passed on to the relevant local authority.

We will give priority to areas with the highest housing demand (social and private) and with high levels of vacancy. While the three larger urban centres, Waterford City, Dungarvan and Tramore will be targeted, we will also focus on the smaller towns and villages with distinct vacancy issues.

The Vacant Homes Team will use the Council's full range of legislative and regulatory powers to seek to reduce the levels of vacant residential units. This will include the exercise of powers in relation to derelict sites and dangerous structures, the utilisation of schemes intended to encourage vacant property owners to allow their properties to be used for social housing through the Repair & Leasing Scheme and the Buy and Renew Scheme and the use of enforcement action through Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO). In relation to CPO, Waterford City and County Council has made a provision of €100,000 in the 2018 Budget to facilitate the commencement of a programme of compulsory purchases of vacant residential units with the objective of returning those properties to the market for productive use.

5. Setting Targets

Based on the Vacant Houses Database and detailed survey of properties and subject to the availability of resources, achievable and realistic targets can be set. As noted above, a provision has been made in the Council's 2018 Budget for a targeted CPO programme to return vacant units to the private market. Based on the Council's own funding provision, it is expected that 25-30 units could be delivered to the market. However, if additional Exchequer funding were to become available to match the Council's own resources, that target could expect to be at least doubled. Under the two Exchequer funded schemes (Repair & Leasing and Buy & Renew), our target for 2018 is to bring 70-80 additional units into use for social housing

6. Challenges

The main challenges would include securing sufficient additional resources to implement the Action Plan, identification of the owners and legal status of vacant properties, engagement with owners, verification of condition of the vacant stock, and pursuing owners to bring vacant houses back into use. Aside from the resource issue, the Vacant Homes Team has experience of addressing the other challenges over the last year and will continue to do so under this Plan.