

Letter to the Editor

Re: Vacant Houses ... the facts

I would like to place a few facts on record regarding the above as some recent media publicity will have given a very unfair and misleading message to people on the housing waiting list.

Housing stock

The Council owns and manages a stock of 5,000 social houses. (This does not include RAS, leased and other units)

On average, one hundred and fifty (150) of those houses become vacant annually. Each year, 150 such vacant houses are refurbished and returned to stock and are re-let to persons on the Housing waiting list.

This is the equivalent of building 150 new units annually as they are made available to households on the waiting list. So every week on average over the year, three houses per week, which have been refurbished, are returned to stock and are re-let to applicants on the housing waiting list.

Over the last five years, 700 such houses which have become vacant have been refurbished and re-let. In the above context, at any one time, we are working on 70 to 80 houses. i.e. 1.5% of our total stock.

All houses, once they become vacant, are immediately put in to the refurbishment process. i.e. Inspected, procurement/ tender/appointment of refurbishment contractor *etc.*

The houses are refurbished by a combination of the use of contractors and by our own small direct labour crew, where lesser works are required.

No houses are left vacant other than a tiny number for small planned regeneration projects. Currently this amounts to 6 units.

Boarded up Houses

Houses becoming vacant are shuttered *immediately* for two reasons. *Firstly*, to protect the house from criminal behaviour and vandalism - a

regular threat.

And *secondly*, because it is a requirement of our insurers to do so, in order to be insured.

Houses are worked on and new tenants identified while being shuttered to protect the house and the works. The shutters are not removed until the new tenant moves in.

Just because a house is shuttered does not mean it is not being worked on.

Average spend on houses becoming vacant is €12,000 euro per house. This can range from €40,000 to €1,000 depending on level of damage etc. i.e. in the order of €2 million euro per annum.

Is there an issue and a challenge regarding houses being left in a really bad state by tenants and/or deliberately damaged subsequently, including fire damage? **Yes, there is.**

Reasons Houses become vacant each year

- Death of the tenant
- Houses abandoned without any prior notice to Council
- New family formations, where new partners previously had two separate houses
- Houses deliberately fire damaged
- Where enforcement proceedings are being taken for serious tenancy breaches and tenants leave prior to final proceedings
- Following transfers of tenant to alternative house on overcrowding or medical grounds

Refusals of offers of accommodation

Refusals of offers of houses are still a big factor.

In the 12 months to the 30th September 2015, out of 224 offers of housing made, there were 104 refusals of those offers i.e. **46%** refusal rate.

Refusals and re-offers leads to time delays in re letting houses. The refusals crossed all areas from older houses to brand new houses.

The reasons given for refusal ranged from “House too small, House too big, Because of City Centre location, because they were not in City Centre location, and some did not turn up for appointment, following attempts to contact applicants, these are deemed as a refusal.”

Note: Houses are only offered in areas where applicants have already expressed as their choice area and similarly, only houses that will meet needs of the household are offered.

We have a very small number of houses that are difficult to re-let, and may take a few offers. This is not a material issue for us in terms of the overall numbers, but does require constant attention.

Resolution of Housing need 2015

In Waterford, more than 900 (yes, nine hundred) families from the housing waiting list will have received keys to excellent quality houses in 2015.

This has been done by the combination of all the various Social Housing schemes operated directly or indirectly by the Housing office and publicly funded.

These keys emanated from :

- Refurbished casual vacants, Council and Approved Housing bodies, new build Council and New build Approved Housing bodies, the HAP scheme , acquisitions for special needs etc.
- In addition, a further 200 families will have their specific and pressing need resolved through the special grants schemes.

Conclusion

Some recent media information regarding vacant houses is very misleading and unfair to applicants on the housing waiting list in genuine need of housing.



It is also misleading and unfair in the context of the massive work being done by the direct labour crew on a daily basis, and the Vacant House team in the face of very serious and constant challenges.

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