



SINN FÉIN CORK **VACANT HOMES STRATEGY**

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INTRODUCTION

Right across Cork City, people are faced with the unpleasant sight of empty houses. Empty social housing, empty private housing and derelict houses are too common a sight in this city. In the middle of a Housing Crisis, houses should not be left to sit idle for months, and years, on end.

Not only are vacant homes an eyesore and an insult to those trapped in the Housing Crisis, they are a magnet for anti-social behaviour, criminality, dumping and pests. They are sources of anger, frustration and distress for local communities.

Sinn Féin have an ambitious, innovative plan to put an end to houses sitting empty for months, and years, on end. We will work at local and national level to ensure that everybody cooperates in bringing every usable home back into the Housing Market.

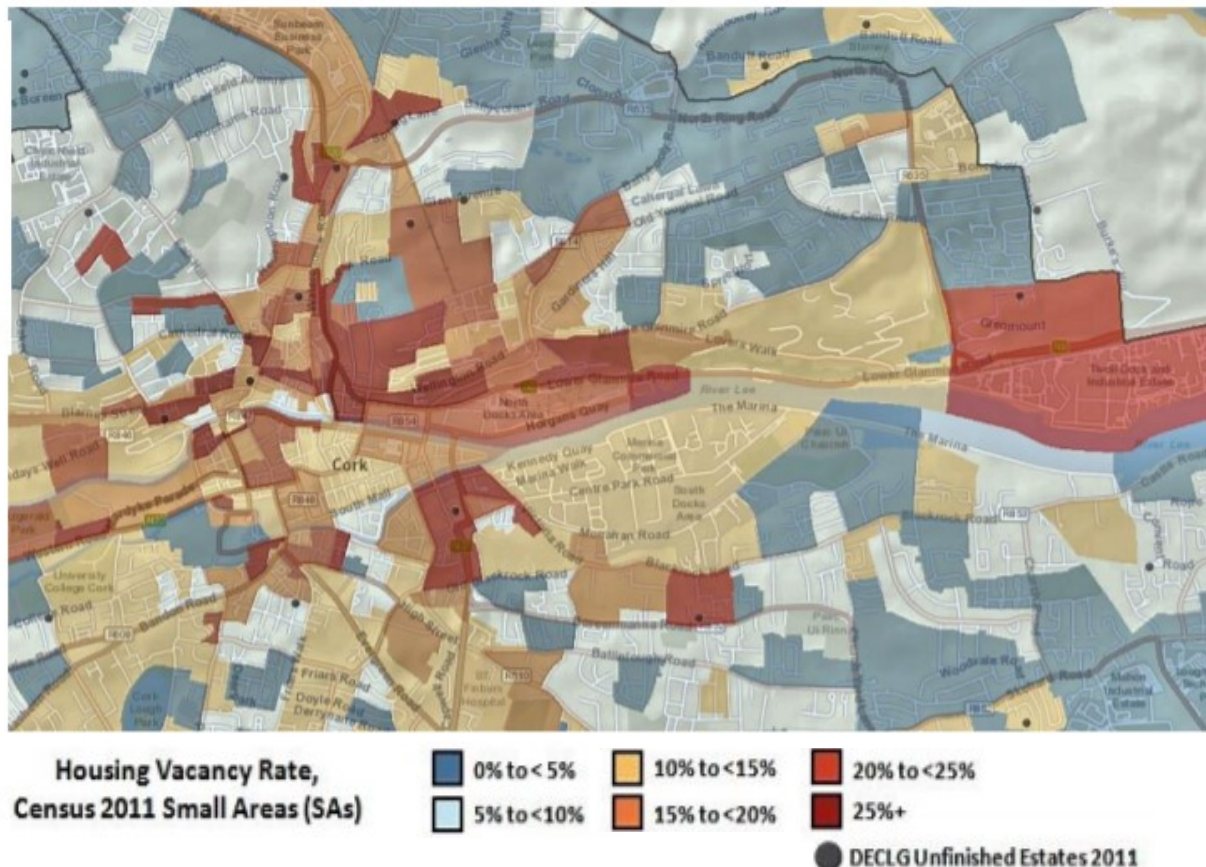


VACANT PRIVATE HOUSES

The National Vacant Housing Reuse Strategy 2018-2021 has failed Cork. We have not seen the promised benefits and we are still in a city full of empty houses.

On average, 4.1% of houses in Cork city and county are vacant¹ but The Housing Agency has found that in certain areas in Cork city vacancy can be as high as 25% of homes². It is clear from the map below that vacant homes are prominent in the less developed, underfunded areas of the city.

Figure 3: Vacancy rates in Cork city centre, Census 2011



Source: All-Ireland Observatory, Maynooth University

The Vacant Site Levy (VSL) was brought in to encourage landowners to utilise their empty land and build houses. It would appear that it is failing miserably in this attempt. The levy is legislated at 7% of the market value of a site. Sinn Féin has called for this levy to be increased to 15%. The levies collected in Cork in 2020 were nowhere near 7% of the total site values. Cork City Council had collected just under €21,875 by November 2020. Vacant sites of an estimated market value of €27 million - this represents only 0.08% of their value. The Vacant Sites Levy is not working. The Council needs more powers to utilise the existing Levy and they need to be able to Compulsory Purchase homes if they are left idle.








The Housing Agency Fund, Buy & Renew, Repair & Lease are chronically underfunded and combined, they are targeting 5,600 vacant homes over six years – just 3% of the total vacant stock in the state.

1 GeoDirectories Residential Report Q2 2021

2 Tackling Empty Homes Overview of vacant housing in Ireland and possible actions by Housing Agency Discussion paper prepared for the Housing and Homelessness Committee May 2016

The Repair and Lease Scheme, funds landlords to repair houses that have been vacant for over 12 months on the condition they lease them out as social houses for 5 years. To date, Cork City Council have returned two houses under this scheme.

The Buy and Renew Scheme allows local authorities to buy private homes that need to be repaired and use them for social housing. Cork City Council had delivered 43 homes under this scheme up to Q4 2020³.

-  Ensure that all local authorities including Cork have dedicated vacant homes offers
-  Compile an audit of all vacant homes in each local authority area
-  Publish multi annual targets for the return of vacant stock into use for social and affordable homes
-  Increase the portion of the Councils capital budget to target the return to use of vacant homes in line with each Councils public housing plan and climate action plan
-  Increased use of CPO powers by Cork City Council
-  The roll out of a specific scheme, ran in conjunction with the Department of Health, the Department of Housing and stakeholders to bring some homes in the Fair Deal schemes back into use in a fair and equitable way
-  Establish a time limited working group including Revenue and the Departments of Housing and Finance to recommend the design and operation of a Vacant Property Levy with appropriate exemptions (such as properties in probate or Fair Deal) to disincentivise speculative vacancy in areas with a high housing demand





Voids

As of October 2019, it took an average time of 49 weeks⁴ to turn around voids in Cork City Council, compared to a national average of 27.75 weeks. Cork City Council continues to have one of the highest levels of voids in the country. Meanwhile, 5,127 families and people in Cork City Council were on the social housing waiting list in January 2021.

Currently, when a Cork City Council tenant vacates their house, the Council can't start to get the property ready for a new tenant until the Voids Programme is opened. Most years this only happens once or twice. The Council then must submit a full list of all the works needed on the property, the Department will then come back some weeks later and approve this and the Council can then begin work. The Council pay for the work and then get reimbursed by the Department. They provide regular detailed updates to the Department. This red-tape is clearly a serious barrier to getting voids turned around quickly. With 340 voids returned in 2020, there were still 572 remaining in December. That's 572 empty houses that could be homes for people on the housing waiting list.

There is the need for a dedicated taskforce in the Maintenance Department in Cork City Council to be established. Instead of addressing repairs on an emergency basis, preventative maintenance audits should be conducted regularly. This would reduce the works needed when a social house becomes empty and ultimately reduce voids.

In October 2017, the European Committee of Social Rights found that Ireland's social housing was in breach of Article 16 of the European Social Charter. This charter is legally binding and must be followed.

The ECSR found that these breaches related to sewage leaks, dampness and



mould. It also found that no complete statistics on the condition of local authority housing have been collected since 2002 by Irish authorities and no national timetable exists for the refurbishment of local authority housing stock to take place.

There continues to be a lack of improvement and the Human Rights Committee of the Council of Europe found that Ireland's local authorities continued to breach Article 16 of the European Social Charter in March 2021. They noted that whilst there has been progress in Government measures there still exists substantial limitations in providing adequate accommodation to families who remain living in inadequate social housing conditions.



SINN FEIN WOULD:

- ▶ Pending the abolition of the Local Property Tax Sinn Féin will urge Government to end the practice of Local Authorities paying Local Property Tax and instead use these funds to introduce a system of preventative maintenance and to fund the return of voids
- ▶ Conduct 5-year rolling preventative maintenance audits on all social housing stock
- ▶ Properly implement and oversee a National Register of Social Housing Stock
- ▶ Fast-track the Voids Programme by leaving applications for Void Returns Funding open all-year round to ensure that local authorities can apply to return a house to their stock as soon as it becomes vacant



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