



Vacant Homes Action Plan 2022-2026



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Introduction

The Government housing strategy, “Housing for All - A New Housing Plan for Ireland” is the Government’s Housing Plan to 2030 and is targeted at improving Ireland’s housing system and delivering more homes for people with different housing needs.

The policy has four pathways to achieving housing for all:

- Supporting home ownership and increasing affordability.
- Eradicating homelessness, increasing social housing delivery and supporting social inclusion.
- Increasing new housing supply.
- Addressing vacancy and efficient use of existing stock.

As a response to the **Pathway 4, “Addressing vacancy and efficient use of existing stock”**, Fingal County Council has prepared this Vacant Homes Action Plan 2022 -2026 (‘Action Plan’). The Action Plan seeks to provide a targeted approach to identifying vacant housing units with the intention of bringing these properties back into use for both private and social housing. The Action Plan will also take cognisance of promoting town and village centre development as a positive town and village centre environment can help reduce dereliction and vacancy. It is envisaged that this Action Plan will be developed in conjunction with the emerging Town Centres First policy.

Nationally, the number of vacant dwellings recorded in Census 2022 fell by 9% compared with Census 2016. In the same period, the housing stock in Ireland grew by 6%. The vacancy rate therefore fell from 9% to 8% nationally in that 6-year period. Bringing vacant properties back into use is a cost-effective and sustainable way to increase the supply of housing and makes the best use of existing buildings to meet local needs. It can help improve neighbourhoods, increase access to housing and help to improve quality of life for those living within the towns, villages and larger urban areas within the county.

The reasons properties become or remain vacant are varied and the tools, resources and skills required in resolving the issues are significant and diverse. The aims and objectives of the Action Plan can only be achieved by working closely with internal and external partners and other key stakeholders, such as property owners and local communities.

The Action Plan aims to give an understanding of the issues surrounding vacant property and how it impacts on local areas. It looks at why properties become vacant, what advice and assistance are available to the owners of vacant properties, and how the Council uses the range of schemes available to it to return vacant properties to use. Fingal County Council aims to address vacancy and under-utilisation of residential properties in the county to help contribute to the supply of housing in the county.



Local Context

Fingal is the second largest of the four Dublin Local Authorities and has the third biggest local authority catchment area in the country. The results from the Census 2016 showed that Fingal is Ireland's fastest growing county with a population of 296,214, with a young and diverse population. This represented an increase of 8.1% since 2016 and the increase was the highest of any county or city at the time and over twice the national rate of increase. This trend has continued, with preliminary Census 2022 results indicating a further 11% increase in the population of Fingal to 329,218.

Fingal has a high demand for housing across all tenures, with a growing population, and this is in the context of wider issues around the affordability for rental and purchase properties and continuing challenges with homelessness.

The impact of the shortage of housing within the county is reflected in various ways - the number of applicants on the Council's housing list (6,243 currently) and increasing applications for housing support; people and families remaining in either rental accommodation or private accommodation that is unsuitable for their needs. This has contributed to a rental market where demand outstrips supply. It is believed that this demand for housing is having an upward effect on the cost of both renting and purchasing property within Fingal.

Provision of social housing for those who are unable to provide housing for themselves is a high priority and a major challenge for Fingal, with a rising population. The aim is for every household that has a need, to be able to access an affordable home of good quality, at an affordable cost, which is suited to their needs and in a secure environment. Bringing vacant homes back into use will assist with meeting this aim.

An average vacancy rate of between 4 to 6% at any one time is considered normal by international standards. Fingal has one of the lowest levels of housing vacancy in the country. The 2022 Census measures vacancy at a point in time and the rates among Dublin's four Local Authority Areas were well below the national rate of 8%, with South Dublin (4%), Fingal (4%) and Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown (5%) recording the three lowest rates in Ireland. However, as outlined previously, there remains a shortage of housing and it is necessary to make the best use of the county's existing housing stock, ensuring a supply of good quality homes for people to rent or buy.

Fingal County Council has appointed a full-time Vacant Homes Officer to co-ordinate the roll-out of this Action Plan. Key features of the plan are:

- A dedicated e-mail for members of the public to report vacant homes vacant.homes@fingal.ie along with the national website www.vacanthomes.ie, which provides information and a mechanism for reporting potentially vacant properties. This national web portal is aimed at encouraging members of the public to report vacant properties in their area and the data is then provided to each local authority to investigation and follow-up action. The Council will continue to promote the website and encourage citizens of Fingal to report vacancy.



- The Council has engaged with property management companies and resident associations in the county seeking information on vacant homes and carried out street-by-street surveys of vacant properties across the county under the previous plan. Engagement with property management companies, resident associations and further utilisation of street surveys will be considered and utilised in this Action Plan.
- Where properties have been identified as vacant a process of engagement will be entered into with owners to return these properties to use.
- New initiatives under Housing for All set out below include linking of urban housing delivery with an overall Town Centre First Approach.
- Further actions as set out below.

Actions to Address Vacant Private Housing

Currently, a property is long-term vacant if it has been unoccupied for 12 months or longer. Privately-owned, long-term vacant properties are the primary focus of this plan.

Not all vacant properties are located in what might be perceived to be deprived areas, nor are they necessarily derelict, boarded-up or causing a problem. There are a significant number of properties which naturally become vacant for periods of time, perhaps due to the buying and selling process, are in between tenancies, an owner may have moved to residential care, owner passes away and the probate process delays moving the property on. When a property remains empty for a significant period of time, or is attracting unwanted attention, then it is considered vacant.

There are other reasons why properties remain vacant, including difficulties in selling or leasing a property, the owner does not have the finances/time/skills to manage the property or the property has been repossessed. It is important that the Council understands why individual properties become derelict and/or remain vacant so that the Council can work with the owners to arrive at the most effective and appropriate solutions.



Identification of Properties

Fingal County Council's objective will continue to be to identify vacant properties using the following methods:

- **Local Knowledge** - Facility for citizens to report individual vacant homes to www.vacanthomes.ie, to the Fingal Vacant Homes Officer or via e-mail to vacant.homes@fingal.ie.
- **Housing Inspectorate\Derelict Sites Inspectors** - Inspectors are on the ground on a daily basis and report and investigate vacant properties.
- **Derelict Sites** - Using the Fingal Derelict Site Register, the Vacant Homes Officer will link with the Council's Derelict Sites section to identify vacant homes and those with potential for refurbishment\occupation.
- **Data Analysis** - Analysis of the 2022 Census Data, Revenue Commissioners Vacant Homes Survey and GeoDirectory. Preliminary Census data is already available and under examination. Data will be analysed to identify what estates and streets had a significant high concentration of vacancy levels at the time of the census survey and this will be compared to other vacant home data sources within the state.
- **Communications** - Roll-out of a publicity campaign designed to encourage members of the public to report any vacant property. Extensive use will be made of social media to highlight the campaign. This campaign will also promote the various schemes and grants available to assist homeowners bring properties back into use particularly new schemes such as the **Croí Cónaithe** schemes.
- **Cross-Departmental Liaison** - The Vacant Homes Officer will co-ordinate and liaise with other departments of the Council to establish a co-ordinated approach towards the implementation of the Action Plan, taking cognisance of the Town Centre First approach and proposed new role of Town Centre Regeneration Officer. While the vacancy is often associated with urban settings, there will also be a focus on vacancy in rural locations.



Investigation and Engagement with Owners

All vacant properties identified will be investigated. Owners will be traced and contacted, where possible, with the intention of gaining an understanding of the circumstances around the property vacancy. The process followed will vary depending on circumstances, each being tailored to the specifics of each case.

Fingal County Council will provide information and advice to owners of vacant properties to help identify the best options for them and their property. Government-supported schemes available through Fingal County Council include:

- **Repair and Lease Scheme:** The basis of the scheme is that repair and improvement work to suitable vacant properties is funded to bring them up to the standard for rented accommodation and the cost of the works is then deducted from lease payments over an agreed lease term.
- **Buy and Renew Scheme:** This initiative provides a funding to Local Authorities to buy and renew empty residential buildings.
- **Private Sale or Private Leasing Arrangement:** Includes encouraging owners to provide properties under the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) scheme to meet the need of social housing applicants.
- **Croí Cónaithe (Towns) Refurbishment Grant Fund:** This new fund is being administered by Local Authorities and will provide new choices for people to live in towns, villages and rural countryside in Ireland, initially through the provision of a grant to support the refurbishment of vacant properties, with priority given to areas where the level of vacancy or dereliction is high. Funding of up to €30,000 per property and up to €50,000 where the property is deemed derelict is available. The Council is accepting applications for this scheme, for which all areas of the county are eligible, and the Vacant Homes Office is available to assist citizens who wish to avail of the scheme.
- **Croí Cónaithe (Towns) Serviced Sites Fund:** Fingal County Council will also promote and administer the new Serviced Sites Fund or Ready to Build scheme. This fund allows Local Authorities to make serviced sites in towns and villages available to potential individual purchasers. These sites will be available at a discount on the market value of the site for the building of a property for occupation as the principal private residence of the purchaser. The level of discount to the individual will depend on the level of servicing cost incurred by the local authority before the sale of the site with discounts up to a maximum of €30,000. The amount of such discount will be reflected in the sale price of the site to the purchaser. Sites that are available will be advertised on the Council's website and / or in relevant local publications along with a closing date for receipt of applications.



The table below indicates progress in bringing vacant properties back into occupancy since 2019 under the various schemes.

Scheme	Vacant homes brought back into use since 2019	Comments
Repair and Leasing Scheme	28	537,300
Buy and Renew Scheme	16	
Compulsory Purchase Order	7	Also utilised the Buy and Renew Scheme
Additional vacant properties following work by Vacant Homes Office	19	Vacant properties that came back into use following engagement by the Council with owners\banks, without requiring formal action such as CPOs
Total	70	

Enforcement Action

There is a range of legislative powers available to the Council to deal with immediate and specific environmental issues such as nuisance, fly-tipping, presence of vermin and insecure or dangerous buildings. There are also further powers which can be used to deal with vacant properties in the longer term.

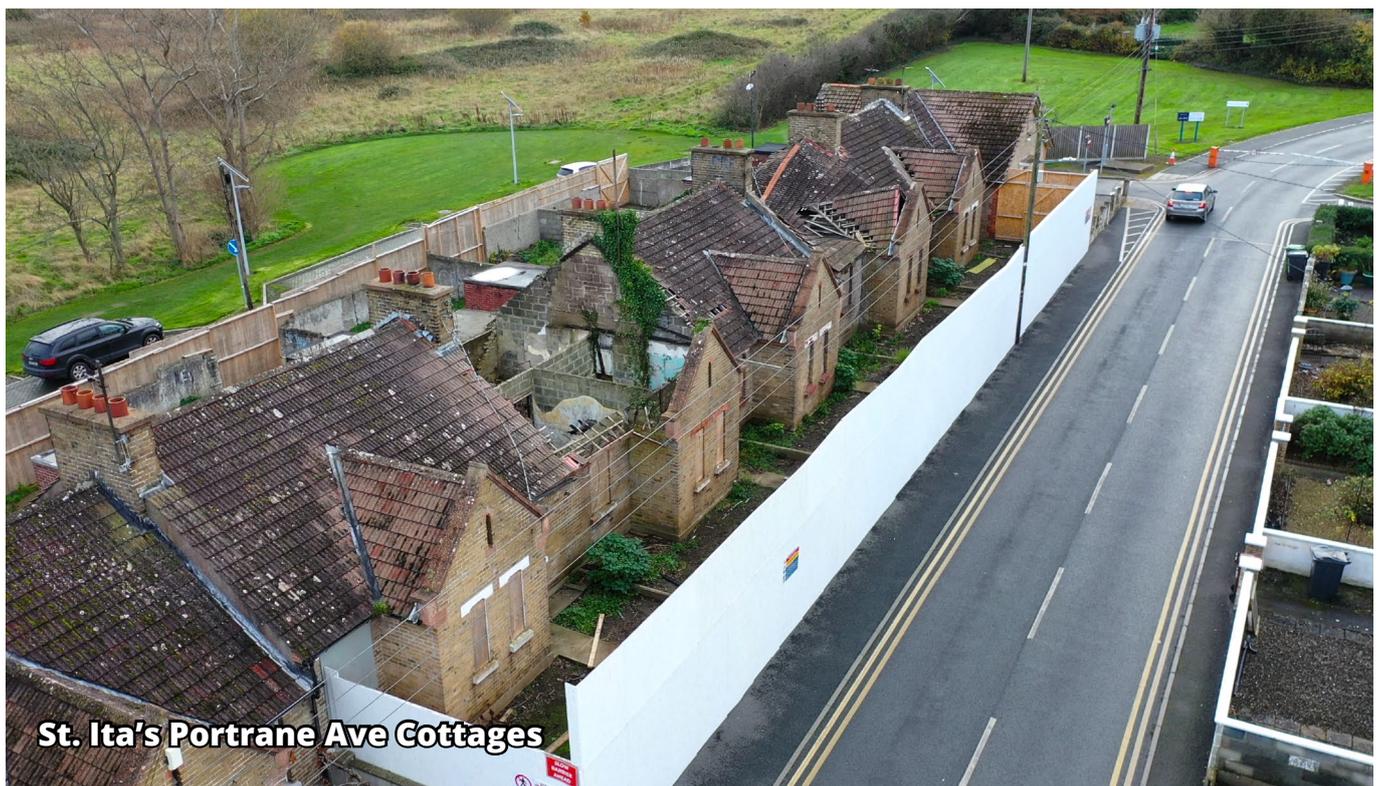
- **Derelict Sites Act 1990 (as amended):** The Act allows Local Authorities to compel owners\occupiers to clean up their sites, prosecute owner\occupiers who don't comply with requests made, statutory notices served etc. Presently there are 17 dwellings across 6 sites on the Derelict Sites Register. Dwellings \sites can be placed on the Derelict Sites Register and annual levy of 7% of the market value applied. Local Authorities can also purchase land compulsorily or carry out necessary work themselves and charge the owners\occupiers. The Derelict Sites section will continue to engage with owners\occupiers of sites, issue correspondence and statutory notices to the owners\occupiers of sites that have issues of dereliction.
- **Housing Act, 1966:** Fingal County Council will continue to identify properties suitable for a CPO procedure and advance these properties through the CPO process.
- **Urban Regeneration and Housing Act 2015:** Since 1st January 2017, Local Authorities have maintained a vacant site register (residential and regeneration land) and can apply an annual charge of 7% of the market value of the land. There are presently 10 sites on Fingal's Vacant Sites Register and the Council will continue to pursue sites under this legislation or any other relevant legislation that may come into effect with respect to vacancy.



Actions to Address Vacant Social Housing

Fingal County Council has a strong record in repair and re-letting of its own housing stock. The Council has maintained a vacancy rate of less than 2% for its social housing stock and will continue to manage resources effectively to ensure the return to use of properties that become vacant in as efficient a manner as possible.

- **Quick Voids Turnaround:** The Housing Department works to ensure that the repair and re-let processes are optimised to minimise 'voids' or vacant housing. Void houses are inspected, tendered and repaired promptly allowing the Council to ensure that less than 2% of stock is vacant at any point in time.
- **Allocation of Casual Vacancy:** The Housing Allocations section identifies suitable tenants while properties are under repair ensuring expeditious occupancy when repairs are complete.
- **Choice Based Letting:** The Council has also introduced an online Choice Based Letting (CBL) scheme to allow applicants to express an interest for designated social housing stock and this will continue to be promoted, along with the expansion of the CBL scheme to expedite lettings and afford applicants greater choice.
- **Approved Housing Bodies:** Properties are identified and highlighted to any Approved Housing Bodies where a vacant property in their ownership requires attention. Nominations by FCC will continue to be made in an efficient and timely manner where a housing vacancy occurs with an Approved Housing Body.



Town Centre First and National Town Centre First Co-Ordination Office

A **National Town Centre First Office** has been established within the Local Government Management Agency to drive Town Centre First policy actions, coordinate stakeholder engagement at a national level and across local government sector and promote best practice.

The Town Centre First - A Policy Approach for Irish Towns, was launched in 2022 and this plan is focused at enhancing the attractiveness, accessibility and social and economic activity of the state's towns and villages. It provides a co-ordinated, whole-of-government policy framework to proactively address the decline in the health of towns across Ireland and support measures to regenerate and revitalise them. It recognises that a solely top-down approach to the development of towns is not appropriate and sets out an innovative approach where local communities and businesses are central to planning within their own towns and shaping their development. Key elements include:

Town Centre First Plans will be produced by a local Town Team drawn from local community and business representatives which will identify challenges, actions and integrated responses across a number of themes (business/commercial, community/cultural, housing, built environment, heritage). The plan will be action-orientated and will assist the town in accessing a range of funding programmes available for town regeneration across government departments and agencies. An initial fund of €2.6m has been provided by Department of Rural and Community Development to fund 26 Town Centre First Plans.

Local Authorities with towns will be provided with a dedicated post of **Town Regeneration Officer** who will lead Town Centre First implementation at a local level, assisted by the wider local authority. A **Town Regeneration Officer** was recently appointed in Fingal. The **Vacant Homes Officer** will work with the **Town Regeneration Officer** to ensure vacancy is addressed in Fingal as part of the overall, holistic Town Centre First approach.



Urban Regional Development Fund (URDF) and The Town and Village Renewal Scheme (TVRS)

The potential to activate vacant properties is part of the criteria in Urban Regeneration and Development Fund considerations.

While programmes such as the URDF are primarily intended to support wider town regeneration, these programmes also facilitate optimal use and re-use of existing properties and contribute to the creation of conditions conducive to housing developments in towns and will be examined as part of an overall county-wide, holistic approach which will tackle vacancy and dereliction.

The Town and Village Renewal Scheme supports small to medium capital projects which also enhance the environment of town or village centres and will also form part toolkit to help address vacancy.

Implementation and Review

The plan will be kept under review as returns are made to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on activity levels and outcomes in terms of the various schemes as Fingal County Council looks to build on the positive strides made to date on addressing vacancy within the county and further reduce this level of vacancy.

The plan will be reviewed periodically taking account of findings from data analysis, surveys, Government policy and best practice as well as from interaction with other Local Authorities particularly through engagement with the national Vacant Homes Officer network.

A full review of the plan will be conducted in the final year of the 5-year plan.



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