

# HOUSING, PLANNING, COMMUNITY AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT



EOIN Ó BROIN TD

SPOKESPERSON ON HOUSING,  
PLANNING, COMMUNITY AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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**VACANT  
HOMES  
STRATEGY**



SUBMISSION TO DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING,  
PLANNING, COMMUNITY & LOCAL GOVERNMENT



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# INTRODUCTION

- There are currently 183,000 vacant homes, not including holiday homes, across the state
- In Dublin alone there are over 35,293 vacant homes
- The current level of vacancy is twice the level of vacancy in a functioning housing system
- A portion of this stock is not nor will it ever be suitable for occupancy
- However a significant portion of this stock can and must be brought into active social or affordable use through Government intervention
- It is regrettable that it has taken Government more than one year to devise a vacant homes strategy
- The three schemes introduced by Government to date – Housing Agency Fund, Buy & Renew, Repair & Lease- while welcome are chronically underfunded
- Combined, they are targeting between 5500 and 6500 vacant homes over six years – just 3% of the total vacant stock in the state
- Vacant Homes can be brought into use quicker and at a lower cost than new build units
- The Government’s Vacant Homes Strategy must be more ambitious, targeting a larger portion of the vacant stock, in a shorter time frame, to meet the growing levels of homelessness and social and affordable housing need



## High Level Vacant Homes Targets

- Government should aim to return to active use a minimum of 20% of the current vacant stock (36,000 units) over six years delivering an average of 6000 units per year
- This target should include vacant residential homes and commercial to residential conversions particularly in city and town centres.
- Government expenditure should be weighted to deliver a greater number of these for acquisition by Local Authorities and Approved Housing Bodies for social housing allocations by a ratio of 60:40 delivering 21,600 new social houses
- The cost of delivering these 21,600 units would be approximately €100k per unit totalling €360m per year and €2.1bn over six years
- This funding should come from within the capital funding outlined in the Governments Housing Action Plan
- Leasing should be used for the remaining 14,400 units to increase the supply of affordable rental units for individuals whose gross income is above the limits for social housing in the relevant Local Authority area and below the gross income limits previously used to determine eligibility for affordable housing schemes (single income €58,000/double income €75,000)
- The existing allocation of €140m provided by Government would be sufficient to kick start this programme which would ultimately be revenue neutral as the refurbishment grants are repaid by the property owners
- The Department of Housing should hold a central register that is updated twice yearly and provide a detailed report to the Oireachtas Housing Committee on the progress made in returning vacant units to social and affordable stock
- These high level targets should be revised (upwards or downwards) following the publication of the Vacant Homes Register.
- The government should facilitate the establishment of an Empty Homes Practitioners Network involving the Housing Agency, Local Authorities and Approved Housing Bodies to share information and promote best practice.

## Vacant Home Officers

- Every Local Authority should be instructed to immediately appoint a full time vacant homes officer from within their existing staff compliment
- Larger Local Authorities should be provided with additional resources to employ additional full or part time vacant homes staff as required
- The task of these Vacant Homes Officers must be to oversee the compilation and maintenance of a Vacant Homes Register and to engage with owners of vacant homes to encourage them to return their properties to active use

## Vacant Home Register

- Local Authorities must be instructed to complete an initial Vacant Homes register within four months
- The register should include all properties that have been vacant for six months or more
- Staff from other sections of Local Authorities' Housing Departments can be temporarily redeployed during this four month period to assist in the task of compiling the register
- The Register must include information such as the location, ownership, legal status, market value and estimated cost of returning the unit to active use
- Government should introduce legislation to place this Register on a statutory footing and place a legal obligation on the owners of properties to register their properties once vacant for more than a period of time specified in the legislation

## Vacant Homes Action Plan

- On completion of the initial non statutory Vacant Homes Register each Local Authority, in consultation with its elected members, must draft and agree a multi annual vacant homes action plan
- The Plan must set out the total stock of Vacant Properties which the Councils believe can and should be brought back into active use
- The Plans must include annual targets for bringing Vacant Homes back into use via the range of measures outlined below including through purchase, leasing and the application of a vacant homes tax

## Council Long Term Voids

- Significant progress has been made by the Department of Housing and Local Authorities in reducing the number of long term social housing voids
- Government should set a deadline of April 2018 as a final deadline for the return of all long term voids into active use
- Government should prioritise the implementation of Choice Based Letting in all local authorities to ensure that all short term voids are tenanted as speedily as possible – a clear target should be set for this
- The Governments Housing Action plan commitment to introduce performance standards for Council voids must also be prioritised and introduced as a matter of urgency

## Purchasing Vacant Homes

- The Government must make the Buy and Renew scheme the main mechanism for delivering vacant stock back into active social housing use
- Local Authority Housing Action plans should place sufficient emphasis on delivering the maximum number of homes under this scheme
- The €70million rolling fund held by the Housing Agency for purchasing 1600 vacant homes from banks should be increased to €140million to deliver 3200 units
- The time frame for delivery of these units should be accelerated to meet this initial target by mid 2018

## Leasing Vacant Homes

- The Repair and Lease scheme should be amended to provide a stream of affordable rental homes to those whose gross income is above the threshold for social housing eligibility and within the traditional thresholds for government affordable housing schemes
- In addition to an upfront loan from the Local Authority to cover the renovation of the property, Repair and Lease properties should include greater rent certainty and security of tenure for tenants
- Landlords would repay the up-front refurbishment payment to the local authority from the initial rent paid by the affordable rental tenant



## Taxing Vacant Homes

- Sinn Féin believes that maximising the return of vacant units to active use requires incentives for those who need assistance to return their properties to active use and penalties for those who wilfully leave vacant properties empty
- Government should introduce a second home/property tax<sup>1</sup> exemption year for owners who bring properties back into active use after 1 year. The exemption should be 100% in year 1 and 50% in year two.
- Local Authorities should receive a New Homes Bonus equivalent to that homes annual second home/property tax yield for the first two years after it is returned to active use. This funding could be added to the Local Authorities discretionary spend and would cost the exchequer an average of €5.9m a year (€35.64m over seven years). This cost would be offset from within the existing current expenditure budget allocations to the Department of Housing and thus be revenue neutral.
- Government should introduce a vacant homes tax applicable to properties vacant more than 6 months within DED's or LEA's determined by the Local Authorities as having a high level of housing need and a high level of vacancy. Exemptions would be applied to certain categories of homes (inc holiday homes, homes in probate, fair deal homes etc).
- The Government should introduce a vacant property tax in Budget 2018. In advance of its introduction they should examine the best model for the application of such a tax considering the relative merits of a tax based on multiples of the existing property tax bands or one based on a percentage of the market value or rentable value of the property. It should also consider the merits of incrementally increasing the tax liability annually. The tax should be collected by revenue, paid directly to the Local Authority and ring fenced specifically to fund the implementation of the Vacant Homes Action Plan.

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<sup>1</sup> Sinn Féin is opposed to the Local Property Tax and in our Alternative Budget we proposed Second Home Tax as a replacement. [https://www.sinnfein.ie/files/2016/SF\\_Budget2017\\_ENGLISH.pdf](https://www.sinnfein.ie/files/2016/SF_Budget2017_ENGLISH.pdf)

## Planning & Vacant Homes

- In order to speed up the return to active use of vacant stock, particularly 'over-the-shop' units the Government should bring forward emergency planning regulations to streamline the procedures that apply to the re-use of vacant dwellings
- The legislation should extend the number of exempted development categories, introduce a streamlined process for securing planning, building control and other statutory permissions into a single application and a priority inspection process to ensure compliance with all relevant statutory standards

## Legislation & Vacant Homes

- Greater use must be made of Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO) by Local Authorities. However this process is slow and can incur additional costs.
- Government should review the CPO provisions in section 76 of the Housing Act 1966 with a view to streamlining this procedure where its application is designed to tackle long term or wilful vacancy in order to address chronic housing shortages.
- Government should also amend the 1966 Act to introduce Compulsory Leasing Orders as have been introduced in England and Wales via the Empty Dwelling Management Orders as provided for in the Housing Act 2004.



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## Eoin Ó Broin TD

**Working for you nationally  
& locally**

**Office 4, 1st Floor, Griffeen View,  
The Square, Main Street, Lucan,  
Co Dublin**

**Email: [eoin.obroin@oir.ie](mailto:eoin.obroin@oir.ie)**

**Tel: 01-6218653**

Working locally with

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### **Cllr Danny O'Brien**

**Lucan/Palmerstown  
0868570828  
[dannyobrien@cllr.s.dublincoco.ie](mailto:dannyobrien@cllr.s.dublincoco.ie)**

### **Cllr Mark Ward**

**Clondalkin/Newcastle/Rathcoole  
0867038164  
[mward@cllr.s.dublincoco.ie](mailto:mward@cllr.s.dublincoco.ie)**

### **Cllr Jonathan Graham**

**Clondalkin/Newcastle/Rathcoole  
0858214840  
[jgraham@cllr.s.dublincoco.ie](mailto:jgraham@cllr.s.dublincoco.ie)**

### **Lynn Boylan MEP**

**01-8736554  
[Lynn.boylan@europarl.europa.eu](mailto:Lynn.boylan@europarl.europa.eu)**

